Article

The Culture of Endings

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External Editor: Robert G. Bednarik

Received: 10 September 2014; in revised form: 8 December 2014 / Accepted: 8 December 2014 /

Published: 17 December 2014

Abstract: This article analyses the cultural state of mind characteristic of historical periods at some kind of endpoint: the end of *a* world or even of *the* world or, most hypothetically, of the universe. This is the idea of Last Days. In order to contextualize it, it is necessary to consider varying conceptions of temporality: a hunter-gatherer model, models of cyclical time and of linear time. At least in the West, this last may be understood as a product of Judaeo-Christian thinking, of which the article gives an account focussed on the motifs of eschatology, apocalypse and messianism. Finally the article proposes that the present moment in history, characterized as “Post-Modernity”, may readily be read as a time of endings, perhaps even of a conclusive end.

Keywords: models of temporality; biblical and mediaeval studies; eschatology; apocalypse; messianism; the Enlightenment; Structuralism; Post-Structuralism; Post-Modernity

1. Introduction: End-Time

Some years ago, I found myself walking in one of the extensive lava tubes around Undara, in north Queensland, Australia. The space left by the disappearance of the lava which originally created it was inhabited by cockroaches entirely covering floor and walls. Every step crushed countless numbers and at regular intervals it was necessary to stamp so as to shake them off one’s legs. The thought came to me with some force that there would be a time when I and my conspecifics would no longer exist, but the cockroaches would, conceivably, still be there. It was an eschatological thought, that is, one belonging to the broad historical discourse (*logos*) of last things (*eschatos*: last). Self-consciousness is frequently taken to be the defining characteristic of humans: we are the animal that knows that it

knows. But perhaps not coincidentally figures central to twentieth-century philosophy—among them Heidegger and his imitators, not least Sartre—fleshed out the self-consciousness argument in the direction of a particular emphasis on temporality: in this context the human animal was seen as fundamentally futural, living not so much in the infinitesimal present of consciousness as in its project, that is, its projected futural activities. To take a simple example, I open a door not because of a determining past factor but because of a futural imperative: to get into the next room. Temporality understood in this way as linear and directional defines the nature of human beings. However, self-projection into the future as structuring present activities (e.g., I knap a piece of chert so as to obtain, in the future, a blade; I buy a ticket so as to board, futurally, my flight) brings with it a sense of finality: the end of whatever it is I am doing.

In this article I want to make some selective comments on the all-encompassing *eschaton*: the discourse of Last Days, the end of *a* world, or even of *the* world or even of the universe. Of course the ending of a particular world, that of a society or culture or historical phase, is inevitably experienced by those involved as the end of the world itself, and with good reason. I shall return to this point, since it informs much of my argument. It should be said at once that not all cultures necessarily address the issue of the End, since concepts of time (though not, naturally, the actual experience of time) differ across cultures. So I need to begin with a discussion of temporality.

2. Hunter-Gatherer Temporality

The Australian Aboriginal concept of time has been tied to that of the Dreaming understood as a past that remains present ([1], p. 234), a long-ago neither temporal nor historical ([2], p. 57), a sacred and continuing past ([3], p. 230). This by authoritative commentators: A.P. Elkin, W.E.H. Stanner and R.M. and C.H. Berndt. Mircea Eliade [4,5] read this in the light of a dubious or at least debateable thesis, that of a desire to escape time. The most philosophically sophisticated interpretation of the notion of the Dreaming, but one which may be too ambitious to find acceptance among anthropologists (though it should be attractive to archaeologists with a taste for the Heidegger-inspired Julian Thomas [6]), is Tony Swain's *A Place for Strangers* [7]. Swain sets out to square the circle of the Dreaming as simultaneously temporal and atemporal by an appeal to the centrality of place, rather than time, in Aboriginal thinking. In adopting my own language to describe the phenomenon of Aboriginal temporal ontology, I remain broadly in line with the above commentators, though, as indicated, I am sceptical of Eliade's thesis. Dreaming temporality may be articulated as follows. It is an idea involving two separate, yet interconnected, temporal dimensions. If the subject has a given relation to a particular primordial being, the subject's ritual or even everyday activity repeats/reenacts in time the action performed by the primordial being in mythic or "special" time—in Eliade's terminology, "that" once-upon-a-time time: *in illo tempore*. The subject acts out temporally something done by the primordial being outside time, in the eternal Now of the Dreaming.

Highly project-oriented culture exclusively relegates events to a past which is accessible, as it were long-distance, by memory. While the actual phenomenon of memory is of course common to all humans—indeed it is not restricted to our species—the culture of the Dreaming has a particular structure for the understanding of time. It "stores" events in stories which are themselves stored in the natural world, that is, identified with some feature of the natural world (landscape, for example). Such

events are proximate, *i.e.*, immediately accessible, since the story-laden natural world is always there. In this way a mythic culture rooted in the natural world lends itself to a two-tier model of time in which the *ur*-activity locates itself not so much in the past as in “another” time, one that is ongoing. Coupled with a degree of disengagement from project-oriented thinking (certainly relative to the frenzied project-obsession characteristic of present Western society), this disposes of both past and future: whenever something significant happens, it is relegated to that “always-there” time. For example the arrival of Macassan traders to northern Australia—a historical event with beginning and end—is incorporated into timeless, and ritually temporally reenacted, Yiritja-moiety mythology.

It may well be that hunter-gatherer thought is generally liable to take something like this Australian Aboriginal form—and it is with this strong possibility in mind that I have chosen to put some emphasis on the Dreaming concept of time, the point being that cross-cultural discourse usually fails to take account of hunter-gatherer paradigms. In fact the greater part of human history is one of hunter-gatherers and all subsequent intellectual structures necessarily derive from hunter-gatherer ones. In saying this I am conscious of the enduring nature of those original structures, notably if not exclusively in Australia: they retain living force into the present. I am equally conscious of a necessary caveat in view of the great local diversity of hunter-gatherer societies. Still, such fundamentals as the attachment to, and consequent metaphysics of, *place* may plausibly be taken as a constant. In the above analysis of the “two-tier” Aboriginal model of time I have sketched out one variant of this appeal to the centrality of place.

3. Cyclic Temporality

There would seem to be some connection between this powerful and intriguing model of temporality and notions of time as circular. Nietzsche postulated his Eternal Recurrence [8], but before him many cultures read time as repetition and some have done so since. An element of reincarnation is present in northern Australian models of the afterlife, one of three souls constituent of the human individual envisaged as returning to life in the form of a baby-spirit. More widely known are notions of reincarnation in Indian cultures, including the Buddhist variety. Time as circular may involve specific quasi-historical temporal phases. Thus at a certain tipping point Siva destroys the cosmos which will, however, return to being under the direction of Brahma. So there is an idea both of never-ending circularity and of an ending—which is cataclysmic. This had from the 1920s a scientific counterpart: the cosmology of an “oscillating” universe with beginning (Big Bang) and, according to Alexander Friedmann, expansion followed by contraction, presumably catastrophic and repeated ([9], p. 121). Richard Tolman, who examined the option of a “bounce” along similar lines in the 1930s, himself eventually saw that the idea of an “oscillation” could not be made to work. More recently the cyclical model has taken new scientific forms [10]: “inflation” theory and, subsequently, “eternal inflation”, with, in the latter case, a universe generated by quantum fluctuations in a space/time vacuum, then progressively generating further universes after the manner of branchings-off. “Inflation” of any sort does not require a Big Bang, though it is unclear how the initial requisite situation gets there. Still, it is cyclical and, with assistance from String Theory—as modified in the direction of the notion of a “membrane” or “brane”—it generates what I take to be the latest Western avatar of circular time. This is the theory of universe-creation by means of a collision between branes. It would be, if I understand

right, a gentle event, unlike the Hindu cycles. There are other variations on the theme of circularity from diverse cultural traditions, based on metaphysics rather than mathematics. Pre-Columbian Americans envisaged temporal phases of immense duration leading to annihilation, then yet another beginning. The Aztec calendar stone (a full-scale model of which was donated to the Australian National University by the Mexican government and housed, to the horror of classicists, in the A.D. Hope building's Classics museum) depicts five world-ages, each terminating in destruction (by deluge, eclipse, fire, wind and earthquake). Brotherston [11] has identified the first four of these with world-age accounts in the early chapters of the Mayan *Popol Vuh* [12] and argued for comparable cosmologies throughout the Americas. One assumes cyclical annihilations along these lines require no final conflagration: like the scientific "oscillation" model, and also the "inflation" one, they go on for ever. Yet Buddhism famously allows for release from the wheel of death and rebirth in the state of Nirvana. So varieties of circular models of time have managed to accommodate not only partial but final endings.

