

# COWBOY POSTCAPITALISM

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

## Permanent Raging Presence

As we pilot our glider from one of the many glass paneled skyscrapers of Villedor to the rooftop of what strikes us as a loose rendition of Pei, Kung and Boada's *Bank of China* in Hong Kong, we set down machete first in the skull of a lone zombie, quickly salvaging from the unsuspecting victim whatever loot we can find.

It makes sense that *Dying Light 2* (Techland, Poland 2022) is staging its zombie apocalypse in an architectural landscape that epitomizes what we could, for lack of a better name, call a "Third Modernity" or "Postmodern Modernity". Here, modernist shapes reappear as empty husks, as stylistic building blocks devoid of the idea of social progress that made up the core of post war era architecture. Here, "the end of history" meets the end of the world.

As we make our way through this action packed adventure game, the urban landscapes around us are a pastiche of European aesthetics, deliberately anonymous and as unlocatable as many city centers have become. While we start out parkouring between maisonettes with a French flair, Neo-Gothic brick churches that remind us of Poland and Dutch style canals, we soon leave the downtown area and start climbing the enigmatic glass towers of global capital that surround it. The indifferent glass facades, the panel clad towers - they are modernist in appearance, but never seem to follow the modernist approach to create an "ideal for living". One step into these structures and it becomes clear that these aren't architectures for humans at all, but, if anything, architectures for capital. It seems obvious why Mark Fisher picked a glass facade as the cover photo for his 21st Century "Millennial Mao bible" *Capitalist Realism*, writing that here, modernism returns as mere "frozen aesthetic style"<sup>1</sup>.

Frederic Jameson prophesied that the postmodern cultural scene "would become dominated by pastiche and revivalism"<sup>2</sup> due to its failure to conceptualize a future worth striving towards. And the various -wave, -core, -goth and -punk subgenres that make up contemporary aesthetics suggest he was right. These oversaturated, almost mythological snapshots of the past point back to a time shortly before the "permanent raging presence" of *Dying Light 2*. Valentina Tanni reflects Mark Fisher's understanding of hauntology, where "nothing really changes anymore" and we find ourselves in a certain kind of "nostalgia for past, lost, unrealized futures," haunted by a "burden of unfulfilled promises."<sup>3</sup> This "obsession

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Fisher: *Capitalist Realism. Is there no Alternative*. New Alresford 2009, S. 8

<sup>2</sup> Ebd. S. 7

<sup>3</sup> Valentina Tanni: *exit reality. vaporwave, backrooms, weirdcore, and other landscapes beyond the threshold*. Ljubljana 2024, p.30

with recent cultural past"<sup>4</sup> has an ideological background noise, coined by Zygmunt Baumann as "retrotopia" - a regressive, conservative vision of the future. Here, our yearnings are the product of a phantasmatic, mythopoetic view of bygone days. Retrotopia doesn't promise social progress, but a return to past glory - a time before the "fall of man", whose space in time can never be grasped fully and which remains loosely associated with an absence of complexity and "Ohnmacht"<sup>5</sup>. This is crystallized in Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" campaign, which is similarly malleable in that it doesn't really give a clear rendition of the past it is actually aiming to return to. One could argue that this is precisely why it so successfully acts as a collecting pond for the economically or culturally disenfranchised masses produced by decades of neoliberalism.

It is striking how our entertainment media typically portray our future as dystopian. Most of the aforementioned retrotopian outlooks are built on the back of the post-apocalypse: Catastrophe has wiped away all the complexities of modern life and left us with a blank slate to do it all over. The intricacies of global social struggles are replaced with the simple questions of survival. In that sense, the post-apocalypse brings the "end of history" to its literal extreme: It's the reset button for a society trapped in a present haunted by its zombified past - the dreams of yesterday reappearing again and again as empty pastiches. This zombification can be understood aesthetically as well as politically: The political narrative of past decades has been similarly dominated by the negation of democratic progress (austerity, privatisation etc.) as well as the call for a preservation and defense of democracy (as an empty signifier). Our present is thus both futureless and, one could argue, "presentless" at the same time. Like a zombie, democratic society is maintained in an undead state.

