The Social Imaginary of Ruination: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Disaster Mediation

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ABSTRACT

Background *Although the popularity of ruins has accompanied Western modernity in waves since the eighteenth century, the post-9/11 decade marks a notable resurgence of the imagery, aesthetics, and rhetoric of ruins, especially in American culture. This article was completed a few months prior to the global COVID-19 crisis.*

Analysis *While many scholars dismiss contemporary forms of ruin gazing as a mindless fascination with disaster and destruction in its virtual circulation, the author contends that this contemporary imaginary has significant political and social implications.*

Conclusion and implications *Although each geographic site of ruination has its own social, political, and historical specificity, the author draws from Cornelius Castoriadis' psychosocial extension of Lacanian theory to designate a broader iconographic and discursive trend in American culture whereby the imagery and rhetoric of destruction contributes to what he calls the "social imaginary of ruination."*

Keywords *Media/mass media; Mass media theory; Mass media effects; Disaster and emergency communications; New media*

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte *Bien que la popularité des ruines ait accompagné la modernité occidentale dans les vagues depuis le XVIIIe siècle, la décennie post-11 septembre marque une résurgence notable de l'imagerie, de l'esthétique et de la rhétorique des ruines, en particulier dans la culture américaine. Cet article a été achevé quelques mois avant la crise mondiale du COVID-19.*

Analyse *Alors que de nombreux chercheurs rejettent les formes contemporaines de ruine en les considérant comme une fascination aveugle pour les catastrophes et la destruction dans sa circulation virtuelle, l'auteur soutient que cet imaginaire contemporain a des implications politiques et sociales importantes.*

Conclusions et implications *Bien que chaque site géographique de ruine ait sa propre spécificité sociale, politique et historique, l'auteur s'inspire de l'extension psychosociale de Cornelius Castoriadis de la théorie lacanienne pour désigner une tendance iconographique et discursive plus large dans la culture américaine par laquelle l'imagerie et la rhétorique de la destruction contribuent à ce que il appelle «l'imaginaire social de la ruine».*

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> The only thing that is the end of the world is the end of the world.
> —Barack Obama (quoted in David Smith, 2017, para. 4)

Preface: After the apocalypse of 2016

In uncertain times, we speak colloquially of the end of the world. Is this not one of the most pressing social and political anxieties that lingers as a spectre in everyday conversations around so many global economic, technocultural, and environmental issues? Political leaders flagrantly evoke and draw upon the iconography and discourse of ruination and mass destruction during election time. Certainly, anyone who followed the 2016 American presidential election will be painfully familiar with Donald Trump's incessantly repetitive rhetoric of total disaster.[1] At a rally of 15,000 people in Florida, for instance, Trump declared, "The election of Hillary Clinton would lead, in my opinion, to the almost total destruction of our country as we know it" (quoted in S.A. Miller, 2016, para. 2). The Left reciprocated Trump's rhetoric, circulating statements from Democratic Party leaders with an emphasis on his belligerent and reactionary behaviour as a dangerous liability in the context of presidential responsibility and nuclear weapons. Clinton's campaign released several ads drawing on Cold War–era politics and the possible threat of nuclear war under a Trump presidency (Stevenson, 2016). "As I've told people," said Hillary Clinton to a *New York Times* reporter just one month before the election, "I'm the last thing standing between you and the apocalypse" (quoted in Leibovich, 2016, last para.). Right and Left often speak in this sort of intense political hyperbole meant to scare the bewildered herd toward one party affiliation or the other, fuelling anxieties of contemporary life around socio-economic precariousness, terrorism, and catastrophe. Surely, there has been a proliferation of actual disasters, but in this discourse or dissuasion, both parties invest and foster an atmosphere of pending destruction, an intensification of the "social imaginary of ruination." Ultimately, what should have been revealed more explicitly in this political blackmail is that each of these parties supports and is supported by the persistent late-capitalist state of affairs, a network of global neoliberal financialization, which itself is bent on exploitation, predation, and calamity. In the past five years, scientists have reported the hottest temperatures ever recorded around the globe as a result of global warming (Borunda, 2019). The state of affairs is already boiling over. The financial class profits from the destructive symptoms of the system itself. I refer to Naomi Klein's (2007) terminology of "disaster capitalism," which designates the ways in which the current economic system targets the specific conditions of catastrophic events and suffering populations for profit. If the neoliberal capitalist state increasingly produces and profits from disaster, it is not a leap to suggest that the mediation of pending destruction or collapse, whether actual or imaginary, is increasingly employed as a deliberate tool of governance (Loewenstein, 2015; Lorey, 2015). Let's assume if you are reading this that the end of the world has not yet happened, but if Clinton is to be taken at her word for a moment, since Donald Trump is president, it must now be after the apocalypse.

Terminology and propositions of the social imaginary of ruination

Is this the end times? And what do we evoke when we speak of the end of the world? This article will return to the "end," but first emphasizes the polyvalence of "world" for a moment, in order to circle what this utterance of finality implies. We speak of the earth and its inhabitants, but a world also implies its own creation, existence, and growth. A world forms through some genesis, construction, and actualization. A world is not only material, but also historical, symbolic, temporal, and atmospheric. It is a given state of affairs. It is a state of human existence. "World" is from the German *Welt* and there is the *Weltanschauung*, worldview, which involves aspects of perception, thought, knowledge, and action at the intersection of individual and collective levels of society. There are even strong connotations of gender here, but let us leave the myths of Mother Earth aside for now.[2] Christoph Wulf (1989) organizes the complex etymology of "world" into three categories:

- 'World' serves to designate a period of time; it implies the emergence and passing away of time; 'world' is equivalent to 'time.'
- 'World' specifies the human community; the place where one lives in contrast to uninhabited areas and the times before man existed.
- 'World' signifies a self-contained entity, a reduction of complexity to the limited unity of a world-view. (p. 50)

When I speak of the end of the world, I evoke a floating signifier of finality that operates on these three discernible levels: temporality, society, and the limits of individual perception in the mediation of a given state of affairs. In a psychoanalytic sense, collective perception of the world might also be understood as regulated through processes of what Cornelius Castoriadis (1987) has called the "social imaginary." Castoriadis adapts the Lacanian imaginary of the clinical analytic situation, the realm of images, imagination, and deception for psychosocial theorization. For Castoriadis, the social imaginary is larger than any individual fantasy. It consists of a complex network of signifiers that can only be described indirectly, obliquely, and haphazardly. Constituting the world of signification, symbols, and myths that circulate for a multitude, the social imaginary provides meaning and identity where there would otherwise be a void. It also has the social function of covering over gaps or that which may be unconscious in the symbolic order for the subject. The social imaginary might also be understood alongside what Benedict Anderson (1983) conceptualized as "imagined community," a common language that subjects of a particular nation might share. Anderson suggested that it is through the convergence of mass media and capitalism that the nation-state coheres. Hegemonic regimes distribute ideology through the mediasphere, deeply influencing signification within the social imaginary.

