

Y2Care: Debugging the Millennium (or “I’m ok – I have a Mac”)

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“Just imagine the extraordinary good luck of the generation which would have the end of the world to itself.” – Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End* (115)

Allow me to begin with an anecdote, which is also a thinly veiled plug.

In December last year I was asked by the State University of New York Press to write two different conclusions to my manuscript on millennial tension. The first version was supposed to anticipate the fact that the Y2K problem was a giant red-herring, and that the world would report little or no adverse effects on January 1. The second version was supposed to incorporate the complete chaos of Y2K malfunction, pre-emptively documenting the death-rattle of civilization as it is dragged shrieking back into the middle ages. It didn't take me long, however, to realize that if the latter scenario was actually going to happen, then no-one would be in any hurry to publish another academic book, let alone read one. The printing presses would be standing silent like menacing monuments to our electric past, or, perhaps more accurately, like gothic tombstones for the information revolution. No-one would care about my book because everyone would be too busy trying to remember how those guys on the curiosity show made fresh water out of glad-wrap, tupperware and pipe-cleaners. So I decided to follow my gut-instinct that nothing would happen, and wrote my conclusion accordingly. The final draft, therefore, began something like this:

New Year's Eves are notoriously anti-climactic. This is because we insist that they hold the symbolic weight of a temporally significant transitional moment, a weight the actual experience of time passing cannot hold. Despite the conviction of the prophets of apocalypse, there is always a morning after. We are always, to quote Jean Baudrillard, after the orgy. The urge for fusion through confusion – no matter how primal, infantile or mystical its origin – is a dionysian theme now being remobilized by the media, who anxiously await a spectacle worthy of the occasion. (Pop-singer Jennifer Lopez provided a perfect example of this orgasmic anticipation in her video clip for “Waiting for Tonight,” which lovingly depicted a group of millennial party-goers being drenched in the suggestive

spume of giant champagne-bottles-cum-fire-hydrants.) All the media hype surrounding new years' eve 2000 helped create the anti-climactic wave which swept the globe with the millennial dawn, compounded and aggravated by centuries of this discursive foreplay.

Every cliché in history has been made to jump through the mesmerizing hoops of those three zeros in the year 2000. Computer scientists and corporate executives awaited the date with dread because they had a self-made apocalypse on their hands, known as the “millennium bug” or the Y2K problem. As if believing unconsciously in the Christian Millennium, computer programmers put only two digits in each silicon chip, making 69 stand for 1969 without anticipating the problems this would bring in the twenty-first century. Possible scenarios offered by self-styled experts included everything from minor inconvenience to total system breakdown, including nuclear disfunction. One newspaper reported that “[t]he failure to program even vastly powerful mainframe computers to cope with a trivial change of date may be the biggest, most costly and absurd mistake in the history of the industrialized world” (Reeve et al. 53). We were told to brace for the Infocalypse, which would begin in New Zealand and sweep west across the globe with the dawning of the millennium. The Y2K problem was thus a perfect fable of modern myopia, a prosaic twist on the Frankenstein myth that our technology will destroy us. Suddenly the corporate demand for “Y2K compliance” became a warning to us all – upgrade or freeze.

2000 (or more specifically 2001) is more than a date. It represents a future which was never supposed to come, or at least not so soon. Currently dwelling in the fleeting year between these two highly charged dates, we find ourselves in the position of someone who has lusted after a sex-object for so long that consummation seems undesirable due to inevitable disappointment. Not being able to resist, however, we try to postpone an awkward awakening: “after the national orgasm a sort of collective melancholy” (Baudrillard 1989: 58). Or even worse, feeling a sharp twinge in our loins – the location of the Last Judgement, according to some (Brown, 1990: 49) – we realize we have all caught the millennium bug, a virus with the potential to seize the entire system.

