COWBOY POSTCAPITALISM

"Tomorrow never happens. It is the same fucking day, man."
Janis Joblin, "Ball And Chain" from the Album "Live In Europe", 1969

My initial decision to choose *Dying Light 2* as the setting for my lecture today derives from the very architecture in the late-game. It consists of blue glass facades, optimistic playfulness like the *Haas-Haus* by Hans Hollein (1990) and skyscrapers like the *Bank of China* in Hong Kong by Pei, Kung and Boada (1985 to 1990).
From the first moment on it made sense to me that the game-studio Techland placed the zombie-apocalypse in this era where the end of history meets the end of the world. The architectural style of most of the buildings has recently overcome postmodernity and just began to repeat what we know as Second Modernity, the modern style following WW2.

Dying Light 2 (Techland, Poland, 2022) immerses players in an action-packed adventure, a role-play horror survival game set in a zombie-infested post-apocalyptic city. Its urban landscape serves as a pastiche of European aesthetics, deliberately anonymous and unlocatable. Within its confines, you'll discover neo-Gothic brick churches reminiscent of Poland and the Netherlands, complete with canals like in Amsterdam or Gdańsk, and half-timbered maisonette-rooftop-houses evoking a French flair. However, my focus shifts away from this down-town area to a district adorned with the enigmatic glass towers of global capital - to the post-apocalypse of the postmodern-modernity, to a style where it actually belongs to.

This maybe "Third Modernity" I am referring to, has no name yet and – to quote Marc Fisher – it appears here only as a "frozen aesthetic style,"[1] and therefore never meets the modernist approach to "an ideal for living." If you know Fishers book *Capitalism Realism*, the 21st century "Millennial Mao Bible", as popular as it is amongst my kin and myself, and it depicts exactly the kind of indifferent glass tower facade on its cover, it's faceless orange aluminum dominated housing estates which we encounter in the game.

Mark Fisher quotes Frederic Jameson who "argued that the failure of the future was constitutive of a postmodern cultural scene which, as he correctly prophesied, would become dominated by pastiche and revivalism."[2] The post-apocalypse defines the end of history in its absolute radicality. Henceforth, it is a product of the fantasy of that age, as it represents a futureless future (told in „presenceless" presence without any history. The post-apocalypse defines the end of history in its absolute radicality. From now on, it is a product of the fantasy of any age, as it represents a future without a future (told in a "presenceless" presence without any history - we know that the pop-cultural overuse of postmodern pastiches and its arbitrary assemblage of retro-punk clichés of the past also negates any presence). Here, our present becomes mummified and lost in the same time.

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[1] Mark Fisher: Capitalist Realism. Is there no Alternative. New Alresford 2009, S. 8
[2] Ebd. S. 7

The faceless late capitalist modernity in *Dying Light 2* points to a future, in which our present is preserved in a corroded state and, at the same time, lies in shards. The city in the game is a pastiche, a condensation of many references, thus serving as a locus of collective memory. And the collective memory – as we know from Luhmann– is largely manufactured and sustained by mass media.

The ruins of the past forge "realms of memory" – as Pierre Nora calls it.[3] And yet the ruins of the future might rather be characterized by both Angstlust and continuity. At least technologically, the postapocalypse grinds progress to a halt. Therefore, it just can look at the rubble left behind either with a certain nostalgia or disgust. It freezes history, a history – according to Walter Benjamin – narrated by a modernist assumption of an ongoing progress of epochs. Benjamin criticizes the view of history that puts its faith in the infinite extent of time [...] in which people and epochs advance along the path of progress."[4]

He condemns modernist history-telling, in which the catastrophe is nothing else than the status quo. Benjamin rages that "the concept of progress is to be founded in the idea of catastrophe."[5] He fundamentally criticizes the idea of continuity, progress and reason within history, which per se means modernity itself. Benjamin perceives history not as a process of eternal life but rather as an unceasing progression of decay.

In his critique of modernist history-telling he uses the metaphorical figure *Angelus Novus*, the angel of history, a metaphorical figure Benjamin appropriated from the *Kabbalah*. This angel now stares at the rubble of the past, incapable of heralding the bright light of his god no more, "debris upon debris at his feet". Here we see no angel of history but a rumbling avatar, staring at ruins of the future's past, ruins of former excesses - and the player's avatar seemingly is enjoying it. In *Dying Light 2* hybris and corporate greed have caused end-time by a pandemic. Other games like *Horizon Zero Dawn* tell a similar post apocalyptic story. The condemnation of modernist hybris, its harmful visions of redefining history is the rubble to overcome, but with no better society instead, or a recurring modernism even - just a fake one. As Jameson, Zizek and Marc Fisher have told us, we struggle to imagine any future, let alone one without capitalism.