Despite its elusiveness and lure, the social imaginary has productive, practical, and affective functions. It is that which anchors the operations of social institutions and maintains a threshold on the potentialities of symbolic structures, allowing for the actualized state of affairs. For Castoriadis (1987), the social imaginary underlies the symbolic order of any society, grounding its system of social significations, providing social patterns and order:

> These patterns do not themselves exist in the form of a representation one could, as a result of analysis, put one's finger on. … They can be grasped only … as a 'coherent deformation' of the system of subjects, objects and their relations; as the curvature specific to every social space; as the invisible cement holding together this endless collection of real, rational and symbolic odds and ends that constitute every society, and as the principle that selects and shapes the bits and pieces that will be accepted there. (p. 143)

More recently, Charles Taylor (2004) described this "invisible cement" as a broad and multifaceted concept that incorporates "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (p. 23). Taylor's understanding of the social imaginary also encompasses what many theorists call the "cultural imaginary," "the available cultural repertoire of images and representations [that] … shapes our emotions, our desires, and our beliefs" (Mackenzie, 2000, p. 143). He writes that the social imaginary is "carried in images, stories, and legends," is "shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society," and is "that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy" (Taylor, 2004, p. 23). The social imaginary, then, is this complex and mutable system of common understanding that allows individuals and communities to carry out collective practices, maintain their identities in relation to the symbolic order, and understand certain narratives, images, social codes, and ideas as normative or factual. It is a system of signification that mediates an impression of reality for individual and collective perception.

In a broader iconographic and discursive trend in American culture, the repetitious visuality and discourse of the end of the world produces what I call the "social imaginary of ruination." To be clear, this particular imaginary may be more evenly distributed and intensely felt across secular Leftist populations as a result of Trump's presidency, but the social imaginary of ruination extends well beyond the surface of the political realm through iconographic and discursive media patterns that influence a certain experience of reality. The floating signifier of the end of the world attaches itself to so many disparate contexts that it begins to permeate the preconscious of most discussions.[3] Since the advent of Trump's presidency, has the word "disaster" not yet become devoid of meaning in an excess of its signification? Or is it that the current state of affairs feels so ruinous that this is the only appropriate signifier for so many pressing social and political issues? The Invisible Committee (2017) suggested that the contemporary political moment exists in a state of ruination where "[t]he spectacle of politics lives on as the spectacle of its decomposition" (p. 8). Let us behold the rotting body politic, fascinated with its own decay as displayed on the screen.

Although the popularity of ruins has accompanied Western modernity in waves since the eighteenth century, the post-9/11 era marks a notable resurgence of the imagery, aesthetics, and rhetoric of collapse, breakdown, and decay, especially in American culture (Dillon, 2011; Ginsberg, 2004). News media producers, popular cinema and television, visual art, and literary works invoke environmental catastrophe, terrorist vio-

lence, international conflict, and deindustrialization through imagery of global ruination with repetitive regularity. Urban explorers and documentarians produce picturesque photographs of architectural ruins, crumbling factories, dilapidated housing, and the rubble of bombed out buildings, which have become prominent in the art market as objects for consumption, appearing in print publications, museum exhibitions, and on mainstream websites (Apel, 2015; Huyssen, 2006). These representations often mediate and denote actual disaster zones, such as the collapse of the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan in 2001; the devastated neighbuorhoods of New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina in 2005; and the abandoned residential and corporate properties of Detroit after the global recession in 2008. Such iconic sites of disaster continue to participate in a shifting exchange of visual production and circulation that contributes to the social imaginary of ruination. Although there are obviously significant distinctions that might be made between the mediation of a terrorist event, the mediation of a natural disaster, and the mediation of an economic collapse, the spread of this iconography is overdetermined and overlapping as the aesthetics of distinct events contribute to the atmosphere of threat, an environment of the looming end.

This social imaginary of ruination does not organize community in the traditional sense that Castoriadis, Anderson, or Taylor respectively describes. It is a contemporary predicament of intensified social anxiety and alienation, disintegration and dissolution, automation and competition, precariousness and disorder. For psychoanalyst Jacques-Alain Miller (2006), urgency is the "temporal modality that comes as a response to the emergence of a trauma" (p. 41) such as a cut, an abrupt end, or death. The persistent evocation of the imminent explosion or death in the social realm connotes the constant possibility of absolute absence, generating a collective sense of urgency in the face of the impending end. Anderson (1983) inadvertently provides an impression of the social imaginary of ruination in an analogy that links newspaper media to its production of an imagined community:

> If we were to look at the sample front page of, say, *The New York Times*, we might find there stories about Soviet dissidents, famine in Mali, a gruesome murder, a coup in Iraq, the discovery of a rare fossil in Zimbabwe. … Why are these events juxtaposed? What connects them to each other? Not sheer caprice. Yet obviously most of them happen independently, without the actors being aware of each other or of what the others are up to. The arbitrariness of their inclusion and juxtaposition … shows that linkage between them is imagined. (p. 33)