And yet the Y2K prophecy, like all others before it, turned out to be a hoax, just another in a long line of anti-climaxes. “The worst of it all,” predicted Baudrillard (and no matter how passé we may find his name, he is still the best authority on these matters), “is precisely that there will be no end to anything, and all these things will continue to unfold slowly,

tediously, recurrently, in that hysteresis of everything which, like nails and hair, continue to grow after death" (1994: 116). Actually I'll quote him further:

The whole problem of speaking about the end (particularly the end of history) is that you have to speak of what lies beyond the end and also, at the same time, of the impossibility of ending. This paradox is produced by the fact that in a non-linear, non-Euclidean space of history the end cannot be located. The end is, in fact, only conceivable in a logical order of causality and continuity. Now, it is events themselves which, by their artificial production, their programmed occurrence or the anticipation of their effects – not to mention their transfiguration in the media – are suppressing the cause-effect relation and hence all historical continuity.

Barely a matter of months into the twenty first century (depending on how pedantic you are with calculations) and it becomes increasingly clear that Baudrillard anticipated the ambience of the year 2000. It is also clear that a more sober mind, namely Derrida's, was correct in declaring that, "all language on apocalypse is also apocalyptic and cannot be excluded from its object" (in Dickinson 233).

With the sound of the clock still ticking loudly in our ears, we nurse this historical hangover and prepare for the next; patiently enduring the cultural equivalent of being too tired to sleep. What can we expect from such hyper-ennui? What, indeed, are we doing after an orgy that we probably weren't invited to in the first place?

OK. So much for my conclusion.

Here we are, conducting a *postmortem* on the Y2K bug – a Kafkaesque pursuit if ever there was one. We don't have a recognizable body or corpse, and the crime seems much closer aligned with white-collar fraud than first-degree murder. Clearly the anti-prophecies of Baudrillard and his acolytes hit the mark. The Y2K bug was but the most visible symptom of an erotically inscribed, and historically inevitable, anticlimax.

Some pundits warned that the bug itself was probably harmless, but that the media panic surrounding its alleged effects may be enough to trigger a simulation of technological chaos. People looting supermarkets and emptying their bank-accounts could theoretically

make the system go haywire on its own. Well, as we know, this didn't happen either. Just as in the year 1000 AD, all was uncannily and drearily quiet. (Although some jokers on the Net have suggested that the Dark Ages were the direct result of unresolved Y1K issues.)

Not even in Japan, where the government itself seemed to be willing something out of a Godzilla movie, did mass-hysteria take hold. A good friend of mine had been planning for months for a techno-meltdown, and he had even plotted the best way to walk from Sydney to his survivalist safe-haven, when "they close all the roads." (You know how they close all the roads whenever anything "goes down.") Of course, nothing that dramatic could happen in this anaesthetized age: at least not on such a Hollywood scale. In this day and age, disaster has become homeopathic, doled out in daily car-crashes and geo-politically displaced misery. Yet the system hums on. Perhaps we are living in the post-panic era. The techno-cocoon, or Matrix, in which we spend our lives forecloses the active panic which could potentially give us a glimpse of alternative models of being. Models less overdetermined than the increasingly commercial vectors of daily life.

Waking up on the 1st of January (or perhaps it was the 2nd) we were greeted with the news that some Adelaide bus-ticket machines were malfunctioning. Perhaps we were tempted to feel relief that everything was continuing as normal, and we even felt a little smug that we hadn't spent extra money on tinned food and purified water. Then we may have felt a twinge of anger at the IT industry, who had generated millions, perhaps billions of dollars from a phantom fear, strategically deployed.

What I would suggest to you today, however, is that this complacent relief is a worst-case scenario of sorts. Without wishing to indulge in juvenile anarcho-apocalyptic fantasies, there is something truly terrifying about the trivial significance of malfunctioning Adelaide bus-tickets. Welcome to the year 2000 – an ersatz upgrade along the lines of a new Microsoft product launch.

On one level, of course, the general populace's resistance to the Y2K hype is admirable. But who can really tell what percentage of this "resistance" is healthy skepticism, and what proportion is a resigned trepidation? Or a fatalistic nihilism? Or good old Australian apathy on a global scale: "she'll be right." It is my contention that we can understand the underwhelming reaction to the millennium bug via sheer cultural exhaustion.