4. Time as Linear

Nonetheless, and despite a number of complications canvassed above, the sense of endings is best fitted to models of time as linear. The culture of endings develops maximally in tandem with a *historical* consciousness. Such consciousness need not be of the modern kind, which understands history as a chain of factual causes and effects. It may simply be tied to an ongoing narrative involving significant events, say of a religious kind. Christian temporality, for example, is primarily linked to real or supposed events occurring in time. Indeed, at least in the West, modern historical consciousness, the foregrounded awareness of history as cause-and-effect process, is the legacy of the Judaeo-Christian synthesis.

5. Hebraic Prophecy, Eschatology and Apocalypse

The Hebraic story visualized events as operative in time, with a linear trajectory from a primal beginning (*genesis*) gradually unfolding as a mythic-historical narrative punctuated by significant figures and events. Such events constitute both endings and new beginnings (the story of the Flood, the Abrahamic succession, the Exodus, invasion of Canaan, *etc.*). The pattern is preserved by many authors in the present form of the Old Testament. In what follows I intend to focus on the scriptural canon of the prophets and on that trajectory leading to an "ending" which may be the outcome of a shattering event in time or a shattering event which represents a final culmination of time. The second would be truly eschatological, possibly coloured by those specific sequences characteristic of apocalypse. Both could include an element of the messianic (sometimes more properly quasi- or proto-messianic), a narrative in which a saving figure—God acting directly or through another, whether military or supernatural leader, whether man or angel—would arrive, perhaps by way of a momentous birth or more momentous descent from the skies, for the purpose of restoring the fortunes of Israel. This restoration would apply to morals and true worship, perhaps in the process reinstituting the real or imaginary Kingdom of David—while crushing the enemies of Israel, that is, the Gentile "nations". Finally such a restoration might usher in a period of earthly triumph or of triumph of an otherworldly

kind, as it were beyond history. Of course elements of this thinking persist to the present in both religious and secular Zionist form.

Before turning to the ways in which this broad narrative plays out in the prophetic books of the Bible, I need to stress that my concern is less with the specific thematics of the Hebraic story than with the general idea of culture at a critical end-time. This is the time when, in the words of the poet Yeats, “things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world” ([13], p. 99). In the prophetic books “endings” entail historical and/or eschatological crisis with, as indicated above, possible thematics of apocalypse and some form of messianism. Scholarly opinions vary considerably as to the complex interrelations of the Hebraic ideas of prophecy, eschatology, apocalypse and messianism, and for a more nuanced account I refer the reader to Rowland, Collins and Hendel [14–16]. “Eschatology” and “apocalypse” are sometimes taken as synonymous, sometimes firmly differentiated—and sometimes seen as different, though closely connected. The term “apocalypse” is more comfortably applied to developments occurring after the classical prophetic texts, though acknowledged as inspired by them [16]. The term “Messiah” is somewhat problematical, not least because of the temptation to read later interpretations back into the classical prophetic texts. Be all this as it may, the most important thing in the present context is to point out that there is a prophetic/eschatological/apocalyptic/messianic nexus, varying aspects of which are presented in different biblical books, as well as in different parts of given books. Above all, I would like to allow a degree of blurring between the textual presentation of what may be a particular historical crisis and notions of a conclusive end-time. The fact is that, as noted earlier in this article, momentous historical endings are always liable to be experienced as final. So whether the historical end of a particular Hebraic world (say in the form of a foreign invasion) amounts to something all-encompassing, *i.e.*, properly eschatological, is doubtless academic to those living it out. In the context of a tradition of Hebraic scripture we may say that metaphysical consciousness readily reads the particular as a type of the universal.

The Hebrew prophets had a recognized status, eventually perhaps a semi-official one, *i.e.*, a loose association with the temple. They are referred to as *nabis* in the scriptures, a term uncertainly sourced to the phenomenon of ecstasy (as *ex-stasis*), or to that of a “calling” or of “proclaiming” a divine message. In the minds of the authors of the scriptural palimpsest the major role of prophecy was to denounce idolatry and return the people to their traditional Law and traditional God—the recurring textual pattern being threefold: (1) the people have lapsed from their God, Yahweh (2) they are required to suffer as a result (3) but there is to be a reconciliation. In connection with the end-time nexus mentioned above we may focus on certain key motifs.

A number of these are introduced in the Book of Amos: the “day of Yahweh” (5:18), of darkness at noon (8:9), that is, of doom—as well as of restoration for a “remnant” of the people (9:11, 5:15). Isaiah more famously takes up the theme: Israel will be tested on the fateful “day”, “that day” (24:21), by the coming of “the terror of Yahweh” (2:10)—from which only the remnant “survivors” will be saved (4:2). Restoration is promised in “the days to come” (2:2), “that day” (27:1), along with oracles against the enemy nations. The “day” appears to be taken as a coming historical event; indeed the language is nothing if not driven by a sense of temporal urgency, a sense quite alien to the hunter-gatherer thinking alluded to above. Now the Book of Isaiah appears to span a considerable period of military threats to Jerusalem culminating in one highly significant event, the city’s 587 BC destruction and the

consequent Babylonian exile. Its earlier (pre-Exile?) material elaborates the idea of a glorious phase involving an Immanuel or “God-with-us” figure from the family of David (7:14 ff, 9:1 ff; 11:1 ff). Its so-called “book of Immanuel” section features those celebrated passages of a providential birth later appealed to by Christians (who read their own chosen prophecy not merely here but in the proclamation of another saving birth in Virgil’s fourth Eclogue [17]). Isaiah’s saving figure is presented more modestly as Yahweh’s “servant” in the later (post-Exile?) section known as the “book of consolation”. This “servant” (41–44) is also the Man of Sorrows (50:6 ff, 53:14 ff), in a primary sense the nation of Israel. The saviour may be identified with God operating through a historical agent, possibly Cyrus the Persian, who permitted the return from exile (45:1), or, in some passages, with God himself. The prophecy as a whole has a messianic quality and, however originally intended, was so read in subsequent times. Of course the motif of a humbled, suffering saviour was especially suitable for Christian appropriation—and it is unsurprising that a popular version of the prophecy like Handel’s oratorio draws from this, as well as from the Immanuel parts of Isaiah. With regard to the later Isaiah, however, it is worth adding that it features luridly apocalyptic or proto-apocalyptic sections, the coming of a wine-red/blood-red God (63:1 ff), a God of fire (66:15), as well as celebrated eschatological passages, prophecies of a new heavens and new earth (65:17, 66:22) in which wolf and lamb, lion and ox are reconciled. There is, finally, a picture of a New Jerusalem (54:11) which looks forward to the Christian Book of Revelation.

Ruin, restoration and the Remnant return in the Books of Micah and Zephaniah, with the latter stressing the *dies irae* note (1:15) and the former making celebrated mention of the Davidic Bethlehem figure who is to lead the people (5:2). However, end-time as impending historical doom is nowhere better evoked than in Jeremiah, the prophet of the fall of Jerusalem. Here the messianic leader is given the title of a Davidic “branch” (33:15) which is reiterated by the later Zechariah (3:8 ff) whose victor, like the Jesus of the New Testament, enters his city on a donkey (9:9). The Book of Zechariah ends with its own apocalyptic battle, yet another end-time Day (14). Here, and in the Book of Ezekiel and the later Joel and Daniel, a tradition which eventually comes to inform the Christian Book of Revelation is elaborated. Apocalypse in Ezekiel is signalled by visionary allegories, the Four Beasts (eventually, symbols of the Christian evangelists) and the Dry Bones (37:1 ff) brought back to life as another messianic (?) promise. In Joel it takes the form of a real or allegorical plague of locusts followed by relief, again with pregnant signs and portents: darkness, earthquakes (2:11), visions, blood and fire (3:11 ff, 4:15), all this culminating in eschatological triumph (4:18 ff). The great Day is the time of Yahweh’s coming, of terror and victory. In Joel it is at hand (1:15), it is near (2:1). In Ezekiel it is coming now, it has come (7:1 ff). Here especially, and in the succeeding Book of Daniel, is laid the ground for an apocalyptic tradition which had not exhausted itself by the millennial year 2000: “An end is come, the end is come: it watcheth for thee; behold, it is come” (King James Ezk 7:6). In the Jerusalem Bible (Dn 11:40) the End is given a capital letter. Moreover, Daniel pre-eminently provides those many later-repeated motifs of apocalyptic thought: visions of (originally Ezekiel’s) four symbolic beasts, angels and saving figures, the “abomination” in the holy place (historically, Zeus and, for later writers, the Roman emperor, worshipped in the temple) and, above all, a complicated eventful timeline for the Last Days. Inevitably metaphysical and historical elements (e.g., the looting of the temple under Antiochus IV Epiphanes) combine. Daniel traces, by means of doubtless intentionally obscure allegory, the succession of historical empires, all the way and without break, to the never-ending

kingdom (2:44), itself by all accounts located in time. This would be the coming of the “Man”, or “Son of Man”, a term originating in Ezekiel (2:1): presumably the Messiah in glory (7:13 ff).