Anderson brilliantly notices that these seemingly disparate stories share some commonality in that they produce an imaginary social bond through mediation, but this imagined community between contemporary subjects reveals itself to be preoccupied with precariousness, death, and ruin. The subject experiences the accelerated form of this phenomenon in the contemporary technocultural atmosphere. The state-corporate-media matrix disseminates the emerging threat of disaster in "real time," producing collectively shared and integrated affective states of precarity across populations, but only in paradoxically individuated, deterritorialized, disorganized, and disintegrated ways. The social imaginary of ruination involves the uneven distribution

of panic, apathy, depression, alienation, and displacement of anger across multitudes. The live and looping reality show of disaster and death manifests potential for a globalization of affect, overpowering critical thought, and reproducing the soft violence of "semio-capitalism," a term Franco Berardi (2009) uses to describe the contemporary subject's experience in the technocultural oversaturation of signs, acceleration of stimuli, and constant attentive stress that dissolves collective meaning, stability, and solidarity. It should be apparent that I am writing of not only the spread of ruination imagery and discourse, but also the rapid decay of social bonds. This social imaginary of ruination might be partially conceptualized as an electronic virus that informs collective fatalism, enabling widespread hopelessness and cynicism to persist among the Left at a time when it is more imperative than ever before to recognize the possibilities on the horizon beyond this contemporary state of affairs.

Drawing on an article by Jacques Derrida (1984), which was written in a time of intense apocalyptic premonition at the height of the Cold War, this article refers to the notion of "remainderless destruction," the continual repetition of representing that which is unrepresentable. Although this social imaginary of ruination often naturalizes destruction, death, and decay as inevitable, encouraging a kind of ahistorical political apathy toward the future as a futile drive toward the end, these same representations may undermine narratives that posit late capitalism and the state as bearers of progress, rationality, and protection. Further, these persistent representations of pending doom within the 24/7 mediasphere propagate a collective sense of speed and panic that manifests as a crucial component of the social imaginary of ruination. In the spirit of Paul Virilio's (2005/2007) anticipation of the need for "a philosophy of post-industrial eschatology," I raise several key questions in these times of uncertainty. What dreams and fantasies, involuntary memories and free associations, slippages and breakdowns might emerge for subjects under a social imaginary of ruination? What social, political, and affective influence does this imaginary have on contemporary subjectivity? And what emancipatory possibilities might this current predicament reveal for the subject in opposition to neoliberal capitalist assemblages that propagate virtual and actual disasters in mediation?

Premediation of disaster: Speed, anxiety, and temporality

Is there nostalgia for the Cold War in the social imaginary of ruination? Certainly, fantasies of mass nuclear death always seem to be in vogue. While the Obama Administration gave the impression that it was more targeted and reserved with its military tactics through "surgical strikes" of drone warfare, Cold War threats have been resurrected through a pastiche of the arms race during the Trump presidency in which Russia, North Korea, and Iran play adamant roles. Immediately following the 2016 election, Trump, as president-elect, ambiguously fuelled anxieties of nuclear war through his Twitter account in stating, "The United States must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes" (Trump, 2016). News media manufacturers produced speculations in all directions as to what exactly Trump meant in his statement. Trump's tweet prompted a group of arms control experts to urge President Barack Obama to remove America's nuclear weapons from a state of high alert prior to Trump's inauguration. Removing nuclear

weapons from a "hair-trigger alert" would supposedly limit the immediacy of Trump's access to nuclear weapons. The Ploughshares Fund sponsored a petition, which gained more than 60,000 signatures, demanding a limit on Trump's access to nuclear weapons. The petition's plea encapsulates the anxiety that forms at the intersection of thought around Trump's erratic use of social media, the immediacy of new technology, and the danger of nuclear war: "President Trump could launch 140 warheads in the time it takes to write 140 characters. The grave difference is: a tweet can be deleted, but the devastation of a nuclear warhead can never be undone" (quoted in Buncombe, 2017, para. 4). The terrifying social fantasy emerges around associations between the impulsive keystrokes of a tweet and the push of a nuclear button.[4] The Cold War discourse of speed and death is revitalized in the contemporary social imaginary: mass destruction at the president's fingertips.

Derrida (1984) posits a crucial aphorism that must be kept in mind when considering any evocation of the Cold War: "*in the beginning there will have been speed*, which is always *taking on speed*, in other words, overtaking … doubling, passing" (p. 22, emphasis original). Here, Derrida speaks not simply of increasing speed, but of the acceleration of acceleration.[5] This is hyperspeed. It is called an arms race, after all. This race should be understood not only in regards to the stockpiling of actual weaponry, but also in regards to the speed of media as "premediation," a phenomenon that contributes to rapid circulation and overproduction in the flow of information. Premediation is a primary symptom of semio-capitalism, the experience of electronic hyperstimulation through the excessive production of overlapping and contradictory viewpoints. Richard Grusin (2010) sees premediation as a cultural trend that intensified after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. He describes it as a form of representation whereby "the global mediasphere" works to "prevent citizens … from experiencing again the kind of systemic or traumatic shock produced by the events of 9/11 by perpetuating an almost constant, low level of fear or anxiety about another terrorist attack" (p. 2). Premediation is not simply about predicting possible outcomes, but rather about proliferating speculation about the future with immediate updates on developing situations as a pre-emptive mitigation of potential catastrophe. According to Grusin (2010),

> premediation characterizes the mediality of the … twenty-first century as focused on the cultural desire to make sure that the future has already been premediated before it turns into the present (or the past)—in large part to try to prevent the media, and hence the American public, from being caught unawares as it was on the morning of 11 September 2001. (p. 4)

Premediation entails rolling and instantaneous media representations that constantly evoke the threat of disaster, symptomatically generating low underlying affective states of anxiety across populations. Here, the term "state" has a double sense, not only as a condition or representation of emotion, but also as the governing entity that organizes hegemonic power.

