



CONVENTIONS OF DEPICTION OF THE APOCALYPTIC SCENE

Visual expression of the dread of the end, in the cosmic sense, already appears in early Christianity, in the attempts to translate the apocalyptic text of *Revelation* into visual-plastic language. The best-known representations of the end in the history of art are depictions illustrating this text. Frederick Van Der Meer, a lecturer in art history and a scholar of Christian iconography, has surveyed the transformations of the apocalyptic motif throughout the history of art,⁷ with special focus on the Middle Ages, a period which had a particular affection for the subject. The narrative components of *Revelation* – richly imaginative metaphors and images which tell the story of the destruction, the eradication of evil and the purification of the world until the establishment of a new world order – posed a challenge to whoever sought to translate these images into a plastic language. In addition to the problem of translation, there was of course also the question of choosing those images which best served the ideology of the Church in the different periods. Van Der Meer notes, for example, that during the early Christian period the Church preferred to select from the story those motifs which were designed to aggrandize and establish the status of the Christian deity as a victorious one (the eradication of evil), and permitted the appearance of the incomplete apocalyptic narrative only later, after its status was established. The best known single motifs are the Alpha and Omega – the symbol which designates Jesus as the beginning and the end of all things – and also the Lamb of God, standing on Mount Zion. These symbols generally appeared in mosaics and wall paintings in the most sacred parts of the churches. Towards the end of the 10th century, on the threshold of the year 1000, with the intensification of apocalyptic anxieties, the apocalyptic story received new emphases, as something threatening and terrifying. More complete narrative cycles were consolidated both in manuscripts (starting from the 8th century)⁸ and on the facades of the large cathedrals (in the 13th and 14th centuries).⁹ The most prominent images in these cycles are: the angel Gabriel revealing himself to John during the writing of the Apocalypses; Jesus surrounded by the four beasts, the symbols of the Four Evangelists; the Heavenly City and the twenty-four elders; the fall of the towers of Babylon; the Lamb and the seven angels sounding their trumpets; the sea of glass mingled with fire; the angel Michael fighting the dragon; the Great Whore and the four horsemen.

With the invention of printing in the mid-15th century, and concurrently with a new wave of anxieties which swept Europe towards the middle of the first millennium (around 1400 and around 1600), the diffusion of the apocalyptic cycles expanded. The apocalyptic message served the policy of the Reformation of the 16th century. According to Augustinian doctrine the beginning of "the millennium" (the "reign of a thousand years") was marked by the First Coming of Jesus. In this period – the middle of the second millennium – leaders of the Reformation claimed, that "reign" was long over, and the proof of this was that Satan, the Anti-Christ, was once more roving free in ruling the Pope of Rome. In 1540 Martin Luther stated that 5500 years had passed since the Creation, and humanity was now in the middle of the sixth millennium, i.e., at high noon of the sixth day of Creation, and Jesus would come again in 1680.

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One of the best-known apocalyptic cycles from that time, which had a decisive influence on the pictorial representation of the subject for many years afterwards, was that of Albrecht Dürer, from 1498 (ill. 1). In the 16th and 17th centuries artists began giving freer personal expression to their interpretations of the subject – both in the choice of motifs and in the manner of their visual translation. This can be seen, for example, in the 16th-century Italian painter Correggio's depiction of *The Vision of the Heavenly Throne* (1521-1520) on the dome of the Church of San Giovanni in Parma, where the emphasis is on the threatening effect implicit in the divine revelation at the end of days. In a more suggestive manner, the 17th-century Spanish painter El Greco depicted the *The Opening of the Fifth Seal* (1608-1614) as a richly expressive scene that integrates *Revelation* with the practice of "the Last Day of Judgment" (ill. 2).