6. Christian Eschatology and Apocalypse

Of the ensuing semitic religions, both Christianity and Islam take up the theme of Endings. I shall pass over the second of these here, referring the reader to sections of *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’ān* [18]. The book of Islam has many eschatological sūras dealing with the Day of Resurrection (21:47), the Day of Judgement (37:20), the “Hour” (21:49), the Overwhelming (88:1), the Calamity (101:6), the Day of Separation (37:21). There is also the especially apocalyptic sūra 81. As regards Christianity, it seems likely that the historical Jesus, like others before and after him, saw himself or was seen by his followers as a Messiah, with the Baptist as the requisite predecessor. Accordingly it is not surprising that the Gospels, some or all set in their present form after the second destruction of Jerusalem, the one under Titus in AD 70 tendentiously described by Josephus [19], include the prophetic discourse of the End and the coming of the “Son of Man” (see Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 17 and 21). However, the most extravagant Christian eschatological text is the Book of Revelation (Gk “apocalypse”), whose key protagonists (the Lamb, the Beast, the Whore of Babylon, *etc.*) as well as key events (the Day of Wrath, the fall of Babylon, the chiliastic or thousand-year reign of Christ, wars and persecutions, the Judgement and the establishment of the New Jerusalem—still evoked by British socialists singing the stirring words of William Blake) are too familiar to warrant more than mention here. What is relevant to the present analysis is that the book’s concept of supernatural events unfolding in historical time—according to a sequence that is very specific despite considerable editorial confusion (the running together of at least two separate texts)—recapitulates so many Hebraic ideas of the End. The Book of Revelation draws on the Hebrew prophets, especially Daniel, and probably on speculations closer in time to Christianity, such as those of the (Essene?) community of Qumran [20], itself appealing to Daniel (and to Isaiah “concerning the last days” ([20], p. 294). It may be noted that, in addition to “A Midrash on the Last Days”, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* include a fragmentary account of the surveying of the New Jerusalem, and the “Messianic Rule” with its associated “War Rule”—this last dealing with an eschatological struggle between the Sons of Light and of the Sons of Darkness (plausibly, the Romans). The Book of Revelation, by contrast, finds its enemy not in Gentile Rome, but in the Rome of the great persecutions. It is understood to identify Rome with Babylon and the emperor Nero with the Antichrist and to have most likely been written during the persecutions of Nero and, some twenty-five years later, of Domitian. Its concluding “Veni Domine Iesu”, which echoes a call for the next-in-line Buddha (“Come, Maitreya, Come”), is quintessentially apocalyptic. For Christians the End was, and is, a *dies irae* or testing-time of God’s wrath terminating in renewal, even to the extent of bodily resurrection. Such a metaphysics could only be elaborated within a linear model of time.

Not unexpectedly, a tradition of the Last Days, chiefly fed by a passion for the inexhaustibly cryptic symbolism of the Book of Revelation, continued beyond the point at which Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman empire. It is an ironic fact that, after the Last Days of Jerusalem, levelled by the Romans, those same Last Days attached themselves to Rome, long threatened and, finally, sacked by the barbarians. At this period the coming end of another world led the so-called

Desert Fathers into the eremitical seclusion of the Egyptian Thebaid [21], just as, periodically, disgust with courtly decadence and social decay led Chinese scholars into their mountain retreats. The collapse of Rome prompted Augustine's defence of Christianity [22], blamed by some for the Roman catastrophe—Augustine himself, who died with the barbarians at the gates of his North African city of Hippo, being opposed to the Hebraic model of a redemptive intervention within the historical process.

In the Middle Ages a Culture of Endings was part and parcel of religiosity, not least in horrendous periods such as those of the Black Death which decimated European populations (and whose avatars hover on the edge of twenty-first-century consciousness in the form of imminent Superbugs). Here we may expect a specifically apocalyptic eschatology, and in this connection McGinn [23] has provided a readable selection of late Latin and mediaeval texts on the theme. This includes the work of the third-century rhetorician Lactantius; Abbot Adso's tenth-century letter to Queen Gerberga; Joachim of Fiore's writings in the twelfth century; the letters of subversive Franciscan radicals from the thirteenth century on (some, like the Fraticelli—familiar to present readers through Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*—who opposed clerical wealth like proto-Protestants and Communists and were liable to read the Church itself as the latest Antichrist); and, finally, Savonarola (who we know to have inspired a penitent Botticelli to add some of his pictures to the general bonfire of Florentine vanities). In this article I wish only to draw attention to the most influential apocalyptic writer of the Middle Ages, the Calabrian Joachim of Fiore, whose analysis of the historical process broken down into three major periods leading to a final dénouement had an impact on Dante. A threefold, *i.e.*, Trinitarian, division of time is not unexpected in a clerical author (we recall that Hegel, not to mention Marx, still thought in threes!), but Joachim, for all his labyrinthine twelfth-century hermeneutics, genuinely marks a “turn to history” or shift towards a more modern historicizing consciousness. He reads past events not simply—like the authors of the Gospels applying Old Testament passages to episodes in the life of Christ—in order to legitimize the present by appeal to past authority, *i.e.*, as prophetic fulfilment, but to make sense of history, to find coherence in its processes, and so to hazard predictions as to where it might be going.

7. The Enlightenment Idea of Progress

It is entirely in this spirit, if somewhat more (no pun intended) open-endedly than Joachim, that I now want to focus on the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, that is, on a consideration of Endings in the context of a largely secular model of linear history. Following Coppola's 1979 movie title, this might be headed *Apocalypse Now*—though the extent to which the term “apocalypse” applies is a matter for discussion below. (For previously-published comments on what follows in this article see Dobrez [24–26]). Enlightenment orthodoxy, buoyed by the anti-authority, “freethinking” ideal of an increasingly dominant commercial middle class and excited by possibilities opened up by experimental science and developing technologies, read linear temporality as Progress, simply secularizing the Christian legacy of time as ultimately redemptive. Capitalism for a time delivered and Marxism for a time promised at least a modest, materialist version of the New Jerusalem. Evolutionary theory, on the face of it non-teleological, and neutral as to the progress of species, was at once read as an ascent culminating in the best of all possible species, one's own. It was from the start, with Darwin's relative, Francis Galton, caught up in ideas of eugenics and, more generally, with existing notions of European

racial superiority which it both reflected and encouraged. Thus it is no coincidence that consideration of the Enlightenment discourse of Progress returns us to the subject of hunter-gatherers. Time as linear progress unfailingly seeks to demolish that competing paradigm of time-as-place, since its impetus is towards radical transformation of geography from sacred to neutral or inert space, space ready for “development” precisely because it is inert. I intend to return to these comments. Here I stress that the modern project equally requires the neutralization or obliteration of hunter-gatherer people themselves, now characterized as evolutionary curiosities. A pre-Natural Selection Darwin, visiting Australia on the voyage of the *Beagle*, confidently predicted (prophesied?) the demise of Aboriginal people, along with the emu and kangaroo [27]. Despite historical falsification of the prediction and the subsequent efforts of thoughtful anthropologists, the dark side of Enlightenment confidence, its belief in the superannuated inferiority of past beliefs and ways of life, remains unshaken. At any rate whereas in America the evolutionary mindset generated discourse of “the last of the Mohicans” [28], in Australia it centred on that “last Tasmanian”, Truganini. Since genocide has all the thrill of apocalypse, there was some reluctance in acknowledging that, after all, the Tasmanians were not actually extinct. Nevertheless what happened in Tasmania deserves to be regarded as an apocalyptic end of a world, a fact perfectly grasped by the (problematically Aboriginal) novelist Colin Johnson when he wrote *Doctor Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* [29]. Somewhat along similar thematic lines, the highly original Serb, Sreten Božić, writing under the pseudonym “Wongar”, generated not merely literary texts but a cross-cultural phenomenon [30]. Projecting a European experience of World War II onto the Australian Aboriginal experience of massacre and dispossession—and in the process further combining Western anxieties about the nuclear threat with the mining of uranium on Aboriginal land—he depicted the Australian Bush as a blasted post-apocalypse landscape [31–33]. This was indeed intended as prophetic of coming events.

In fact the discourse of Progress always had premonitions of doom, not merely for supposed racial inferiors but for “civilization” itself. At the very start of the Industrial Revolution which realized the dream of enlightened secular Modernity, scholars were unearthing the ruins of the two Roman cities wiped out by the eruption of Vesuvius, and texts like Bulwer-Lytton's 1834 *The Last Days of Pompeii* articulated subterranean doubts about the future. More strikingly, Joseph Conrad [34], in the novella which stands behind Coppola's film, aired all the doubts about the superiority of European Modernity in the figure of Kurtz (“The horror! The horror!”). However, in the nineteenth century and at least until the winding up of most European empires after the disasters of two great twentieth-century wars, it was still possible for the West to continue the belief in Progress.