Not surprisingly the postapocalypse is a popular setting in video games. The ruins in mass media are the answer to our lack of vision. It's a consequence of what Fisher calls "reflexive impotence"[6], knowing that things are bad and that nothing can be done about it.

Ideology of the postapocalypse in current mass media.

The narrative frame of the genre of postapocalypse often follows a conservative-leaning nostalgia or, in Zygmunt Bauman's terms, a 'retrotopia'.

Óliver Pérez-Latorre writes that "post-apocalyptic videogames reflect certain tensions and dilemmas characteristic of contemporary society, between promoting a 'retro-modern' ecologist and communitarian utopia or a nostalgic urge to return to and 'take refuge' in more

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[3] Pierre Nora: Realms of Memory. The Construction of the French Past. Volume I, Conflicts and Divisions. New York 1996
[4] Walter Benjamin: Das Leben der Studenten. München 1915
[5] Walter Benjamin: The Arcades Project. Cambridge 1999 [1940], S. 473
[6] Mark Fisher: Capitalist Realism. Is there no Alternative. New Alresford 2009, S. 21

traditional/conservative social models and lifestyles."[7] Retrotopia has become a dream forge for post-apocalyptic games like the *Fallout-series* or the *Last of Us*. Partly flirting with a midcentury retrotopian atmosphere it's the backdrop for hegemonial ruinporn narrations. Barbara Gurr writes that "the frequent reliance of post-apocalyptic science fiction on the mythohistory of the American past reveals a cultural yearning for a collective identity of American-ness that has been only incompletely realized."[8]

Moreover a "speculative future continues to rely on and define the very shape and function of the frontier: a vast and violent place that provides men with the freedom to determine their own destinies and carve out a new (better?) world. And who are these brave, indomitable men? They're the cowboys."[9] The survivors in post-apocalyptic games are often *White Man of Means*. Like cowboys, they are romantic figures, to use Jean-Jacques Rousseau term Solitary Walkers[10]. They are fighting and wrestling through an infested cityscape. But above all they are killing and looting human enemies and zombies alike, stocking up loot in their inventories, buying better weapons to kill more efficiently and more dangerous enemies and selling their precious loot again for higher prices.

The contemporary avatar at the end of the world is a cowboy-entrepreneur. During the course of the game, he becomes filthy rich, with no further reason other than just continuing to accumulate. The *capitalist cowboy* actually is a figure coined by the sociologists Craig Jenkins and Teri Shumate, as a ruling class of ultraconservative entrepreneurs in the US post-World War sunbelt region, who depicted themselves to be "frontiersman and self-made conquerors".[11]

They became rich by various industries like tourism and agribusiness but stuck to a get-your-hands-dirty approach and cowboying up, ridin' them horses across the wide-open prairie. In it's continuity "Cowboy Characters of the postapocalypse", as Pérez-Latorre points out, "are forged into heroes by their acquisition or accentuation of certain neoliberal and patriarchal characteristics, including leadership skills, an extraordinary adaptability to changes and to the ceaseless emergence of new risks, a dominant personality and a conquering spirit, as well as the expression of power through strength and aggressiveness."[12] This could also be a description of most of the hyper-individualist avatars in games.

Nature

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[7] Óliver Pérez-Latorre: Post-apocalyptic Games. Heroism and the Great Recession. In: Game Studies. The International Journal of Computer Game Research, https://gamestudies.org/1903/articles/perezlatorre (Zugriff: 03.07.2024)

[8] Barbara Gurr: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Post-Apocalyptic TV and Film. New York 2015, S. 32

[9] Ebd. S. 33

[10] In seiner letzten und autobiographischen Schrift *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* spaziert der sich von seiner Welt mehr und mehr isolierende und entfremdende Rousseau durch Paris, zu Pflanzen, Gesellschaft und seiner Einsamkeit tagträumend.

[11] Craig Jenkins, Teri ShumateCowboy: Capitalists and the Rise of the "New Right": An Analysis of Contributors to Conservative Policy Formation Organizations. In: Social Problems 33/2 (1985),

[12] Óliver Pérez-Latorre: Post-apocalyptic Games. Heroism and the Great Recession. In: Game Studies. The International Journal of Computer Game Research, https://gamestudies.org/1903/articles/perezlatorre (Zugriff: 03.07.2024)

What is to be conquered is the blank sheet of nature. Óliver Pérez-Latorre explains nature to be "a particularly complex symbol in post-apocalyptic narratives", since the idea of a 'return to nature' often plays an ideologically ambivalent role in them."[13] Being dedicated to nature the setting is a wild and beautiful battlefield in games, even if it's a cityscape. With Krista Comer Barbara Gurr argues "(white) people (re)populate the frontier in their image through a constant retelling of [...] 'one of the most entrenched master narratives of the broader geocultural imaginary': the 'wilderness plot' which centralizes 'exoticized and depopulated imagery' and the 'great unpeopled outdoors.'"[14] The unpeopled people here are the Zombies. They are wild in every sense of their meaning. Former humans in a former human city, both swallowed up by what is called nature.