Trump's Twitter account provides a microcosm of this much larger media atmosphere as a form of hegemony. No president has ever engaged in this sort of constant and directly personal use of social media before. In his first 100 days in office, the @realDonaldTrump Twitter account was instrumental in premediating ongoing events,

producing 496 tweets for 30 million followers. This amounts to an update from the president every few hours. Trump's administration executes premediation as a tool of governance where these messages are recirculated across flows of the 24/7 live mediasphere, reported and dissected in detail. The majority of Trump's tweets might be categorized in themes of "serving as spin," "bullying foreign leaders," "creating drama and excitement," and "raising alarm" (Parlapiano & Buchanan, 2017, para. 1). There is a blank parody of the Cold War occurring right now in premediation, which results in consequences as real as death. In April 2017, Trump ordered the use of the largest bomb in the U.S. military arsenal, "the mother of all bombs" that is not of nuclear capacity, in Afghanistan (Cooper & Mashal, 2017, para. 1). The U.S. Department of Defense released a widely viewed topographic video of the explosion in which a gigantic mushroom cloud can be seen spreading across the foreign landscape. Following the strike in Afghanistan, media manufacturers quickly dispersed assertions that Russia has "the father of all bombs," a larger, more powerful weapon of destruction. Here is the old enforcement of terror on populations once known as MAD (mutually assured destruction), despite the MADness this logic seems to entail. Meanwhile, North Korea continues to develop and test its nuclear weapons, nuclear arms tension simmers between Iran and the West, and Russia builds new missile silos and other incendiary technologies. One circulating fear is that North Korea may be capable of building a new nuclear bomb every six weeks, expanding the country's arsenal to 50 weapons by the end of Trump's four-year term (Sanger & Broad, 2017, para 10). Here, the scale of threat is again measured in speed. In response to North Korea's nuclear program, Trump's statement that there "is a chance that we could end up having a major, major conflict with North Korea" was given prominent attention across mainstream media sources (quoted in Borger & Haas, 2017, para. 6). The ominous ambiguity of such statements promotes media speculation and nervous fantasies of disaster.

If the recognition of future threats in their potentiality produces anxiety, the subject's experience of temporality may be altered. A kind of countdown is initiated where there is a loss of time in perception as the probability of disaster is signified.[6] Premonitions of ruination speed up reality and shrink time. Shortly after Trump's initial nuclear tweet, for instance, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists marked the 70th anniversary of its Doomsday Clock by moving the clock's hands 30 seconds closer to midnight, the closest the clock has been to midnight since the United States government raised alarm in testing its first hydrogen bomb after World War II (Krauss & Titley, 2017). Although the clock is meant to raise awareness around the dire situation of nuclear weapons and climate change, it also depicts a kind of anxiety-provoking countdown where time is running out. This symbolic gesture dramatizes the imminence of total destruction, the reduction of time in the threat, giving representation to fears of death and precariousness embedded in the social imaginary of ruination. Ultimately, the clock suggests a terrifying threat in that the world is likely to end soon. "Threat's ultimately ambient nature," writes Brian Massumi (2010), "makes preemptive power an *environmental power*. Rather than empirically manipulate an object (of which it has none), it *modulates* felt qualities infusing a life-environment" (p. 62, emphasis original). Premediation of the threat contributes to a broader media environ-

ment of precarity whereby there is less opportunity for processing and thought. This production of precarity is a central element of the social imaginary of ruination. Judith Butler (2015) has argued that "precarity is not a passing or episodic condition, but a new form of regulation. … [P]recarity has itself become a regime, a hegemonic mode of being governed, and governing ourselves" (p. xii). Precariousness is no longer the exception or the margin; it is the standard of American governance in neoliberal capitalism. Perhaps insecurity is the predominant preoccupation of the subject in the spread of actual and virtual manifestations of precariousness. Administrations now govern through a politics of uncertainty, disorder, and fear, all of which are now part of everyday life in developed technocultural societies. This politics of uncertainty leads to individual and collective experiences of the world as a perpetual present as subjects look to their screens, anxiously waiting for the disaster of the future to arrive.[7]

Mediatizing live disaster: Repetition and collective virtual trauma

What about the déjà vu of disaster? What are these reoccurring dreams of destruction? What is repeating in the premediation of American ruination? To shed some light on these questions, it is worth revisiting the massive production and circulation of disaster in "real time" visual media that emerged from the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Many scholars denounce the narcissistic rhetoric of American exceptionalism that seemed to manifest among even the most intelligent of thinkers in the wake of ruination of the World Trade Center. It is difficult to ignore, however, that there was something quite exceptional about the collapse of these two buildings in terms of the media convergence between digital cameras, 24/7 news reporting services, and globalized internet technologies. The nexus of these media developments enabled instantaneous transmission of images and video footage of the terrorist attacks to audiences across the world. As the events unfolded, amateur and professional photographers gathered on the streets and rooftops of New York City to make images of the visual spectacle. "Manhattan seemed alive with cameras," wrote David Friend (2006), and "[a]mid the horror, New Yorkers by the tens of thousands had committed millions of moments to film and video" (pp. ix–x). Media images of the World Trade Center's collapse were played and replayed incessantly on television, printed and reprinted in newspapers and magazines, shared and distributed across internet platforms. Jonathan Flatley (2002) wrote that the Twin Towers "offered a perfectly condensed and extremely visible site for a disaster that capitalized on the iconic reproducibility and, often horrible attraction of spectacle" (p. 4). This primacy of the visual dimensions of the terrorist attacks has led to the common scholarly characterization that September 11, 2001, is the most recorded and photographed day in history, a quintessentially Baudrillardian "image-event."

Although the World Trade Center's collapse may have been exceptional in that it was what Virilio (2005/2007) might call the "original accident" of its kind in terms of its hypermediation, a social imaginary of ruination that precedes and exceeds the terrorist attacks also dissolves this impression of exceptionality or singularity. Many scholars have highlighted parallels between the aesthetics of Ground Zero imagery and instances of destruction in the twentieth century, particularly the bombings of Dresden and Berlin during World War II (Josyph, 2012; Perry, 2008; Dennis Smith, 2003). Scholars also refer to the spectacle of the terrorist attacks through Slavoj Žižek's con-

tention that the collapse of the World Trade Center was an eerily familiar doubling of Hollywood disaster films. Žižek (2002) has argued that the virtual images of disaster movies entered reality, producing the media spectacle's surreal affectivity:

> The fact that, after September 11, the openings of many 'blockbuster' movies with scenes which bear resemblance to the WTC collapse were postponed should thus be read as the 'repression' of the fantasmatic background responsible for the impact of the WTC collapse. … [T]he question we should have asked ourselves as we stared at the TV screens on September 11 is simply: Where have we already seen the same thing over and over again? (p. 17)