8. Contemporary End-Time

I would like to suggest that a change is gradually apparent after the second great war and becomes marked from the 1960s and 70s on. It is at this point that that I wish to locate the beginnings of a contemporary Culture of Endings. This with respect to the West, since the rest of the planet had its own post-colonial situations to deal with. What was ending in the West, however, was not simply the colonial enterprise, significant as that might be. My concern is with the phenomenon of the rise of Post-Modernism or, more precisely and following Harvey's [35] terminology, Post-Modernity. Why this phenomenon should be regarded as more critical than other more or less recent historical turning

points, including major wars, and why it should be read in the light of a Culture of Endings will be argued below. As regards terminology, however, Post-Modernity is preferable to Post-Modernism, because the latter is liable to suggest a narrowly cultural development, culture in the sense of describing something in the sphere of literature or the visual arts or music or architecture, *etc.* Whereas what I have in mind relates as much to a broadly social, political and economic phenomenon, that is, to culture in the anthropological sense. Regardless of the terminology they use, it is the case that most commentators have focussed on cultural expressions of the post-modern, understood in the narrower sense of the word, what the Marxists referred to as superstructural rather than base-related. My interest, as well as that of commentators to be discussed, is in a historical shift that is truly momentous, like those endings of cities and societies bemoaned (or wished-for) in the Old Testament.

Popular imagery is instructive in this context. In the genre of Science Fiction, film could always accommodate world-disasters, invasions from Mars and the like, as in the classic War of the Worlds scenario. However, there was for a long time a conviction that technology made for a clean and tidy, aerodynamic future—perhaps with a little Evil thrown in. There might be trials, but these would play out in a high-tech, spick and span world. In 1982 *Blade Runner* proposed a very different picture of the future, as did at about the same time Miller's Mad Max movies. Sci Fi writing, now characterized as Cyberpunk [36], shifted in the direction of dystopia. Even as Pop products like the 007 films became increasingly cynical about personal and political innocence while maintaining the fantasy of Victory over Evil, the culture industry imagined a future with islands of privileged power in a general sea of moral confusion, socioeconomic chaos and, significantly, rusting technology. This in combination with the development of new, refined techniques of social and individual repression. Techno-culture had always had its critics. There was, after all, the spectre of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and, post-war, Eisenhower's foreboding about the "military-industrial complex". Moreover from the sixties on no amount of scientific breakthroughs (there have been many) could disguise the fact that science overwhelmingly operates in the service of the military and of the corporate profit motive.

More than that, there was a growing belief that science expressed a culture of power, of technological control. I shall return to the issue of power, which has been much discussed. Here it suffices to point out that the shift from traditional Sci Fi to Cyberpunk indicated, in the sphere of pop consumption, a loss of confidence in the liberating force of technological science, that is to say, a pervasive querying of the Progress paradigm. Advocates for science have, I suspect, misread the nature of the problem. They see (they could not fail to see) that there is a crisis of confidence in science, but have read this in outdated terms, viz as a resurgence of superstition, say in the form of religious fundamentalism—only able to be countered by education, "selling" science better to a confused public. But this is the old battle, already won in the project of the Enlightenment. The post-modern crisis is of a quite other kind, and religious fundamentalism is probably just one symptom of it. The solution, if there is one, requires more than renewed confidence in a techno-fix, simply because it is plain that technology, while capable of generating solutions, is more fundamentally part of the problem. Our contemporary dystopic vision has to be taken seriously and understood in recent-historical terms.

9. The Post-Structuralist Critique of Enlightenment

From the 1960s or a little before that, a number of thinkers set out most deliberately to undermine the Enlightenment paradigm. They zeroed in on the individualism of the Enlightenment, its concept of history, *i.e.*, time, and on a series of associated narratives. They did so by a, to say the least, idiosyncratic route. A hundred years ago, Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* [37] was published, inaugurating the subsequently-developed discipline of semiotics. Saussure argued (with some provisos) that language operates, both phonemically and (more dubiously) semantically, by a system of difference. Using a simple example, "cat", "cot" and "cut" are solely sound-differentiated, that is, there is nothing intrinsically catty about "cat", cotty about "cot" or sharp about "cut". Language, in short, works with arbitrary sounds attached to arbitrary or conventionalized meanings. Putting it another way, the components of the sign, *viz* signifier (the carrier of meaning, in the case of "cat" the sound) and signified (the meaning "cat") have no necessary connection. This sounds reasonable when we ponder that "thanks", "grazie" and "arigato" all mean the same thing while sounding different, though it by no means follows that language originated in this way. Still, the radical move was not made by Saussure but by the structuralists who took inspiration from his particular type of linguistics. Via Lévi-Strauss linguistics binaries entered the discipline of anthropology and via Leroi-Gourhan that of Rock Art studies [38,39]. Structuralism offered a usable methodology where the original meanings of texts (verbal, visual, *etc.*) were unavailable. However, it led to an idea of the primacy of language as a synchronic system over diachronic or historical agent-oriented approaches. Barthes [40] asserted that it is not we who write language but language which writes us. This was labelled a "death of origin", *i.e.*, of individual agency within a historical process, or a "death of the author". Likewise Foucault [41] examined the nature of authorial attribution, in the course of which the author was transformed into the "author function". Already at these points we may legitimately speak of a move beyond Structuralism, usually referred to as Post-Structuralism. It was in a way all implicit in the Saussurean model, but the single element that was added was, significantly enough, the anarchic. A new, quickly dogmatized, notion of the arbitrary nature of the sign was applied to the whole of social reality, something that might have greatly surprised Saussure. There is in fact no scientific evidence that the mind, indeed the brain, is structured like a language, and in particular like Saussure's concept of language. We know, for example, that it is quite possible to *think* non-linguistically or without language [42–47]. Even more speculative is the notion that all sociopolitical systems are based on a linguistic premise of difference. This, however, was a general assumption of post-structuralist thinking.

10. Derrida's Absence

Derrida took this very far, in a way that is initially exasperating, then appears witty (even plausible), then, finally, exasperates once more. His view of Difference was famously expressed in an address [48], and it underpins his major *Of Grammatology* [49]. It is, however, most pithily put in "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" [50]. This last points out the disconcerting fact that a circle (any circle) is constituted by its centre, but that this centre is not actually part of the circle; it is, rather, an absence. Thus, the "concept of centered structure...is contradictorily coherent" ([50], p. 279). Doubtless this is the Sophist's argument, which Plato's Socrates would have

nicely ridiculed. However, post-structuralist thought privileges the Sophist against Plato. In a way that is both compelling and, to my mind, ultimately more rhetorical than not, Derrida argues that all the great structures have at their core the internal contradiction of the circle. The centre is inevitably not in the structure but somewhere else: it is an absence which defines a presence (the circle). Of course it might be objected that Derrida's example is simply a metaphor. Derrida would not, however, see this as an objection. His is an odd kind of anti-theology, one that operates like that of Dionysius the Areopagite, negatively [51]. But it is Negative Theology without God. All the large philosophical ideas are given the same treatment as the circle with its absent centre. Being, Origin, Substance, Truth, Consciousness, God, Man, owe their structure to absent dominants ([50], pp. 279–80). The philosopher Heidegger, who identified what he saw as an old philosophical error, that of understanding Being as a Presence or “thing” [52], makes an appearance here, though in a guise he would certainly have repudiated, as he repudiated an earlier French misinterpretation of his work, that of Sartre [53,54]. At any rate it is from Heidegger that Derrida borrows his own revised version of “deconstruction”. All structures are to be problematized, revealed as self-contradicting, as “play”, in an extreme, in its way logical, anti-essentialist way. We recall, after all, that the word “cat” entailed no essence of cat. Moreover, we apply this observation to the whole of discursive reality, that is to say, to almost everything. Or perhaps, at least in some sense, to everything? Putting it in a way that would be metaphysical if Derrida allowed metaphysics into his scheme, neither “presence” nor “absence”, neither being nor its negation, may stand as ground or first principle ([50], p. 292). Instead that principle is a “play” which functions after the manner of Greek Chaos, as that entropic X preceding and generating an ordered cosmos.

Now some might readily accept that behind all intellectual structures, all human attempts to make order of any kind, there lurks something like Chaos in the Greek sense, that it is we who assign meanings to what is intrinsically meaningless, there being no divinity above to do it for us. This sort of anti-essentialism will seem unremarkable to many who are otherwise bamboozled by the ideas I have been describing. Even so, I would argue that key concepts are not so easily reducible to this type of Nominalism. The idea of “man” is central to the universalizing tolerance of Enlightenment thinking. It is indeed a construct in the sense that applies to all discourses. But does that mean there is no such thing as human “nature”, simply endless varieties of humans, diversely constructed by diverse circumstances? Scientific developments, *contra* recent Humanities ones, take the idea of “nature” very seriously, not simply as a socio-discursive, perhaps ideological, invention. Genetics tells us we do not simply invent ourselves. What about the Theory of Evolution or the laws of physics? Fed up with the easy jargon of Post-Structuralism, the physicist Alan Sokal of New York University perpetrated a successful hoax, having his nonsense article “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity” published in the progressive journal *Social Text*. (For a detailed discussion of the hoax, see Dobrez [55]). Sokal's parody hit the mark, but his main concern was to point out that Derrida and others like him were in the process of reducing reality to a social construct. I do not think Post-Structuralism seeks to go that far, though it would certainly claim that to the extent we think/speak the Theory of Evolution or the laws of physics we necessarily annex these to the discursive. To the extent they are “theories” they qualify as constructs. However, to the extent they remain extra-discursive, e.g., when subjected to repeatable experiment liable to falsification, they constitute empirical reality. Nonetheless there is a difficulty here with over-zealous construct thinking.