Having said that, one must immediately understand that cultural exhaustion is already a tired theme. One-hundred and fifty years ago, the institution of the railroad was blamed for a wave of frayed nerves and psychological abnormalities. In the 1890s, the celebrated Physician Max Nordau warned of the degeneration of society through “organic wear and tear” waged on a fragile humanity by technological acceleration and the cultural quantum leaps that these machines demand. After two world wars, fought as much in the factories and laboratories as the trenches, the West seemed to get a second wind through America’s economic buoyancy. But this only intensified the problem, resulting in Alvin Toffler’s future shock, and today’s media panics of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, empathy burnout, and other symptoms of an exceedingly draining millennium. Add to this the displaced Christian narrative of salvation and eternal rest, and you have a recipe for a particularly strung-out form of anticipation. A meta-exhaustion in fact. An exhaustion which has been harnessed, internalized and reified. A phenomenon which I would never call hyper-exhaustion for fear of confusion with hyper-activity.

It is this realization, that we (always) live on the edge of an abyss that I call “libidinal millenarianism.” It is the sense of liminality – of being in a highly charged psycho-social limbo – which creates the conditions for a different way of thinking time, and our relationship to time. Libidinal millenarianism is therefore an unanticipated spasm, one which has been drawn out for over a hundred years, dissipating and returning like a terrible pain momentarily forgotten. As Steve Wright says, “you know that feeling you get when you’re leaning back on a chair and you start to fall but then you catch yourself? I feel like that all the time.”

And as Derrida points out in *Spectres of Marx*, even in the 1950s: “We had this bread of apocalypse in our mouthsAs for those who abandon themselves to that discourse with the jubilation of youthful enthusiasm, they look like latecomers, a little as if it were possible to take still the last train – and yet be late to an end of history (15).” Derrida here identifies a consistent motif in apocalyptic thought; namely, a psychology of belatedness, which seems to be present – paradoxically enough – no matter how far we go back. It seems that the feeling that we somehow missed the party speaks to an intrinsic part of human temporal location and orientation. Nostalgia is built into our bones, the always-already infecting our responses to both what is and what will be.

It is this ethos which prompts Ben Lee to sing, “A lot goes on, but nothing happens,” or Radiohead to sing “I wish it was the 60s I just wish something would happen.” And yet one glance through the archives of the 1960s reveals the painful longing that generation had for the Victorian era. Go back to the 1890s and – you guessed it – they were lamenting the fact that they had missed the Renaissance, middle-ages or ancient golden ages. After a while, this kind of nostalgia becomes oppressive, and arcadianism gives way to utopianism, whether figured positively as Paradise, or negatively as apocalypse.

These hastily sketched terms point to the deeper ebbs and flows which give the present its particularly zombie-like bureaucratic momentum. The postmodern vision of apocalypse is thus not a battle between demons and harlots, but a conference of bespectacled computer programmers with identical pocket-protectors. As the enigma of Armageddon morphs into the spreadsheets of Silicon Valley, Truth is revealed not in a thunderclap, but in Bill Gates’ monotonal whine. As Krishan Kumar puts it, “[c]atastrophe will be expressed in lines on a graph rather than in the imagery of the Book of Revelation” (211). Such is the “debased millenarianism” (ibid.: 212) of our own epoch, where seduction and fate yield to rationality and causality.

The tension that exists between orgasm-as-sacrifice (*petite mort*) and orgasm-as-insemination (reproduction, immortality) always depends upon the panic dynamic. Accordingly, those three zeros contained in the year 2000 begin to acquire a pornographic gloss. In the phallic economy of apocalypse, each zero becomes either an orifice used in the game of political withdrawal, or a womb to return to in a mass movement of redemptive regression. (And as we have seen very recently in Uganda, the power of millenarian attraction can have devastating consequences, no matter what the actual date according to the Western calendar.)

To sum up, then: The millennium, the climax of history, is all about deferral. It is as if the second coming – whether it be figured as religious or scientific revelation – is being postponed by a God who is high on Viagra and his own sexual prowess. (And let me preempt the obvious objection by stating the equally obvious point that these tropes are profoundly gendered and intrinsically phallic.) The second coming did not arrive on schedule because our Lord was thinking of everything He possibly could to delay the

moment: mentally listing cricket teams from the 1940s, recounting pi to thirty decimal places, and conjugating irregular French verbs – anything to distract the people of Earth from realizing that they are being thoroughly screwed by the mythic linearity of Christian time.

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