This fantasmatic background is the social imaginary of ruination, which also accounts for so many of the initial reactions to the terrorist attacks that describe how the event felt like a movie or even like a dream. Jean Baudrillard (2002) communicated that world destruction fantasies of New York City were already well entrenched in social consciousness before the terrorist attacks when he wrote, "[W]e have dreamt of this event … everyone without exception has dreamt of it. … The countless disaster movies bear witness to this fantasy" (pp. 5–7). Further, Ground Zero is itself a repetition of signification that many scholars have linked to nuclear explosions and test sites. "Ground Zero" denotes the threat of nuclear disaster as much as representations of the World Trade Center's ruination in its two billowing toxic dust clouds, which might connote two previous toxic mushrooms produced in the American terror bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The American election of Donald Trump in itself generated common comparisons to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman (2017) wrote: "We need to rerun the tape. Ladies and gentlemen, we were attacked on Dec. 7, 1941, we were attacked on Sept. 11, 2001, and we were attacked on Nov. 8, 2016. That most recent attack didn't involve a horrible loss of lives, but it was devastating in its own way" (para. 8). One can easily find such colloquial media comparisons between Trump's election and the collective emotional distress generated through the mediation of the terrorist attacks. Trump actually made such a link himself, suggesting that *Fox News* had seen higher ratings during his administration's first 100 days in office than the network received during the coverage of 9/11 and its aftermath (Revesz, 2017). Although such a comparison might be taken as incredibly insensitive and bizarre, what such an association reveals is not only the popular draining of the terrorist attacks of their symbolic efficiency as an exceptional event, but also the radical shift of symbolic coordinates in the wake of Trump's election. The election marked a collective trauma not entirely unlike the spread of shock and anxiety after the incessant mediation of the World Trade Center's collapse. The example of 9/11's mediation demonstrates that even in the case of such a presumably singular event, that singularity cannot be easily contained in an affectively charged atmosphere of acceleration and collapse, for the aesthetics of ruination are easily associated with other instances of disaster in the social imaginary. The virtual traces of past encounters with disaster circle the present encounter in its actualization. The iconography and discourse of a disastrous event reverberates through a series of other catastrophes, influencing previous events and

those still to come, which are both in the process of becoming. Representations of the ruins of destruction typically echo the ruins of other temporalities and geographies through aesthetic and affective traces.

The repetitious nature of the social imaginary of ruination might further be understood through the Freudian concept of the uncanny. The uncanny is an affective and aesthetic notion that extends from the attraction to limits, namely the experience of life at its limit in close proximity to death. Freud (1919) described the uncanny as an experience that "belongs to all that is terrible—to all that arouses dread and creeping horror … [and] coincide[s] with whatever excites dread" (p. 218). Freud is describing an experience of cognitive dissonance that results from an encounter with something both strange and familiar, fear inducing and fascinating. The uncanny experience deeply involves the death-drive and frequently arises from "a sense of repetition or 'coming back'—the return of the repressed, the constant or eternal recurrence of the same thing, a compulsion to repeat" (Royle, 2003, p. 2). The uncanny disrupts any clear sense of borders between inside and outside, producing a sense of liminality, muddling discernible distinctions between the past and present encounter. The evocation of disaster may impose an uncanny awareness of that which came before, but also has a relationship with future occurrences. Brian Dillon (2011) writes that "the ruin casts us forward in time; it predicts a future in which our present will slump into similar disrepair or fall victim to some unforeseeable calamity" (p. 11). Past and future collapse into the anxiety of the present moment with the premediation of pending destruction.

Although each given geographic site of actual disaster has its own social, political, and historical specificity, the overlapping discourse and iconography surrounding these sites reproduces an uncanny sensibility, a generalized impression of destruction that obliterates difference in the hyperproliferation of ruins. Immersed within a media-saturated technoculture, the signification of ruination becomes an environment that is dislocated and dissociated from any regional specificity. Susie Linfield (2010) articulates a similar notion in her book about the political violence of photographs, *The Cruel Radiance*:

> A photograph of a bombed-out apartment building in Barcelona from 1937 looks much like a photograph of a bombed-out apartment building in Berlin in 1945, which looks much like the bombed-out buildings of Hanoi in 1972, Belgrade in 1999, or Kabul from last week. But only a vulgar reductionist—or an absolute pacifist—would say that these five cities, which is to say these five wars, represent the same circumstances, the same histories, or the same causes. Still, the photographs *look* the same: if you've seen one bombed-out building you've seen them all. (p. 21, emphasis original)

This is not to diminish the importance of specific histories, causes, and circumstances, but Linfield's observation communicates the associative and repetitive aesthetics of ruination. Each site of disaster in its circulative mediation is in peril of resembling all of the others. Linfield's observation echoes Walter Benjamin's (1969) well-known description of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, the terrified angel who stares out of the image with eyes and mouth open, wings spread:

> His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreck-

age and hurls it in front of his feet. … [A] storm is blowing from Paradise. … The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (pp. 257–258)

Benjamin's description of Klee's angel may as well denote the subject's experience of disaster capitalism in its technocultural mediation. What Benjamin highlights is that these piling catastrophes are really all one and the same when speaking of global capitalism and its disastrous patterns. These repetitive occurrences of calamity as a result of the deregulated acceleration of technoscience, militarization, and globalization reveal that these events are not separate instances in a historical chain of singularities, but rather share a common source. When speaking of technoscientific progress or growth, it is not possible to speak in simple terms of positivity or incremental advancement. Progress always functions in two directions simultaneously, for with each gain there is also loss and with each creation there is also destruction. Virilio (2007) writes that the

invention of the 'substance' is equally the invention of the 'accident'. The shipwreck is consequently the 'futurist' invention of the ship, and the air crash the invention of the supersonic airliner, just as the Chernobyl meltdown is the invention of the nuclear power station. … While the twentieth century was the century of great exploits … and great discoveries in physics and chemistry, to say nothing of computer science and genetics, it would seem, alas, only logical that the twentieth-first century, in turn, reap the harvest of this hidden production constituted by the most diverse disasters, *to the very extent that their repetition has become a clearly recognizable historical phenomenon.* (p. 5, emphasis original)

The level of speed and energy invested in the material manifestation of progress inevitably produces the possibility of a proportionally equivalent of disaster. Bound to technoscientific militarization, late-capitalist narratives of progress and growth negate themselves in the event of collapse. Perhaps any growing premonition of the end of the world should be recognized as symptomatic of a reoccurring historical phenomenon of repetitive disaster that is contingent on narratives of progress.