As a scientist Sokal answers the question “is there order in nature?” in the affirmative. Indeed science cannot function without this premise. If order is merely imposed by us, then there is no natural order but only, as I believe the post-structuralists have it, anarchic chaos. “No natural order” means “no such thing as nature”. And, necessarily, “nature” includes “human nature”.

The issue may be put more philosophically by asking: “how easy is it to reduce the notion of ‘truth’ to linguistic play, *i.e.*, social construct?” If, like Derrida, we assert this, are we not also asserting that the proposition “truth is a construct” is *true*? In which case Derrida’s argument is circular, and not simply in terms of a narrowly-defined logic. Rather it looks as if the concept of truth is ontically, *i.e.*, *really* prior to anything we say about it. It is, in short, prior to language. The same was argued by Heidegger for “being”, since whatever we assert about being (say, along Nominalist lines) necessarily always presupposes its reality.

It must be clear that I am not in sympathy with Derridan philosophy, but I hope I am putting it in such a way that readers who might otherwise be inclined to dismiss it as nonsense will get a sense of its (paradoxical) coherence and appeal. At the sociopolitical level, there is an element of conspiracy theory in that presentation of the absent, yet controlling, centre. Of course some conspiracy theories turn out to be based on fact (think of the Gulf of Tonkin incident or Iraqi weapons of mass destruction). But it is more challenging to entertain the notion of the entire Enlightenment project of truth-seeking, whether via reason or experiment, as a conspiracy—because for Derrida the absent centre represents ideology, a violence of some kind. Worse still, the dethronement of truth *et al.* means that, in the face of specific historical situations, “deconstruction” paralyzes any form of ethical/political response. Derrida unashamedly spoke of it as “undecidability”, and it is telling that, when he visited the Middle East, he could, with the best of intentions, add nothing to the undecidable of Israel and Palestine.

11. Deleuze/Guattari, Foucault and Lyotard

French theory from the 60s on largely abandoned the Communists who had been so powerful in the country in the immediate postwar. The new philosophical position had to be anarchic, as indeed was the so-called “plural” politics of the period, the politics of ecology, feminism, gay and lesbian liberation, *etc.* I want to indicate that the anarchic is not coincidental but very much at the heart of the philosophical position outlined above, and that this position has an unlikely logic ultimately referable to the semiotics proposed by Saussure. In due course I shall focus more specifically on the critique of the Enlightenment, but before that I need to mention some of Derrida’s varied fellow-travellers—not to be understood as followers. I have stressed Derrida’s contribution to a philosophical form of anarchy because it is in its own way clear and fundamental. (Of course his anti-foundationalism would have utterly rejected this formulation of his thinking.) Others elaborated on a comparable theme. Deleuze and Guattari [56] turned Freud on his head to analyse capitalism on the basis of an understanding of Difference much like Derrida’s. The question was “how to produce, how to think about fragments whose sole relationship is sheer difference”, because “we no longer believe in a primordial totality, that once existed, or in a final totality that awaits us at some future date” ([56], p. 42). This has an eschatological flavour appropriately dressed as anti-eschatology after the fashion of Derridan “deferral”. Capitalism is the “despotic signifier” ([56], p. 40), with “schizoid” or “nomadic” strategies as the only linguistic, psychological and political way out. It would be ungenerous to enquire what actual

schizophrenics or those few remaining nomads would make of this—though it is certainly the case that Deleuze/Guattari write with considerable (over-the-top) wit. Moreover those who remember R.D. Laing’s work [57] will more readily grasp Deleuze/Guattari’s preference for the schizoid (considerably idealized) over the classically modern Freudian neurotic ([56], p. 2). In another major book [58] the two developed these views, notably via the metaphor of the tree (with single trunk, *i.e.*, origin, foundation) vs the rhizome, a (subversively!) nomadic plant with multiple stopping-points and ever-renewed settings-out.

If all of this sounds excessively hothouse Parisian, as indeed it is, there are the equally anarchy-directed Jeremiads of Foucault, who wrote the preface for the first Deleuze/Guattari book cited above. Foucault is much more accessible to a general readership because he is not writing as a philosopher but as a theorizing historian—of sorts. He puts the case for all knowledge as an expression of power, and his histories are histories of discursive constructs (for a methodological overview, see *The Archaeology of Knowledge* [59]). The sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit, theme of these historical discourses—discourses of madness, a history of “insanity in the age of reason” [60]; of pathology, a history of the medical clinic [61]; of the human sciences, a history of knowledge [62]; of constraint, a history of the prison [63]; of sexuality [64–66]—was inevitably the new, disguised violence of institutions in the wake of the Enlightenment. Foucault’s argument is in many respects convincing, at least if we overlook the premise on which it rests. Unfortunately it can offer no way out of the predicaments he so meticulously and relentlessly maps out. Just as Derrida’s deconstruction of truth removed the ground for any reformulations (leaving Derrida with the painful disingenuousness of truth as merely “strategic”) so Foucault’s power thesis offers only the dubious relief of a somewhat preferable power play replacing a not-so-preferable one. Finally this very brief account of intellectual developments under the rubric of Post-Structuralism must make mention of Lyotard, who more than any other emphasized the demise of the master-narratives or totalizing stories which we source to the Enlightenment project [67]. I shall again refer to Lyotard while specifically addressing the post-modern. Here I note the same problem of circularity discernible in other post-structuralist arguments: is not the anti-narrative discourse simply another narrative replacing possibly superannuated ones? But this sort of logical objection is familiar to the post-structuralists and their reply is simple: “if you insist on this logic you must be seeking to impose your own will on the discussion”. Which is true if you choose to see it that way, but not if you take a prior stand on truth, *i.e.*, on truth as *not* intrinsically and inevitably in the service of power.

12. Post-Structuralism and the Subject

Interestingly, Foucault wrote a piece on that standard Kantian manifesto, *What is Enlightenment?* [68]. Kant made a call for a questioning of authority and dogma, chiefly in the religious sphere. He could hardly make more than a moderate appeal in the political sphere, since he lived under an absolute monarch. Nonetheless the call for a turn to an “enlightened” maturity, expressed in the *sapere aude!* (dare to know!) motto, represents a revolutionary assertion of individual freedom. Foucault somewhat laboriously damns Kant with very measured praise, as it were bringing the Enlightenment project up to date by problematizing it. Certain points emerge which are of relevance to the present article, however. The Enlightenment initiates “the attitude of modernity” and two aspects stand out, viz “man’s historical

mode of being” and “the constitution of the self as an autonomous subject” ([69], p. 42). I shall consider the fate of these two within the post-structuralist paradigm. We recall the anti-essentialist approach adopted by Barthes and Foucault with respect to the “author”, not speaking language but being spoken by it. This has wider applications, not least to the concept of a human subject. Psychoanalysis, adopted with astonishingly uncritical zeal by French intellectuals of the period, and later by their anglophone imitators, exploded any notion of a homogeneous, monolithic self. Rather it offered a model of the self as multiple, shifting, unstable—on the basis of a rewrite by Lacan [70] of the Freudian Oedipal crisis along linguistic lines. The linguistic model pure and simple presented the subject as a product of grammar: “I-subject” as in the “subject-predicate” construction. This subject was of course generated socially, via ideology: it was yet another linguistic-sociopolitical construct. Now it is not unreasonable to postulate that individual identity is not monolithic and that it does indeed develop in the course of social interactions, under specific political and economic conditions, *etc.* (Sartre called it “freedom” within a given “situation”). However, when Foucault prefers the term “subject-position” to “subject” and when Deleuze/Guattari argue that the “subject itself is not at the centre... but at the periphery, with no fixed identity, forever decentered, *defined* by the states through which it passes” ([56], p. 20) something quite different is being said.

13. Post-Structuralism and History

Clearly there has been a radical transformation of Kant’s Enlightenment individual, the protagonist of Modernity. What about the same individual’s historical existence, with history understood as a cause-and-effect process encompassing all things—an idea systematized by scholars in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century? It is a view of reality so ingrained in the last two hundred years that it requires effort to put oneself in the shoes of a subject, for example Shakespeare, perfectly aware of historical events as a chronology of sorts, but unaware of “period” as influencing the way we think and act, and of the succession of temporal situations as “historically” linked, that is, linked (whether more or less organically) by that causal chain. Post-Structuralism had to be drastically anti-organicist. Its logic was of the sort that derided large syntheses (while inescapably making them), totally opposed to the intellectual triumphalism of the days of Hegel, Marx, Wagner, Darwin. This was the drive against “totalization”. In a related vein, and with reference to the idea of history, we recall Lyotard’s rejection of the “*grand récit*” or master-narrative. That included the narrative of Enlightenment success in the struggle against superstition and conservatism, the narrative of technological, social and economic advancement, viz the narrative of Progress.

