

Alec Soth's Archived Blog

January 15, 2007

The End

Filed under: [aesthetics, critics & curators](#) — alecsothblog @ 1:07 am

Just like Pat Robertson ([watch this](#)), I've got apocalypse on the brain. My [Top Eleven](#) for 2006 included two depictions of the End Days (*The Road, Children of Men*). Pat and I aren't alone. "Apocalypse is on our minds," Kurt Anderson [wrote in New York Magazine](#), "Apocalypse is ... hot." But Anderson goes on to say that this trend is nothing new:

Apocalypticism has ebbed and flowed for thousands of years, and the present uptick is the third during my lifetime...but this time, it seems, more widespread and cross-cultural, both more reasonable (climate change, nuclear proliferation) and more insane (religious prophecy), more unnerving.

The art critic and poet Peter Schjeldahl spoke about these waves of nihilism in his 1978 essay, *The Hydrogen Jukebox, Terror, Narcissism, and Art*:

The present widespread disarray and morbidity of the arts in Western civilization represent, it occurs to me, a long-term toxic effect of the atom-bomb terror of the last three decades...Most insidious of the terror's by-products is what I'll call the no-future effect. Conditioned to living on the eve of doomsday, we have lost the ability to conceive of a future stretching farther than our own most distant personal goals or responsibilities.

Schjeldahl goes on to explain how this has changed the role of the contemporary artist:

The personality type of our time is the narcissist. Obsessively self-regarding, self-referential, self-consuming, the narcissistic personality finds authenticity only in the moment-to-moment convincingness of bodily sensations and mental events. The narcissistic artist or poet offers to a shadowy public evidence of the dramatizations of these sensations, inviting that public to join in the self-contemplation. Anger, at world or self, alternates with a husky or antic seductiveness, a siren song of love and death or sexy fun, and with abject complaining, the cries of the abandoned baby within.

Nearly thirty years after Schjeldahl's essay, not much has changed. Along with plenty of terror, narcissism in the arts is alive and well (note my recent post on [Snow & Koh](#)). But do artists have a choice? "Deprived of the anchor of the past and the rudder of a future," writes Schjeldahl, "the new personality is as helpless as a paper boat on the ocean."

6 Comments

1. well said, couldn't agree more with Schjeldahl's words.

BTW, maybe this is one reason why Art photography is more and more managing to depict our world so strongly (still): from one side it is an immediate why to "capture" reality, yet, on the other side, to elevate photography into art, still one needs the vision and the vast skills of an Artist

and i take this occasion to tell you, how much i appreciate your art works, they are overwhelming, poetic and beautiful.

Comment by [moon](#) — January 15, 2007 @ [9:28 am](#)

2. "Love the art in yourself, not yourself in the art"

-Konstantin Stanislavsky

Comment by [Lux Iconic](#) — January 15, 2007 @ [10:46 am](#)

3. Great artists still root themselves in the past. I think in photography there is some phenomenal work that is expressive both of the past, the artist's self and the outside world – your own work springs to mind, and then work like Hendrik Kerstens work on his daughter, Jacob Sobol's Sabine or Paul Kranzler's Austrian domestic scenes all spring to mind – self obsessed but in a healthy outward looking way.

As for the rudder of the future, it's still there as much as it was 30 years ago – it's just not necessarily the nicest future possible – see Hollywood Dystopias for all the possibilities – none of which include Pat Robertson's (crazy guy! Dontcha just love the little chubby cheeked chappie) or even the ones George Bush or Tony Blair would like us to believe in.

Comment by [colin](#) — January 15, 2007 @ [11:13 am](#)

4. Apocalypse schmapocalypse you scared the bejeebers out of me with your title! The End? I saw that in my aggregator and thought you were hanging up your keyboard! Don't do that to me, I'm a middle aged woman with a weak heart and very little faith. Is the word apoplectic appropriate?

Comment by [Mel Trittin](#) — January 15, 2007 @ [7:39 pm](#)

5. Thanks Mel. Can I buy the rights to schmapocalypse.com?

Comment by [Alec Soth](#) — January 15, 2007 @ [9:16 pm](#)

6. [...] Via Alec Soth's blog I found this article by Kurt Anderson on the hotness of apocalypse. [...]

Pingback by [Odd Thoughts » Blog Archive » Apocalypticism](#) — February 18, 2007 @ [11:53 am](#)