This societal exposure to repetitious disaster iconography in premediation also results in flows and spikes in affectivity. Psychiatrists and psychologists are only really beginning to understand the effects of what Marc Redfield (2009) has called "virtual trauma." For Redfield, virtual trauma is both ambiguous and spectral. It might be understood as a form of secondary trauma. It is a trauma that is not clearly actual, but instantly transfers the threat of violence over distance and mediation. Virtual trauma is often thought to be a kind of collective, cultural, and symbolic suffering that partially emerges in the social imaginary through technocultural shifts and shocks to signification. E. Ann Kaplan (2005) contends that the clinical concept of vicarious traumatization, whereby therapists experience distress through the accumulative exposure to the raw emotional material of their patients, might provide a model for thinking about the subject's affective encounter with incessant media violence in contemporary technocultures. Recent psychological studies suggest clear links between exposure to media

depicting disaster iconography and traumatization (Wayne, 2016). Cumulatively, the constant mediation of disaster capitalism generates an atmosphere of virtual trauma and pending catastrophe where

> terror can be felt in all corners of the world at the same time. It is not a localized bomb: it explodes each second, with the news of an attack, a natural disaster, a health scare, a malicious rumour. … The … current regime is comprised of the synchronization of emotions, ensuring the transition from a democracy of opinion to a democracy of emotions. For better or for worse. (Virilio, 2012, pp. 30–31)

In this present global capitalist scenario of acceleration and accumulation, there is an archive of ruination that grows, overlaps, and repeats indefinitely, influencing a broader social impression and individual experience of reality. Immersed in a deterritorialized world, contemporary subjects are interpellated and governed through mediated encounters with threats of ruination and calamity. The subject's encounter with ruination in its representation may be caught between overdetermined, multiple, and contradictory historical traumas and geographies, memories and temporalities, affects and images. This is the subject's anxiety without object. Subjects are collectively governed through the maintenance of a semio-capitalism par excellence, a constant state of underlying panic through a hyperproliferation of "real time" disaster in mediation: the social imaginary of ruination.

Psychoanalysis and fantasies of world destruction

Freud often deployed the ruin as a conceptual sign. He famously likened the psychoanalyst's task of listening for the unconscious in the patient's speech to that of the archaeologist's investigation of an ancient civilization's weathered remains:

> Imagine that an explorer arrives in a little-known region where his interest is aroused by an expanse of ruins, with remains of walls, fragments of columns, and tablets with half-effaced and unreadable inscriptions. … He may have brought picks, shovels and spades with him [and] … with them he may start upon the ruins, clear away the rubbish, and, beginning from the visible remains, uncover what is buried. (Freud, 1896, p. 192)

In this analogy, ruins have a potent latency. Each patient's symptoms embody the ruins of past events and experiences. Repressed remnants surface in the patient's articulation of present anxieties, memories, associations, and dreams. The analyst as explorer always arrives after the trauma has already occurred, listening to the figurative rubble, those fragments of the patient's past, whatever is left of the traumatic encounter in the body as it is expressed in speech and symptoms. The analyst and patient reconstruct the ruins through language and interpretation. In the process, the analysis of past events produces its own anticipation of a future dimension. There is reflection and recognition and process. What associations will arrive? What dreams will crop up? What else waits to be found in the rubble of memory? If the unconscious might be found in the ruins of the past, it might also be found in the futurity of ruination or that which has not yet been actualized for the patient, perhaps within an "unthought unknown" as Christopher Bollas has called it.

Freud first wrote about apocalyptic fantasies in his discussion of the well-known case of Schreber. During a particularly difficult period in his illness, Schreber began to report visions of a great and pending catastrophe. Schreber had several theories on how this imminent event would occur. "At one time," wrote Freud (1911), "he had in mind a process of glaciation owing to the withdrawal of the sun; at another it was to be destruction by an earthquake" (p. 69). Schreber apparently found these visions to be "partly of a terrifying character, but partly, too, of an indescribable grandeur" (p. 68). Freud's reference to an "indescribable grandeur" already points to the sublime aspect of ruination, the simultaneous fear and fascination that results in an experience beyond language and thought. Freud and his prominent psychoanalytic interlocutors, including Nunberg (1955), Schilder (1928/1951), and Fenichel (1953), understood the *Weldergung*, the world destruction fantasies of their schizophrenic patients, as a projection of an internal catastrophe and as a defensive withdrawal from object cathexis. This withdrawal of the libido from the world of objects is partially understood as the patient's withdrawal from reality, which usually leaves the individual with a feeling that the world of objects has ended and no longer has any meaning. In psychosis, the patient experiences semiotic disintegration. Does the detachment from reality predicate the perception of the world's end, or does the perception of the world's end predicate the detachment from reality? Whether triggered through internal or external intensities, the patient's world goes to pieces. William J. Spring (1939) later emphasized the more obvious point that "the idea of world destruction represents a wish to destroy" (p. 51). Spring also suggested the possibility for pleasure gain in the fantasy of disaster.

> It appears to be more pleasant," he wrote, "to think of the end of the whole world than of one's own death alone … and the idea that the world is coming to an end involves the simultaneous gratification of sadistic and of masochistic impulses, that is the gratification of a destructive wish without distinction between the ego and external objects. (1939, p. 56)

Spring importantly suggests the possibility for a cognitive dissonance, a simultaneous pain and pleasure contained within the patient's fantasies of disaster.