But rejection of a particular great narrative, exposed (in some respects with justification, in other respects not) as violent, all-controlling, is only the beginning. What the post-structuralists set out to demolish was the idea of history *as such*. Foucault wrote history *without* appeal to causal relations. In particular he wrote histories of what he called “epistemes”, the system(s) of knowledge, theoretical and applied, at a given time and within a given power structure. Thus systems were treated vertically or “archaeologically” rather than horizontally, *i.e.*, they were treated synchronically, as distinct from and unrelated to other systems and other times—a procedure which fragmented history much as Barthes had (rather brilliantly) fragmented the literary text and discussed it not as a sequential narrative but a series of structuralist codes in his book *S/Z* [71]. Naturally Barthes cheated and the result was a lucid

methodological statement. In the same way Foucault broke up the historical causal narrative in order to make penetrating, inevitably bleak, comments about history. At any rate the premise of a Death of History remained. I return below to the fact that post-structuralists—Lyotard is a case in point—do not take kindly to attempts to periodize their work. While Foucault sidesteps periodizing history, Derrida characteristically makes gnomic periodizing statements which he promptly retracts. In general, post-structuralists do not see themselves as a product of history; rather for them history is a construct, itself produced. Some years ago I published a collection of essays by various scholars entitled *Identifying Australia in Postmodern Times* [72]. One of the contributors was bothered by the title: why “times”? Clearly, and with intent, I was placing the essays, his own included, inside a box labelled “history”. Whereas he would have placed “history” inside his own box, labelled “constructs”.

14. Post-Modernity Experienced

What precisely does the above survey of Post-Structuralism (the name of a movement which will not be named and which refuses the term “movement”) contribute to the analysis of Post-Modernism? In fact there are some who conflate the two and simply refer to Post-Structuralism as Post-Modernism, but I resist that temptation because I see post-structuralist thinking as one aspect of a larger historical event. It is a highly relevant aspect of the post-modern because, for all its mystifications, it theorizes, and with lucidity and coherence, albeit within a structure premised on anarchic chaos. Foucault called Modernity an “attitude” by way of diminishing it. I want to stress that neither it nor its Post are reducible to attitudes or stances. What happened at the time of the Enlightenment—the coming into being of the phenomenon of Modernity—and what has been happening in the last half century—its transformation into Post-Modernity—are significant historical events (of course entailing any number of “attitudinal” shifts). Critically, it must be apparent that there are parallels between the arguments of the post-structuralists and historical changes we identify as post-modern. I shall briefly review some of these changes, simply as one of many members of that generation which lived through the process, before turning to commentators who have contributed specifically to the analysis of Post-Modernity. The structuralists privileged synchronic over diachronic approaches, taking their stand on language as an all-pervasive system. The implications of this, applied wholesale to society, are massive. They include a devaluation of (individual or group) agency, and the devaluation of a sense of history as the overarching series of structures within which human agency operates—structures which *situate* the human, both influencing it and influenced by it. The post-structuralists added to this by asserting that structure, whether of the subject-self or history, rested on the void of chaotic, shifting indeterminacy—and existed as a power-construct, imposed by some kind of force on that, in their eyes liberating, indeterminacy. Hence their anti-essentialism, anti-totalization, deconstruction—a decentering as radical as any envisaged in Yeats’ lines (“the centre cannot hold...”). However, accompanying this somewhat theatrical theorizing were very real events. European Modernity gave upward mobility to its individualistic middle class and entrenched a market-oriented meritocracy over the old feudal structures of bloodlines and inheritance. It created capitalism proper, made possible by and making possible, new technologies. It did that on the basis of great exploitation of that other newly-created class, the underclass of workers, as well as of subject peoples in the colonial outposts. At the same time, the system gradually offered material benefits and entry into the middle class to all, along with

democratic rights (not, of course, in the outposts of empire). Capitalism with a human face went a long way from the Dickensian horrors of the earlier nineteenth century, and socialism with a human face coexisted more or less comfortably with it, both of them underpinning a teleology of Progress. But at a certain point the paradigm began to lose its hold.

At the political level there was, of course, not only the (welcome) process of decolonization—with its (unwelcome) economic neocolonial successor—but on top of that a continuing decline of Western world dominance. That is an ongoing Ending, with its own culture and pathologies, set against the gathering confidence of nations like China and India. However, I think that the post-modern paradigm has fundamentally more to do with economics than politics (though it generates its own kinds of politics), for the reason that for some time the business of the West has been business. From the 1970s on, along with the rise of anti-Keynesian theories, a more and more extreme free-market ideology prompted commodification of previously unaffected social areas, a move to privatization of previously public infrastructure, and expanding application of corporate structures and business models to institutions. In tandem with the globalization of the market and the rise of the multinationals, this weakened the power of governments and indeed lessened confidence in democracy. The rise to a previously unimaginable degree of advertising in association with frenetic consumer culture and a politics of PR spin, fostered either plain escapism or dystopian anxieties. Among other things, 70s developments stopped in its tracks the earlier steady pattern of upward social mobility. The middle class project of the Enlightenment looked like coming to an end, as it still does in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Nor could faith in science and technology come to the rescue since, as pointed out above, science came to appear less as the key to progress, as it had done in the nineteenth century, and more as part of the (military-political, corporate-economic and ecological) problem.

15. Post-Structuralism and Post-Modernity

So where does this leave the post-structuralist prophecies, whether euphoric (Deleuze/Guattari) or doom-laden (Foucault)? The answer might be that there is an odd and suspicious coming together of post-structuralist ideas and socioeconomic developments which the post-structuralists would entirely disavow and condemn. It seems two dreams are being articulated, equally strange in their more extreme expressions, one of which, however, is in the process of realization in the real world. In each case there is a strong element of dogmatic allegiance to somewhat vague premises. The post-structuralists produce supposedly open-ended manifestoes extolling liberatory anarchy, though it is unclear why this anarchy should of itself be liberatory, *i.e.*, more than a protest *against* something. At the same time there is the assertion of another chaos of sorts regarded as liberatory, a notion that the market, if only left entirely to its own devices, will solve all human problems. In the post-structuralist case anarchic theory requires a detailed critique of Enlightenment Modernity understood largely or entirely as having had negative consequences. In the other case there is a postulate which, if fully realized, looks to dismantle the painfully established regulatory limits of Enlightenment Modernity capitalism. As a consequence we might say that the free market has all the appearance of post-structuralist *jeu*, a “play” directed by the profit motive—programmed for automatic computer share-trading response—and finding slippery and temporary moments of equilibrium without regard for social collateral damage. There is certainly something uncannily coincidental about the way in which

the anti-essentialist, anarchic thinking of Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, Lyotard and others mirrors ideas about the play of the free market as this unfolded in the later part of the twentieth century. It has prompted some to argue that post-structuralist thinking, despite apparently subversive intentions, facilitated the dominance of free-market ideology [35,73,74].

The post-structuralists announced the death of the subject, but it was the post-70s economics surge which actually weakened the position of the middle class in the West by checking upward mobility, *embourgeoisement*, the original rise and rise of the Enlightenment individual. This individual has now mutated somewhat: s/he has become a subject-consumer, an appendage of a system of overconsumption. The post-modern consumer operates within a mystifying opacity, product of globalized systems, uncertain as to product origins, helpless when her complaint about a local Australian service is routed to Bangalore, insecure as to her tenure in a job, since rapid reaction to market shifts rapidly expands—or shrinks—that tenure. It is a kind of Death of Origin, a Derridan “deferral” of explanatory narratives, an impossibly complex totality—with an absent centre. Agency, theoretically proscribed by the post-structuralist primacy of the text, is here *actually* reduced. This while the pervasiveness of advertising and the PR culture of business realizes a very real Death of Truth, truth understood pragmatically as a profit-driven construct. Arendt [75], in her defining critique of totalitarianism, made the point that totalitarian régimes find it useful to create a degree of chaos, an element of the arbitrary, within their own administration. While it is obviously unproductive, it serves to keep everyone nervously on their toes. This is increasingly happening in Western democracies, less as a conspiracy (though that may play a role, say when governments or corporations soften up employees before reducing salaries or sacking staff) than as a byproduct of the business and communication system. It goes by the term “flexibility”. “Flexible” chaos and opacity serve each other well.