In the Romantics of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, fears of the end of the world – although the religious dimension had receded – still had a strong hold. Although the religious dimension had receded, it was felt that the apocalypse was a necessary stage before the utopian renewal. In its longing for the "sublime", Romantism sought to give a new description of man-nature, man-universe relations. The story of the Deluge – the elemental forces of nature at the height of their destructive power – served as an archetype of a possible cosmic apocalypse. The Deluge – the direct outcome of the original sin – was grasped as "the First End" of the world, the "First Day of Judgment", which was henceforth interpreted on a moral-allegorical level as dictated by the spirit of the time (scientific discoveries, the French Revolution, technological progress). The waters which flooded the earth and annihilated all its inhabitants, apart from those on board the Ark, whose rescue made possible the survival of the human species – became a metaphor, on the one hand for the elemental forces which show up man's vulnerability, and on the other hand for the destruction that man brings upon himself by distancing himself from God. The English Romantics, and William Blake and William Turner in particular, turned the story of the Deluge into a universal visual representation of man-world, man-nature and man-God relations. In his apocalyptic vision, as also in his poetic vision as consolidated in his extensive "Prophetic Books", William Blake conceived of the cosmic disaster as humanity's last rescue-plot on its way to redemption. Prof. Mordechai Onzer, who devoted his doctoral dissertation to the iconography of representations of the Deluge in English romantic art, has written that in *The Vision of the Last Judgment* from 1810 (ill. 3, see p. 14), Blake depicted Noah and his two sons Shem and Japhet as symbolic representatives of the Creative Imagination: "Poetry, Painting & Music, the three Powers in Man of conversing with Paradise, which the Flood did not sweep away".¹⁰ In contrast to Blake, who placed man at the center, in Turner the human figure became dwarfed and annihilated next to the stormy landscape. In the painting *The Deluge* (1833), later drygash of him, we can see the tiny figure of Moses writing the Book of Genesis, as a survivor and witness of the apocalyptic event. On one hand, this is an expression of man's existential anxiety in the face of the violation of the harmonious balance between man and nature. On the other hand, as also in Blake, Moses here symbolizes the artist (the imagination) in which, according to the Romantic view, the key to redemption resides.

From the mid-19th century on the apocalyptic theme underwent a gradual process of secularization, in the course of which it lost its direct religious connections and became synonymous with disaster in the broadest sense of the word. This is already an absolute end, which brings no redemption, resurrection or renewal. The historian Saul Friedlander, in his article "The Nineteenth Century Facing the End of Humanity", noted that as against the apparent optimism and faith in progress, a "disease of Romantism" began to appear in Europe, a gloomy cultural pessimism which found expression in scientific theories, literature and art. In this context he refers to George Steiner's description of how, from 1830 on,

III. 1
Albrecht Dürer, *The Downfall of the Stars*, a scene from the Apocalypse, engraving, 1498
אלברכט דירר, סצנה מהAPOקליפטיקה, איגראף, 1498.
דרכן מוזיאון ואוניברסיטת ישראל, תרומות

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ILL. 12

Pablo Picasso, *Night Fishing at Antibes*, 1939
Oil on canvas, 205.8 × 354.4
Museum of Modern Art, New York

12. ת'נ'מ
1939. צייר פיקאסו, ניIGHT פישינג אט אנטיבס
354.4 × 205.8 ס"מ, צד. מוזיאון מודרן ניו יורק

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of death. The "superficial" stance, which derives, among other things, from the use of the photographic medium, exposes the external, theatrical aspects of death. This is the interface between the "death of glamor" and the "glamor of death".