In his critique of modernist history-telling Walter Benjamin speaks against the modernist notion of linear progress, "in which people and epochs advance along the path of progress."<sup>6</sup> Instead, he perceives history as a ceaseless progression of decay, making use of the metaphorical figure *Angelus Novus* - the angel of history. This angel stares at the rubble of the past, no longer capable of heralding the bright light of his god, "debris upon debris at his feet". In *Dying Light 2*, we see no angel of history, but a rumbling avatar, staring at "realms of memory", as Pierra Nora calls it<sup>7</sup>, or: Ruins of the future's past, of former excesses and transgressions. As the story so often goes, hubris and corporate greed have caused a global pandemic. Other games, too, tell this story of original sin - like *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Sony) or *Tom Clancy's The Division 2* (Ubisoft). Their condemnation of the vanity of modernist progress narratives is, of course, a fake one, as it offers no utopia rather than just a wormhole to an archaic fantasy. Similarly, these games harbor no visions of progress within their ruins. On the contrary: The ruins in mass media are the answer to our lack of vision. The medial dominance of the post-apocalypse is a product of what Mark Fisher calls "reflexive

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 31

<sup>5</sup> A pervasive feeling of powerlessness and inability to act in a meaningful way.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin: *Das Leben der Studenten*. München 1915

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Nora: *Realms of Memory. The Construction of the French Past. Volume I, Conflicts and Divisions*. New York 1996

impotence"<sup>8</sup>: The knowledge that things are bad and that nothing can be done about it. This particular deviation from the progress narrative is probably not what Benjamin had in mind.

## Ideology of the postapocalypse in current mass media

The late 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of "critical utopias", inspired by ecological and feminist ideas, offering self-reflective visions of better but imperfect futures. These works by New Left writers like Ursula K. LeGuin challenged traditional utopias and called for radical social change<sup>9</sup>. It is when utopia is no longer imaginable that we fantasize about the apocalypse as a form of liberation.

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 traditional/conservative social models and lifestyles."<sup>10</sup> Retrotopia has become a dream forge for post-apocalyptic games like the *Fallout* series, whose ruin porn imagery flirts heavily with a midcentury vibe. 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."<sup>11</sup> Again, the MAGA movement comes to mind here.

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."<sup>12</sup> The survivors in post-apocalyptic games are often *White Man of Means*. Like cowboys, they are romantic figures or - to use Jean-Jacques Rousseau's term - Solitary Walkers<sup>13</sup>. They are fighting and wrestling through an infested landscape. But above all they are killing and looting humans and zombies alike, stocking up loot in their inventories, bartering for better weapons to kill more efficiently and more dangerous enemies and selling their precious loot again for higher prices.

In *Dying Light 2*, our avatar makes his way from safe-zone to safe-zone. Here he rests, waits out the night, trades goods or collects quests. As zombies lurk on the streets or inside houses, these hubs are often rooftop settlements or easily defensible buildings like churches, where the survivors form small hierarchical societies. Rooftops, formerly reserved for the rich, are now populated by masculine folks in leather jackets, hoodies and denim

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Fisher: *Capitalist Realism. Is there no Alternative*. New Alresford 2009, S. 21

<sup>9</sup> Vgl. Raffaella Baccolini, Tom Moylan: *Dystopia and Histories*. In: Raffaella Baccolini, Tom Moylan (Hg): *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*. New York 2003, S. 2

<sup>10</sup> 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)

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Gurr: *Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Post-Apocalyptic TV and Film*. New York 2015, S. 32

<sup>12</sup> Ebd. S. 33

<sup>13</sup> In his last, autobiographical work *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* a more and more isolated and alienated Rousseau walks through paris, daydreaming of plants, society and his loneliness.

pants with blades dangling from their belts. Apart from the three or four side characters, all of the inhabitants are millennials. Most of the men are bearded and look well-trained. Female residents often correspond to stereotypical *cool girl* tropes, blending traditionally masculine traits with normative beauty standards. They lean casually against walls, beer in hand, or manspread on chairs in their role as “badass” yet attractive set dressing for these dens of hypermasculinity. While it’s fair to say that recent years have seen many female driven stories of dystopia, many of these women adhere to the same cowboy pattern as our avatar. In any case, in *Dying Light 2*, no one steals the player’s show, who sticks out as a hard-boiled warrior with his colorful outfits and flamboyant survival.