The entire package finds perfect expression in art schooled in post-structuralist clichés, and fine-tuned to consumerism. Hence self-referentiality, self-conscious textualizing, the novel about itself or about other novels, the picture about itself or other pictures, *etc.* There is never-ending quotation, of which more below, and, in general, all the decadent rhetorical fireworks and virtuosity for its own sake of the post-structuralist Sophist—some of it of course very impressive (one thinks of Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveller* [76]). In the visual arts especially there is the, in the end tediously, repeated question (posed long ago by Duchamp): “is it art or life?” This because consumerism embraces any object as art—in the process turning any aspect or all aspects of life into aesthetics, *i.e.*, art. In tandem with the mantra that everything is “textual” anyway, that suggests a genuine crisis of reality at the absent centre of Derrida’s circle. (For a more detailed account of the above developments in art see Dobrez [77,78]),

16. Post-Modernity Named

I do not think it is too difficult to find unlikely but actual points of convergence between post-structuralist theory and the neocon/free market project of the post-70s. However, I now want to shift focus from general observations to consideration of specific commentators on the historical transformation in question. In so doing I shall again concentrate on the post-modern subject and on the fate of history under the rule of post-modernity. Invention of the label “postmodern” is as likely due to Ihab Hassan as to anyone else. This “Reformed Postmodernist” ([79], p. 143), offered the first set of

binary concepts, modern against post-modern, in an early article, since republished with other material ([80], pp. 25ff, 91–92). Many of these are broadly in line with what I have argued and as valid in 2014 as in 1971. Jencks [81], with attractively naïve enthusiasm, and very selectively, sang the praises of post-modern art and, more knowledgeably, architecture. Lyotard [67], putting the case for the demise of the great narrative, presented the outcome as “the postmodern condition”. While rejecting periodization of the “condition” he could not help implying it. However, I would like to concentrate on two commentators, Baudrillard and Jameson.

17. Baudrillard: The Subject as Screen/Network

Of all those who set out to describe the metamorphoses of the subject under the condition of Post-Modernity, it seems to me Baudrillard is the most incisive. In “The Ecstasy of Communication” [82] he begins with a summary series of statements about objects, *i.e.*, “things”. For example, there was a once-upon-a-time when people projected themselves onto objects. Thus a car might function as an expression of male fantasies of sexuality and power, and perhaps female fantasies of can-do independence, *etc.* The car would then function symbolically, as an externalization of something inward or psychological. This premised on the human subject as constituted by some sort of interiority. Baudrillard characterizes it as follows: once, an object had the capacity to “mirror” the subject. In such a situation the subject/object, private/public binary had some meaning. However, all that has changed: “the psychological dimension has in a sense vanished” ([82], p. 127). In short, we have witnessed another demise: a death of psychology. Humans no longer operate on the assumption of surface vs depth (or, to revert to a cliché of literary studies, a thematics of “appearance” and “reality”). For Baudrillard the shift was already prompted by the communication technology of television. However, his 1983 commentary has enough insight to apply in the 2014 world of the PC, smartphone, social media (Facebook, Twitter), *etc.* In his words, the “scene and mirror no longer exist; instead there is a screen and network” ([82], p. 126). It is as if the subject has been flattened out, made completely outward, in an *ex-stasis*, a standing outside oneself, the “ecstasy of communication”. You as it were exist “out there”, in the vast network, where your “out” is really your “in”, the surface really your depth, in a collapse of the old subject-object polarity. In this situation there can be no “alienation”, there being no (essential) subject from which to be alienated. You exist in virtuality, more at home there than in real space/time—and yet this virtual space/time has a quality of hyperreality: it is a virtual more real than reality. This amounts to a Death of the Real, in which concepts attached to “truth”, such as “authenticity (see Dobrez [55,83]) mean very little. After all, you can be anyone you like online and so can everyone else, so that the old *angst* of “who am I?” disappears. As Baudrillard puts it, this living in as it were completely naked exposure (where everything could be hidden if there remained an interiority to hide) represents a transformation of the old “scene” into a new “obscene”. Using metaphors of pathology: “if hysteria was the pathology of the exacerbated staging of the subject...then with communication and information, with the immanent promiscuity of all these networks...we are now in a new form of schizophrenia. No more hysteria...but this state of terror proper to the schizophrenic: too great a proximity to everything, the unclean promiscuity of everything which touches, invests and penetrates without resistance, with no halo of private protection” ([82], p. 132). Doubtless this rhetoric will sound overblown to some, perhaps especially to English-speakers. I think

there is something in it. At any rate Baudrillard's contribution is to offer a completely post-modern reformulation of the question "who am I?"

18. Jameson: Pastiche, Schizophrenia and History

Jameson, who has emphatically set out to periodize Post-Modernity [74,84], analyses it along at least parallel lines. In a concise paper given in 1982 [73] he introduces the term "pastiche" for post-modern culture, noting that once there was such a form as "parody", a rhetorical device dependent on an *original* for its operation. You can only parody X if in some sense you acknowledge it or rely on it as your norm. But in a situation in which all norms dissolve away, parody becomes impossible. Instead what obtains is neutralized mimicry, what Jameson calls "blank parody" or "blank irony". Warhol's images of celebrities (Mao, Marilyn, Elvis) come readily to mind. These images have a deadpan quality, they should be parodic but are not, like those Campbell's Soup cans or Brillo boxes. The example is mine, but it illustrates the idea of "pastiche". Pastiche characterizes a state of culture which has lost its norms, and in particular the norm of an identity, that of the subject or individual. It is a state of culture where the sense of interiority is in the process of being lost, since "blank" irony or parody is precisely the old irony, *etc.*, deprived of depth, what Baudrillard referred to as the transition from mirror to screen and network. I want to move on, however, to focus on Jameson's analysis of the sense of history in this context. In his major work on the post-modern, he opens with the claim that we are "in an age that has forgotten how to think historically" ([74], p. 1).

In the 1982 address he works his way from the idea of pastiche to implications for the historical. For example there is the vogue of "retro", say in the Indiana Jones films. As with Warhol, and despite an element of comic tongue-in-cheek, there is no attempt here to generate irony. It is (reactionary) nostalgia for the days of Western dominance, but not quite that either, since it is a *knowing* nostalgia, and for a pop construct of the days of Western dominance. Moreover, all of it is done in a deadpan sort of way, certainly *not* a skit on Boys' Own fiction or the old comics. The example returns the present argument to earlier mention of quotation in literature or the visual arts or architecture, to which may be added the fad for "sampling" in pop music. In this context quotation, at least on the face of it, neither undermines nor reinforces; it is not a critique, for or against. It is simply a simulacrum placed alongside the original. I will gloss over the evident implications of this for the "authenticity" of the original, to point out that it comments on a certain take on history. Like others discussed above but for his own reasons, Jameson appeals to the metaphor of schizophrenia. The schizophrenic experience involves (among other things) a sensory overload in which distinctions become impossible, a loss of self-identity, an excessive, overwhelming sense of being in an intense present. It is of course not hard to attach this experience by way of metaphor to a post-modern situation of life-on-the-Web, where vast amounts of data neutralize themselves, lose meaning and, above all, jumble the many presents of history into a homogenized present, the loss of history which is very much Jameson's theme. It has been referred to as presentism and linked to a society of "instantaneity", here-and-now consumer gratification (Harvey [35], p. 286). At any rate Jameson tackles two major aspects of Post-Modernity under the related concepts of pastiche and schizophrenia: "the transformation of reality into images, the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents" ([73], p. 125). I am not at all sure this overstates the post-modern condition. As I have noted above, the sense of history has not always

existed; Shakespeare did not have it. It evolved in the course of the project of Modernity and with the help of the founders of the University of Berlin (in particular Alexander's brother, Wilhelm von Humboldt), the historicizing philosophies of Hegel and Marx, the nineteenth-century historical novel, the time-syntheses of Lyell and Darwin. And what comes into existence can also go out of existence. It may be that something like this last is currently in train. Of course this is not to say that the contemporary subject somehow ceases to live temporally. We cannot opt to exist out of time. But the particular awareness of living historically, of history in the Enlightenment-modern sense I have described—as an all-encompassing reality structured by causal relations—may lose its force in a culture in which “history” (or “reality”) acquire quotation marks, *i.e.*, turn into another construct. The same fate may await the sense of one's own inwardness—or capacity for agency.