As the world approaches the third millennium, from the '80s of the 20th century intimations of the end have become intensified. The nuclear threat, the loss of control over the technological reservoirs which man has created, the ecological damage and the AIDS epidemic, are conceived as a "punishment" for wild years of consumerism and progress. But while the causes of the end imagined – 19th-century man were transcendental with respect to man and were rooted in the fundamental enmity between man and the universe, at the end of the 20th century the causes involved are imminent, close and palpable. Many texts have been devoted to the subject.²⁵ I will mention only the book by Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, published in 1979, and Jonathan Shell's *The Fate of the Earth* (1982). Many more such essays have entered the cultural discourse and had considerable impact on the art discourse too, especially in the United States. Early in the '80s New York was flooded with a wave of "apocalyptic" exhibitions.²⁶ The most ambitious was undoubtedly the one held at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, under the title "The End of the World: Contemporary Visions of Apocalypse" (1983-1984). The curator, Lynn Gumpert, wanted to situate the apocalyptic tendencies of the period in broader social-cultural-historical contexts, and to examine how the apocalyptic mentality had influenced art. Thematically she focused both on the nuclear holocaust produced by human activity and on natural disasters as a metaphor for the end of the world that is being forced upon humanity.²⁷ In 1988 the Carnegie International devoted its prestigious international exhibition to the state of the art-work at the end of the century. The curator, John Weber, pointed out that the exhibition was "a discourse emanating on the background of the proximity of the year 2000, which embodies the fictional and threatening contexts of the notion *future*".²⁸ As for the end contents which were again presented in painting at the beginning of the '80s, one could identify two parallel approaches: the return of painting as an expressive ethos (the New German Expressionism, the Italian *Trans Avanguardia*) and also a new discussion of the meaning of "the end of painting". Artists like Robert Rauschenberg, Philip Taaffe, Ross Bleckner and Peter Halley reject the painterly element in painting, and in their abstract paintings arrive at effects of photography, almost of "ready-mades". The "professional mourners of painting" seem to want to ravage its corpse: "since the end has come, since it's all over, we can rejoice at the killing of the dead".²⁹ The very act of deconstruction, one of the distinctive features of postmodern culture, is largely grasped as a negation of the act of painting.

One of the central works in the Carnegie International exhibition was *The End of the Twentieth Century*, an installation by Joseph Beuys from 1983-1985 (ill. 15, see p. 18), which is linked to his obsessive preoccupation with the theme of death (corpses, skeletons, dead animals, dried and stuffed animals). These have generally been linked to a traumatic event in his life – his experiences of surviving a plane crash during his military service in the Crimea. At first glance the fourty-four boulders rocks look as if they have been placed arbitrarily throughout the gallery space. From up close one can see that an attempt has been made to reconstruct a kind of "natural" collapse. Most of the rocks lie in a horizontal position, some of them stand vertically. The chilling effect is born of the association of the name of the work with an archaeological environment, perhaps ruins of ancient shrines, perhaps a pre-historic site (Stonehenge), something like archaeological findings of post-apocalyptic civilization. This journey

ILL. 17

Robert Morris, *Untitled*, 1983
Paint on hydrocal with watercolor and pastel on paper, 210 × 250. Sonnabend Gallery and Leo Castelli Gallery, New York

17. ת'נ'מ
1983. רוברט מוריס, טולטד אונטיל
210 × 250 ס"מ, צד. סוננבנד וגלארי, ניו יורק
ליריה זונברג ומיליט ליאו קסטלי, ניו יורק

ILL. 18

Immo Paladino, *Amongst the Olive Trees*, 1984. Mixed media on paper on canvas, 360 × 400
1984. צייר פאלדיינו, בין עצי זיתים
400 × 360 ס"מ, צד. מוזיאון ישראל, ירושלים
סמיקה שטרברט ליר מודען, ירושלים



ILL. 14
Andy Warhol, *129 Die in Jet* (*Plane Crash*), 1962. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 254 × 183. Museum Ludwig, Cologne
14. ת'נ'מ
1962. אונדי וור홀, 129, דיזנגוף צבאי, תל אביב, צייר פוליארטי סינטטי על בד, 254 × 183 ס"מ, מוזיאון לודוויג, קלוגן, גרמניה

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between past and future times reinforces the ambiguity. The dualism also arises from the fact that Beuys marked the rocks (making a eye-circle on each of them), thus appropriating them to mental space. The ambiguity exists in the very need to represent a collapsing civilization and to mark it with signs (to introduce order into it), just as it is present in the combination of nature (nature), which has fallen or been cast up, with apparently stable museum space (culture).