In its essence, the post-apocalypse avatar is a cowboy-entrepreneur. During the course of the game, he hoards wealth to expand his tools for extraction. This *cowboy capitalist* is a figure coined by the sociologists Craig Jenkins and Teri Shumate in their analysis of the ruling class of ultraconservative entrepreneurs in the US post-war sunbelt region, who proclaimed themselves “frontiersman and self-made conquerors”.<sup>14</sup>

Accumulating wealth in various industries like tourism, technology and agriculture, they stuck to a get-your-hands-dirty approach, cowboying up and ridin’ them horses across the wide-open prairie. Often excluded from elite networks at first, these cowboy entrepreneurs strongly identified with the myth of the frontier - a space devoid of strong regulatory social powers. They saw government intervention as a threat to personal freedom rooted in “self-made” success. That is not to say you won’t find cowboy capitalists in government. Donald Trump, for instance, had his lasso passed down from Ronald Reagan, who originally came up with his retroopian slogan “Make America Great Again.”

Similarly, “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.”<sup>15</sup>

All of these traits hold true for most game avatars, which epitomize the notion of the lone hyper-individualist actor in a world waiting to be dominated. Particularly in the post-apocalypse, where the halls of government are no more, it’s time for the self made-cowboy capitalist and their retroopian order.

## Solarpunk

On an idyllic overgrown terrace in one of the makeshift human settlements in *Dying Light 2*, people are cultivating vegetables. Large pumpkins are reminiscent of the prototypical Puritan colonies of the 17th century. We hear birds singing, other animals too - but the game isn’t rendering any fauna at all. Solar panels and windmills supply the local power grid. Were it not

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<sup>14</sup> Craig Jenkins, Teri Shumate: Cowboy: Capitalists and the Rise of the “New Right”: An Analysis of Contributors to Conservative Policy Formation Organizations. In: *Social Problems* 33/2 (1985),

<sup>15</sup> 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)

for the infested land reaching as far as the eye can see, the settlement would almost have a utopian vibe to it. *Dying Light 2* creates a sort of fractured solar punk scenario here, foiled by the retrotopical motifs of a conservative and war-driven society.

Solarpunk sticks out as the only significant punk pastiche that doesn't dwell in fractured, speculative pasts or dystopian futures. On the Solarpunk subreddit, where most of the information about this genre is currently collected, it is described as an ecological and joyful narrative of the future: "Solarpunk is a genre and aesthetic that envisions collective futures that are vibrant with life, as well as all the actions, policies, and technologies that make them real: Science fiction, social movements, engineering, style, and anything else that inspires a future society that's just and in complement with its ecology."<sup>16</sup>

It rejects capitalism, eco-fascism and greenwashing, imagining new futures in art and literature. Nurtured by afrofuturism and indigenous, anti-imperial and feminist literature, it challenges conventional science fiction by placing decolonization and ecology at its core. Solarpunk views nature as a category outside the capitalist matrix.

## Zombies & nature

In contrast, the post-apocalypse typically returns to a settler-colonialist understanding of nature as something to be conquered. Óliver Pérez-Latorre explains nature as "a particularly complex symbol in post-apocalyptic narratives, since the idea of a 'return to nature' often plays an ideologically ambivalent role in them."<sup>17</sup>

The post-apocalyptic battlefields in games are often wild and beautiful landscapes and overgrown cities. Quoting Krista Comer, Barbara Gurr argues that "(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.'"<sup>18</sup>

Capitalist societies typically read nature as an opposite to culture or society. This is a binary which Jason Moore argues is "directly implicated in the colossal violence, inequality, and oppression of the modern world; and that the view of nature as external is a fundamental condition of capital accumulation."<sup>19</sup> Moore predates this nature/society dichotomy within the scientific revolution alongside the primitive accumulation of the 15th century, a phase described by Marx as the early days of capitalism.<sup>20</sup> At the same time frontierism and

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.reddit.com/r/solarpunk/> (29.08.2024)

<sup>17</sup> Ebd. Vgl. 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)

<sup>18</sup> Barbara Gurr: *Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Post-Apocalyptic TV and Film*. New York 2015, p. 35

<sup>19</sup> Jason Moore: *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. London/New York 2015, p. 14

<sup>20</sup> Moore names predates the scientific dominance of the nature/society dichotomy to about one hundred years before the Cartesian revolution, which "imposed an ontological status upon entities (substance) as opposed to relationships (that is to say energy, matter, people, ideas and so on became things)." Secondly, "it imposed (...) a line in which a logic of either/or (rather than both/and)

settler colonialism gained ground: Nature was beyond the gates of civilization, the wild that waited to be tamed. And the people inhabiting these lands were generously subsumed in this idea of the wild. To the Spaniards, British, French etc. they were a wild people of limited civility and thus also part of nature. Silvia Federici shines a light on the colonist's mindset: "‘nakedness’ and ‘sodomy,’ (...) qualified the Amerindians as beings living in an animal state, as a sign of their bestiality"<sup>21</sup>