19. From Time to Space?

There have been suggestions that the modernist focus on the phenomenon of time, alluded to at the start of this article with reference to Heidegger and Sartre, is being overtaken by a new focus on space. Jameson discusses this in his book ([74], p. 364ff), and the question is given considerable treatment by Harvey ([35], p. 201ff), whose thesis is Post-Modernity as a “historical-geographical” ([35], p. 328) paradigm shift. To the extent that the time-to-space idea may be pointing to a real event—underpinned by cultural, political and economic developments—it may signal a weakening or demise of the linear concept of time which I have postulated as essential, though in differing ways, both to the Judaeo-Christian narrative and to the narrative of Modernity. That might prompt speculation as to whether we are witnessing a return to some version of the hunter-gatherer paradigm of place discussed above. Indeed anthropological perspectives guided by post-structuralist *doxa* are liable to read Australian Aboriginal societies along anti-essentialist post-modern lines. (Contradicting this tendency in a paper given at a conference in Indonesia [85], I was met with predictable resistance by someone with such assumptions.) However (and retaining the Australian example as plausibly a type of hunter-gatherer thinking), I do not believe the post-modern paradigm has anything in common with the hunter-gatherer one—and this should hardly surprise. If hunter-gatherer temporality has its grounding in differentiated, meaning-filled place, the linear temporality of Modernity abstracts and homogenizes space (reducing it, for example, to a map); it commodifies it and brings it under technological control. The presumed post-modern demise of this sort of space/time leaves us with nothing like a sense of (belonging to) place. Nor does it leave us with a sense of alienation from place, the kind that impelled the English poets of the Industrial Revolution to the Lake District or, more recently, the urban cog-in-the-machine to a National Park for a weekend drive and picnic. Alienation, it seems, is a thing of the Hegelian/Marxian past, and one no longer needs to get into a car to access “nature”, now theorized as a construct and readily available via Google—admittedly only as a digital construct, but nonetheless satisfying...in that hyperreal way. At this point the undifferentiated universal space of Modernity has been further (?) abstracted to virtuality, the latest commodification frontier. For the original version of these comments I refer the reader to a 2001 publication (Dobrez [86]). Here I want to stress the incompatibility of post-modern ideas with the (let's face it) radical *essentialism* of hunter-gatherer thought.

20. The Culture of Endings

How does the foregoing account of Post-Modernity bring us to the issue of a Culture of Endings? To begin with, and with consideration for a general readership which may find some of the material in this article arcane, do we accept the assertion of Endings by post-structuralists? What about those assertions by commentators on the post-modern? Are we actually in the process of abandoning the paradigm of linear time and its specific expression as the sense of history, or actually altering our understanding of ourselves as individuals? It is at the very least possible. Of course to assent to the notion of a Culture of Endings it is not necessary to establish that any of the theorizing discussed above is true to the facts—in the sense that the existence of a discourse of Endings suffices as evidence for such a culture. I have made it clear that I do not regard post-structuralist theories as phenomenologically accurate descriptions of reality and that I am more disposed to accept periodizing analyses of the phenomenon of Post-Modernity. At the same time there does seem to be a close correlation between post-structuralist theories and the current socioeconomic situation, and it is also the case that these theories have been very influential. So if post-structuralism fails to convince as an account of the real, it may well convince as a highly instructive misreading of the state of contemporary Western culture.

But must we view the post-modern entirely in terms of crisis? After all, postwar reconstruction produced something more than the complacent materialism which ushered in consumerism; it gave opportunities for education and a better standard of living. Moreover, the 60s revolt of the young, who so despised the banality of that better standard, expressed not merely another side of complacent affluence, another form of desire for gratification-now, but genuine idealism and a blueprint for a freer society. However, my present theme is precisely Endings. Moreover I wish to remain focussed on that fundamentally *economic* dominant which seems to be the key to Post-Modernity. With regard to the liberatory possibilities of Baudrillard's ecstasy of communication, as envisaged by more contemporary (online) idealists, I am somewhat sceptical, given that as ever the medium is the real message.

If, then, we are indeed, in some fundamental way, living out an experience of Endings, what is it that is coming to an end? The answer has already been given and merely requires underlining here. It is the end of the Enlightenment Modernity structures which held good for some two hundred years—more than that depending on where one wants to locate the historical beginnings of the Enlightenment. That explains why the shift is felt as more critical than, say, the horrendous military conflicts of the twentieth century. Is it a case, however, of a complete paradigm change or a change within the paradigm? Habermas [87] has argued that the project of Modernity remains incomplete. Harvey discerns more continuity than difference in the two projects, with Post-Modernity as a “new round of ‘time-space compression’ in the organization of capitalism” ([35], p. vii). Jameson's major work on the post-modern has the subtitle *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* [74], implying that the shift is occurring within the sphere of capitalist Modernity. I see the sense of these formulations. At the same time the post-modern feels very much like a revolution, and that, to my mind, justifies the use of the term “post-modern”. One way or another the event is of considerable magnitude. Hence we may speak of an eschatological moment: Post-Modernity has all the characteristics of a culture of Last Days. No wonder it is replete with announcements of many Deaths (Nietzsche was content with just one, that of God). This latest death being imminent, indeed well under way: “An end is come...behold it

is come” (King James Ezk 7:6). It is as if the historical consciousness which structured Western thinking by the nineteenth century were unravelling, with the sense of the past (“origins”), along with an untotalizable, *telos*-free, featureless future, adrift in an ocean of media images, all of them ultimately deprived of meaning by the medium itself and by their sheer volume. In the language of Deleuze/Guattari, “we no longer believe in a primordial totality...or in a final totality” ([56], p. 42). This, as variously argued in terms of a parallel with schizoid experience, serving to express the pathology of a culture anxious, permanently distracted by excess of vacuous data and consumer goods, even, finally, panic-stricken.

21. Eschatology or Apocalypse?

Does that amount not merely to an eschatological moment but to an apocalyptic moment? Hassan spoke of a “millennial delirium” which, however, “does not pose as...culmination, or an apocalypse” ([79], p. 144). It is true that it refuses to pose as such, since it refuses, at least in post-structuralist form, to pose as anything at all. In the eyes of some it is understood as coming “late” in the piece (Jameson’s “logic of late capitalism”). That would certainly support an eschatological reading, the sense of an imminent end. However, I want to postulate a further (unintended) meaning in that “late”, one that is genuinely apocalyptic. This because, while the decline of the large historical project described in this article would constitute nothing less than the end of *a* world, there is an undeniably still greater urgency in the present sense of Last Days.

I will not labour this last point, as it is universally canvassed. However, it is the case that, for the first time in human history, we are perfectly able to foresee, and with a disconcerting degree of realism, an actual ending of *the* world, or at any rate of most or all life in the world. James Lovelock believed Gaia’s tipping point had already been reached. Despite the protestations of those with vested interests, most scientists believe Global Warming is a catastrophic fact whose effects are just beginning to be felt. Some Pacific islanders insist the effects are well advanced. Moreover, while we have had no comparable moments of risk since the Cuban missile crisis, it would be extraordinarily optimistic to imagine that nuclear weapons will not be used both on a small and a large scale in the future. That makes for the Mother of all Endings.

I have argued that for some half a century we have lived in a culture of Last Days whose tropes have historic origins in religious thought while currently taking new secular forms. “Secular” for some only. It is entirely understandable that for many the old forms continue to do the job. Either way, a vision of linear time leads logically from its Alpha to its Omega, that is, to an end. The apocalyptic model has traditionally offered a positive outcome, following specified tribulation, at least for the Elect. Today’s model, the non-traditional one, offers the modest positive of a not altogether (if largely?) discredited humanism, or gropes for a post-humanist alternative. Certainly it is no great comfort to hand the future over to the Undara cockroaches, even allowing that the planet can manage very well without human beings.

22. Conclusion: Beckett, Zeno and Current Cosmology

The one unavoidable option may be to continue in what Heidegger’s essays on Hölderlin [88] poetically refer to as a historical situation caught between the no-more of the old gods who have died

(again, we recall Nietzsche's celebrated announcement) and the not-yet of gods still to come, that is, to continue in a time of unbelief. The life-paradox involved in this situation is perhaps best expressed by the concluding words of Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*: "I can't go on, I'll go on." [89]. Beckett's play *Endgame* (the chess term indicates attrition) visualizes a situation in which everything progressively runs down without ever actually reaching a terminus. In the opening words of the play: "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished." [90]. Until the end comes, there is only *waiting*—for "Godet...Godot...Godin" [91]—the classical eschatological stance, but with a tragically unspecified goal. An entropic version of this tied to the "heat death" of the universe, as put forward by William Thomson in the mid-nineteenth century and later dismissed by Max Planck, seems to have no current equivalent. Still, Beckett's permanent attrition model, like that of Zeno's famous paradoxes (Achilles who never quite catches up with the tortoise) may parallel at least one of several cosmological outcomes implied by currently favoured versions of the Expanding Universe thesis. Accepting the theory of the Big Bang and subsequent expansion of the universe (over String Theory, branes and the multiverse), we have a number of options (Hawking [92], Davies [93]). One way or another, with deceleration and acceleration in varying combinations, the expanding universe may reverse and contract into a Big Crunch; it may go on expanding, even to the dizzying point of becoming a Runaway Universe; it may go on expanding, but at a slower and slower pace—while never quite reaching that zero stop. That would be a Beckettian eschatology. In which last case, post-humanity, we, or rather the universe, would be waiting for a forever-deferred ending in place of the old final conflagration.

Acknowledgments

I am indebted to my three anonymous reviewers for encouraging me to expand and refine my treatment of several important issues.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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