Zombies as Nature

We all know there is a lot of literature written about the toxicity of the term "nature", Timothy Morton, Jason Moore, Silvia Federici, just to mention a few. They place the starting point of a new, extractivist and exploitative notion of nature in the beginning of what Marx called the primitive accumulation, in the times of colonization in the 15. century.
A century in which also the idea of frontierism gained ground and nature was what was living beyond the front of civilization (woman are an exemption here). Behind these natural frontiers live what Spaniards and their predecessors back then framed as wild people, with limited civilized features. Silvia Federici shines a light on the colonist's mindset: "[Being] in their 'nakedness' and 'sodomy,' that qualified the Amerindians as beings living in an animal state, as a sign of their bestiality'".[15] It's not accurate by any means to compare them with each other, but slipping into frontierists' minds we find some continuing toxic narratives. Like natives and the nature they were deemed to be part of colonial capitalism, the zombies are there to be conquered - according to Marx "eingehegt" or "enclosed", exterminated and exploited by the player's axe and crossbow. Yes we can exploit them, loot them after killing, salvage valuables out of their corpse-corpses. Where the Zombie-genre began with George Romero and his "Night of the Living Dead" as a critique of capitalism, the "Undead" in video games paradoxically are a resource to gain wealth from. Zombies, not only in Romero's films, serve as a metaphor for the disenfranchised working class, rendered powerless by corpo-politics, in Romeros terms. This is emblematic of capitalism's impact: stripping people of their agency. Without agency the human being becomes a zombie, a walking ruin. No soul is living in it anymore, the body is just stumbling on.

And zombies living in ruins. In video games I see a typology of three different ruins.
First: As the mass media industry is so obsessed with wars and the military, players mostly fight in ruins of cities pulverized by bombs.
Second, ruins are chiefly encountered in role-playing games set in fantasy realms. Amidst these ruins, players dig into the "kosmische Tragik" (Benjamin) of technologically advanced

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[13] Ebd.
[14] Barbara Gurr: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Post-Apocalyptic TV and Film. New York 2015, S. 35
[15] Silvia Federici: Caliban and the Witch Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation. New York 2003

and ancient civilizations, which had been driven by Promethean hubris and insatiable greed and therefore suffered extinction. In games such as The Witcher, Skyrim, Baldur's Gate, and Spellforce, the ruins trace back to ancient elves, inspired by the old Atlantis-saga, where the use of technology turned against the very fabric of civilization itself.

And thirdly we have the ruins of speculative dystopian futures.

Besides building ruins in its stage picture, games themselves became ruins.

In big budget game studios following tight deadlines from publishers and shareholders, it has become increasingly common for games to be released in unfinished states with lots of ideas scrapped and a host of technical issues unresolved. Many of the recent years' big budget games are bug ridden and some of them launched in barely playable states. Game developers are bound to contracts with publishers. As big budget titles are among the biggest investment products in contemporary entertainment culture, publishers need to satisfy shareholders' needs. Their desires mostly are met at *Day One* of the game's release, as masses of people either pre-ordered a new release or bought it quickly after its publishing date with obsessive anticipation. As the broken product immediately loses the community's favor it already has met its purpose to live up to the investors' expectations. The community of players then deserts the game in the following weeks in disappointment, leaving behind an unpeopled digital world. Prominent examples are *Anthem, Fallout 76, Cyberpunk 2077, Battlefield 2042*, to name but a few recent ones.

Summary

The video game industry builds ruins following a logic deeply inscribed into late stage capitalism. Through agents capitalism builds ruins. "To build ruins means," according to Simon Nagy, "to decompose, to shatter, to demolish life and societal forms. And this is not happening to sabotage the existing, but to uphold it. To materially reinforce the belief that it cannot be different than it is."[16]

Postapocalypse as a retrotopy totally makes sense when our economic and political liberal structures fail to equip us with agency, meaning and a future. Consequently classic dystopian storytelling provides the most conservative criticism of capitalism. In the liberal vision the current polycrysis derives from greed and hubris of people, it bemoans the individual's flaws, rather than the system which perpetuates all these flaws structurally. And it throws us back into the nature we have destroyed.

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[16] "Ruinenbauen, das heißt: zersetzen, zerschlagen, demolieren von Lebens- und Gesellschaftsformen. Und das passiert nun eben nicht, damit das Bestehende sabotiert, sondern damit es aufrechterhalten wird. Damit der Glaube, dass es nicht anders sein kann, als es ist, materiell untermauert wird." Simon Nagy: Spuk als Versprechen. Über dialektische Hauntologie, Ruinenbauen und die Abschaffung von Zeit. Unveröff. Diss., Wien 2023