For Beuys's disciple Anselm Kiefer too, the apocalyptic theme is a central intersection, from which many subjects connected with German mythology and history branch out. Huge vistas of burnt forests and charred desert soil have filled his canvases since the early '70s. In *Cockshafet, Fly* (ill. 16, see p. 18), which belongs to the *Scorched Earth Paintings* series (1974), one can see how the clumps of scorched earth, the rutted trees and the murky fur-like coloring (black-red-brown) create an atmosphere of lament that reconstructs the traces of a fresh destruction – perhaps a huge conflagration which destroyed everything in its path, perhaps a nuclear eruption or a nuclear explosion. Although these vistas appear at first like landscape paintings, and sometimes they resemble the scenes of particular places in Germany, it should be recalled that Kiefer has never seen himself as a landscape-painter, and hence we must read these landscapes as mental spaces, as externalization of internal landscapes. The magical effect of fire has prompted Kiefer both on the concrete and the metaphysical levels. Fires and storms also mark the works of Robert Morris from the early '80s. In the *End of the World* exhibition in New York there was a work of his from the *Storms* series (ill. 17), based on Dürer's *Deluge* – a relief made of parts of corpses which appear to have been sprayed onto collapsing walls – which integrates the myth of the Deluge (the first End of the World) with fire, black mud rain, radioactive dust and soot.

Immo Paladino, who in the early '80s was part of the Italian Trans-Avantgarde movement, has also conducted a fruitful dialogue with representations of the Apocalypse as expressed in the Christian tradition, and especially with descriptions of the coming judgment and the destruction of evil. His canvases abound in damned, tormented bodies, skeletons in constant struggle that symbolize both primal urges in man and the power of nature (ill. 18). The other apocalyptic ethos too, we will recall, was laden with animal symbols, rich in hybrid creatures, and the hybridizing of man and animal symbolized a distortion which originated with Satan. But while in the Christian tradition these representations posted the triumph of "good" as the central value in the struggle, it would seem that in Paladino's death-ouffwks the struggle has long since been won by the dark forces. Unlike Franz Marc who at the beginning of the century integrated animals in visionary mythological scenes according to the best of Romantic traditions and accorded them utopian significances (the noble savage), it appears that here, at the century's end, Paladino has replaced utopia with dystopia, or, as Achille Bonito Oliva phrased it, the Utopia of the Avantgarde with the Apocalyptic of the Avantgarde.³⁰

The last work worth concluding this survey with is one by Robert Longo – *Neweverybody* (1983 which is called *Neweverybody* (ill. 19). This installation was dedicated to the movie-director Fassbinder, and imitates what looks like a huge enlargement of a photograph of a bombed street in Beirut, extending over four panels and serving as a background for the figure of a man cast in bronze, which seems to have emerged from the photograph and stepped out towards the viewer. The metaphor of survival – the distorted figure, perhaps soot-covered, perhaps petrified, of the man – on the background of the sights of destruction, the ruins of a metropolis, brings to mind the notion of "spectacle". Longo offers here a broad spectrum of modes of representation which to a large extent operate against each other: the historical event (the bombed city of Beirut), which at first

ILL. 18
1984. צייר פאלדיינו, בין עצי זיתים
סמיקה שטרברט ליר מודען, ירושלים



est. 2

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1988. גַּדֵּל בָּאִים
Avnon Ben-David, *Day of judgement*, 1988

השכלה – פסל שור בעדר הזאנט אנטונט והדראלט אין קיט.
חרילאלת בעדר ייד זאַר – צייר שעודן האַנט גאנזן.
וועילאלת בעדר ווועילאלת בעדר, צייר ווועילאלת בעדר.
של מוות ובר או ואַט לאַט – צייר ווועילאלת בעדר.
היינס אַט ווועילאלת בעדר, פֿעלן דאַגְבָּעָט בענָה גְּקָדְּמָה גַּעֲבָּעָט.

ת 1.22 LIFE AFTER DEATH

1.22 LIFE AFTER DEATH, 1990
cat. 2
Avnon Ben-David, *LIFE AFTER DEATH*, 1990



ת 1.22 LIFE AFTER DEATH, 1990
cat. 4
Avnon Ben-David, *Not a Picnic to the Income Tax Authorities*, 1990 (details)