Freud (1920) first approached the individual's turn toward destructive thoughts and behaviour in his theorization of the death-drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle.* He defines the death-drive (also referred to as *Thanatos* in psychoanalytic work following Freud) in opposition to *Eros*, the instinct to engender life through reproduction and creation. Whereas the life drive moves the subject toward cohesion and unity, the death-drive encapsulates the subject's inclination toward self-annihilation, alienation, and separation. Freud suggested that the death-drive is the primary motivation for life, which is constantly determined through "complicated *detours*" and "circuitous paths to death," the desire to "return to the inanimate state" of rubble and dust (Freud, 1920, pp. 38–39, emphasis original). Drawing from Freud's death-drive hypothesis, Melanie Klein (1975) understood the patient's world destruction fantasies in terms of "annihilation anxiety" as "[t]he mechanism of one part of the ego annihilating other parts[,] which … implies a preponderance of the destructive impulse over the libido" (p. 24). She maintained, "If the ego and the internalized objects are felt to be in bits, an internal catastrophe is experienced … which both extends to the external world and is pro-

jected on to it" (p. 24). In this light, world destruction fantasies might be understood in terms of projection, as the displacement of the patient's hateful or anxious feelings toward a particular individual, often a primary caregiver.

It is no surprise, perhaps, that patients with severe destructive tendencies also commonly experience the projected inner conflict toward the outside world through the difficulty to maintain stable links and attachments. If the outside world and others are experienced as threatening or overwhelming, the patient may fearfully retreat in isolation or act out in anger, making it difficult to maintain their relationships. Wilfred Bion (1959) actually suggested that Freud's archaeological metaphor for the patient's unconscious "was helpful if it were considered that we were exposing evidence not so much of a primitive civilization as of a primitive disaster. … [W]e are confronted not so much with a static situation that permits leisurely study, but with a catastrophe that remains at one and the same moment actively vital and yet incapable of resolution into quiescence" (p. 311). Bion emphasized traumatic experience, the exceptional catastrophes of the patient's past, as a dynamic and active phenomenon. The unconscious structure of the past disaster repeats and continues in the present, sabotaging the patient's future attachments and capabilities to stabilize signification and meaning. "The repetition of the death-drive," wrote Patricia Clough (2007), "functions at the limit of the subject's identity, where there is a contest within subjectivity between mastery and disintegration: repeating near disintegration over and over again seemingly in order to regain integration and restore equilibrium" (p. 10). The continual collapse of mental stability, attachments, and meaning is the unfortunate outcome for many patients with harsh patterns of self-destruction.

Analytic conceptualizations of individual world destruction fantasies become especially pertinent for an understanding of the social imaginary of ruination. Mortimer Ostow (1988) has suggested that group myths of the end of the world often bind individuals together as the social belief in past or present dangers allows for common coherence: "[T]he individual apocalyptic, distressed by his perceived distance from reality, will grasp eagerly at the group apocalypse when that is presented to him, because it offers him not only the opportunity for discharge, but also validation of his delusion as a group sponsored pseudoreality" (p. 295). The subject's experience or belief in their own precariousness receives confirmation from the social realm, which produces the very validation of that precariousness in mediation. Further, Ostow wrote that

> during periods of great demoralization, whether occasioned by negative forces such as disease, famine, or oppression, or by intangible and paradoxical influences such as immoderate prosperity leading to excessive narcissism and a concurrent loss of the sense of communal obligation, the apocalyptic mechanism may be invoked. (p. 294)

These psychoanalytic insights provide another way into understanding the technological hypermediation of disaster iconography and discourse in the contemporary American moment, which relentlessly contributes to an ambient atmosphere of social vulnerability, anxiety, and alienation. In uncertain times, the media-corporate-state nexus supplies narratives of the end of the world to subjects who are quick to cling such narratives while they obliquely confirm lived experience of precariousness.

The decline of symbolic efficiency, remainderless destruction, and the end

Scholars often argue that the contemporary mediasphere is responsible for "the decline of symbolic efficiency" (Dean, 2002; Horsley, 2016; Žižek, 1999). This means that the global technocultural world of semio-capitalism produces such an overabundance of arguments and ideas, options and opinions that it becomes incredibly difficult to anchor individual identity or collective meaning in the social imaginary. The Invisible Committee (2017) provided an impression of a media environment wherein such a welter of words and images floods the social imaginary, depleting the symbolic, resulting in the fragmentation of truth and the loss of dominant national or cultural narratives:

> This world no longer needs explaining, critiquing, denouncing. We live enveloped in a fog of commentaries and commentaries on commentaries, of critiques and critiques of critiques of critiques, of revelations that don't trigger anything, other than revelations about the revelations. And this fog is taking away any purchase we might have on the world. (p. 8)

The decline of symbolic efficiency results from the excessive fabrication and circulation of information to such an extent that signifiers become more and more indeterminate. Overflowing amounts of information become a lack of information. When there is too much meaning, it reaches a threshold and becomes meaningless.

Colloquial media discourses and iconographies of the end of the world may also significantly contribute to the decline of symbolic efficiency. Derrida (1984) described the rhetorical condition of the end of the world in terms of remainderlessness, an unthinkable situation where there are no leftovers. In the death of the individual, traces are left behind, for instance, in the image, the name, the signature, the heritage. These are remainders, which anchor individual meaning to the symbolic after death. The individual's second death involves the dissipation of remainders until they fade to nothing. The second death is not a natural death, but the death of signification. Remainderless destruction is the notion of the beyond that is unthinkable and unknowable. It is pure nothingness. This notion also denotes the absolute death of meaning, the death of all significations as a totality, the ultimate second death of the signifier. This conceptualization of remainderless destruction overlaps with the Lacanian Real or that which escapes reality as the void beyond signification. This is not the real of reality, but the Real that defies articulation and haunts any attempt at representation. The premediation of nuclear war or mass death evokes traces of the real in the subject's encounter with mediation of remainderless destruction as threat. The death of meaning, this Real of the symbolic is consistently operative as a floating spectre within a social imaginary of ruination. The constant premediation of pending disaster leaves the subject in a state of existential crisis where meaning is sorely lacking. In other words, an atmosphere of the end brings about a crisis in meaning. It is this notion of the absolute death of meaning that directly contributes to the decline of symbolic efficiency. In the premonition of the end of the world, connotations of remainderless destruction come to the surface. What can anything mean when it will all become nothing in the end?