Of course, the zombies that populate the post-apocalyptic wilderness cannot be equated to the indigenous in any sense: Zombies are essentially a virus, after all, driven by an insatiable hunger for living flesh. But it is striking how the zombies' rendition as cultureless beasts waiting to be cleansed from the bountiful land puts us right back into the minds of the settler frontierists. The "wild people" and the zombie narratives are similarly structured colonial tropes serving an extractivist drive. The zombies are there to be conquered - according to Marx "eingehegt" or "enclosed", exterminated and exploited by the player's axe and crossbow. The player, who operates like a colonial settler in an inhospitable world, kills them and salvages what they can from their corpse-corpses. This is particularly interesting considering the origins of the zombie in Haitian and Cuban cultures of resistance to Western colonialism. In Vodou, the "zombi corps cadavre" is a body that had its soul stolen - a figure employed in the context of slavery and colonial plantation capitalism. When the zombie genre came to popularity in modern media through works like George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, it again was interpreted as a critique of capitalist consumerism. Even today, the soulless zombie is colloquially used as a stand in for the disenfranchised masses stripped of their agency, just stumbling on without any future outlook. This, of course, also related to the lived experiences of the working class, rendered powerless by decades of corpo-politics. *Dying Light 2* and its video game colleagues, however, deviate from this tradition in that while they do display the undead as a resource to gain wealth from, this isn't done from the viewpoint of critique, but meritocratic hegemony: The zombie hordes are a challenge awaiting to be mastered.

## Typology of game ruins

The ruin, too, as the setting of this digital extractivism, can be viewed in a new light in the genre of the video game. Essentially, the medium confronts us with four types of ruins. Firstly, as the mass media industry is obsessed with combat and martial gameplay, players regularly fight in the ruined landscapes of warfare.

Secondly, there are the ruins which are chiefly encountered in role-playing games set in fantasy realms. Amidst these ruins, players regularly dig into the trope of the "cosmic tragedy", as Walter Benjamin puts it: Ancient and technologically sophisticated civilizations driven by Promethean hubris have suffered extinction at the hands of their own insatiable

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predominated. And finally, it strongly favored the "idea of a purposive control over nature through applied science." As Jason Moore explains, this paradigm of Cartesian thought portrays an opposition between entities that in fact exist in a "Web of Life". They exist precisely because they are interconnected and work together. p. 29

<sup>21</sup> Silvia Federici: *Caliban and the Witch Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. New York 2003

greed. *The Witcher, Skyrim, Baldur's Gate* and *Spellforce* - all of them feature some manner of old elven ruin inspired by this Atlantean saga.

And thirdly we have the ruins of speculative dystopian futures.

Importantly, however, while all three of the aforementioned types of ruins are encountered as part of the rendered game world, the last decades have seen many games released as ruins in their entirety: Premature releases due to shareholder or publisher pressure have become so common in the gaming industry that the technical state of any given release has become an obligatory talking point in magazine reviews. Shareholders typically look at pre-orders and day one sales for a return on their investment, shifting the priority from the production of a sustainable title to pre-release marketing efforts. The last years have seen countless games released in barely playable states - *Anthem, Fallout 76, Cyberpunk 2077, Battlefield 2042, Stalker 2*, to name just a few -, many of which have quickly become abandoned by their disappointed communities, leaving behind the unpeopled ruins of multi million dollar productions. Here, the video game industry seems to be going through a similar transformation as the many silicon valley startups or even city building pipedreams like 34

According to Simon Nagy, building ruins means “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.”<sup>22</sup>

All the post-apocalyptic retrotopias with their hyper-individualist cowboy capitalist actors totally make sense when economic and political structures fail to equip their broader societies with agency, meaning and a future. But we would be wrong to read these dystopian stories as critiques of capitalism. They voice fake criticism at best, promoting a return to the frontier lands instead of utopian visions. Instead of overcoming the corpo-politics sitting at the root of a society split into classes and at odds with its dependency on nature, they instead do away with society altogether.

But for the world to live, capitalism needs to die.

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<sup>22</sup> “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., Wien 2023