Not entirely unlike the patients with world destruction fantasies, subjectivity under the social imaginary of ruination coalesces into an ambiguous sense of anxiety

without object and without meaning. There is always the possibility that an unrepresentable threat may arrive, leaving no remainder. Established social symbolic structures begin to fade in strength and influence, leaving subjects with an increase in personal and collective immediacy to the Real. Hall (2012), writing about crime and deviance, underscored the vague threat involved in the decline of symbolic efficiency:

> The subject attempts to impose … order on what is essentially a vague threat that resists symbolization. It does not take a great leap of the imagination to see parallels here between the affectively reproduced 'vague threat' in the individual psyche and the culturally reproduced 'vague threat' of material impoverishment and social insignificance. … Here we are looking at the psychological root of the broader political tactic of objectless anxiety. … There is a lack in syntax rather than symbols, and therefore a lack of vital connections. (p. 197)

Simply put, subjects may have more trouble making links in the neoliberal capitalist mediasphere dominated with premonitions of ruin. One additional symptom of the social imaginary of ruination is embodied in Fredric Jameson's (2003) well-known quip, "that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism," which is also parallel to stating that subjects "imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world" (p. 76). Perhaps it really is easier for subjects to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, given the prominence of premediation and its proliferation of disaster across the social imaginary. How can thought go beyond this foreclosure of the future?

If the "end" has not yet happened, it can only be spoken of as an utterance, a representation of that which cannot be represented. Each actualization of ruination or disaster carries some confirmation of the propulsion toward the void. The end also refers to a result or goal that one seeks to complete. Here, the end implies desire and *jouissance* (pleasure). The end of the world has no specific signification, but rather a polysemetic slipperiness whereby the premediation of total disaster stands in for the end, which cannot be properly actualized. This is the end as a fragile fantasy, which supports a collective impression of fatalistic reality. What must be seen is that this repetitive logic of ends has been advanced as a tool of governance through precariousness as part of a broader social imaginary. If remainderless destruction posits the foreclosure of the future, perhaps what is needed is a catastrophic consciousness where the end of the world can be revealed not as a state to come, as in premediation, but as a repetition that has already arrived in the past. The beginning exists alongside the end. This is the enlightened logic of apocalypse: the perpetual end without an end. The catastrophes of neoliberal capitalism are everywhere. In the hyperproliferation of destruction under late capitalism, it is after the end of the world right now. There must be a collective discernment of radical possibilities whereby the end is always recognized as having already occurred. It is always already after the end. Only in this sense can the social imaginary of ruination convey the catastrophic future of neoliberal capitalism, suggesting the possibility for new alternatives to manifest through the subject's affective encounters with the end as distributed in mediation.

How will we begin again after the end that is now?

Notes

1. Reporters have noted since the Republican primaries prior to the 2016 presidential election that Trump's rhetoric involves a pattern of repeating divisive phrases, harsh words, and violent imagery, a technique "that American presidents rarely use, based on a quantitative comparison of his remarks and the news conferences of recent presidents, Democratic and Republican" (Healy & Haberman, 2015, para. 7). This linguistic repetition is a strategy that has a long history in advertising and propaganda where "ideologically useful accusations will stand merely on the basis of endless repetition, however ludicrous they may be" (Herman & Chomsky, 2002, p. 293).

2. Beyond the scope of this article, there is much more to be said regarding the end of the world in relation to anxieties surrounding gender in a post-Oedipal media landscape. Susan Faludi (1991, 1999, 2007) has written about the masculinity crisis in the United States and how this crisis has intensified as a result of deindustrialization and insecurities of terrorism. Following the collapse of the global economy in 2008, Hanna Rosin (2010) wrote a widely read article for *The Atlantic*, aptly titled "The End of Men," wherein she described a cultural landscape that one might now contextualize as the conditions for the emergence of toxic masculinity in populist politics embodied in Donald Trump's election: "[W]hat if the economics of the new era are better suited to women? Once you open your eyes to this possibility, the evidence is all around you. It can be found, most immediately, in the wreckage of the Great Recession, in which three-quarters of the 8 million jobs lost were lost by men. The worst-hit industries were overwhelmingly male and deeply identified with macho: construction, manufacturing, high finance. … [F]or the first time in history, the balance of the workforce tipped toward women, who now hold the majority of jobs. The working class, which has long defined our notions of masculinity, is slowly turning into a matriarchy" (Rosin, 2010, p. 55). The social imaginary of ruination might be partially understood as embodying a dominant masculine identification that is collectively imagined to be in shambles. The populist political reaction has been to spread ambient forms of misogyny in an attempt to shore up and maintain traditional gender categories that are under threat of dissolution (Blow, 2016; Sexton, 2016). Joanna Zylinska (2018) also highlights the implications of the end of the White Christian Man's dominance as the key subject in history.

3. Molly Worthen (2017) outlines Trump's popularity with evangelical Christians in the United States, a group who may have quite a different relationship to premonitions of apocalypse and the social imaginary of ruination that I am describing.

4. Media reports surrounding the possibility of catastrophic ecological disaster under Trump's mandate for climate change circulate a fear that the planet would no longer be inhabitable for human beings (Embury-Dennis, 2017).

5. The speeding up of mass extinctions and loss of biodiversity at an accelerated and unprecedented pace has been a topic of conversation among environmentalists (Plumer, 2019).

6. This countdown to the end is obviously a common trope in the aesthetics of crisis, whether it is the Y2K phenomenon or expiration of the Mayan calendar on December 21, 2012. Baudrillard (1996) hauntingly predicts, "[I]n the future we shall all be condemned to know in advance the date and detailed form of our deaths. So we shall all be in a countdown situation, in a situation of a programmed rundown of time. This stipulation of death within a finite period makes it a kind of time-bomb, a terrifying event" (p. 50).

7. A recent phenomenon that psychiatrists and psychotherapists are calling "Trump anxiety" characterizes the current American Zeitgeist that stems from premediation: "We've reached a weird, quiet agreement that the most potent force in [American] politics is, for the moment, a stew of unease, fear, rage, grief, helplessness and humiliation. … An unpleasant thought follows: that maybe the only thing that could relieve our national anxieties is something bad happening to us" (Abebe, 2017).

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