

Brains

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My family was keen on horror films, so I was indoctrinated at an early age and as a result, my tolerance for the undead is low. But at least the early ones were mindless and predictable, and you had to really inattentively fuck up to get bitten by one or at least be at the mall, therefore deserving it. Now they're out in nature. They hunt us in herds. They reek of fury. They co-operate. They move at speed, none of this slow shuffle. Now we are full-speed-Myer-stocktake-sale-ahead. If there was ever a sign that we have entered late-stage capitalism, it's this.

*It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism*¹ Mark Fisher stated, paraphrasing Frederic Jameson who was a little more expansive in his essay *Seeds of Time*. 'It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations. I have come to think that the word postmodern ought to be reserved for thoughts of this kind.'²

We can feel a little sorry for postmodernity, or we can attest to this *thoroughgoing deterioration*. I am intrigued by the insistent vagueness of these words. They lack the courage to name us as the cause of this particular effect. Our capitulations. Our blatant acceptance of the untenable role we play within this life-supporting system. Fisher considers it as part of the process of becoming human. That the 'failure to see, the involuntary process of overlooking material which contradicts the dominant stories which we tell ourselves is part of the ongoing 'editing process' through which what we experience as identity is produced.'³ In 1968, George Romero created the first of his *Living Dead* films as a critique of capitalism by showing us ourselves as undead. Not quite living, driven by a relentless-mindless-shuffle-of-insatiable-consumerism. It was an honourable attempt, but he underestimated our ability to cast ourselves as willing participant. To see it as a challenge instead of a cautionary tale.

Sarah Walker's exhibition and video work *Target Practice* position her in the improbable role of survivalist. The end is assuredly nigh, though conveniently on pause while she skills up a few more levels. She brings us on part of her journey through the relic of the vlog, providing evidence or advice for future generations. Or perhaps just to entertain a safely distanced social network audience. It's sort of the equivalent of scribbling your name on a wall in an abandoned building for whoever might happen along. Proof of existence, perhaps. Walker trundles through the survivalist's guidebook attempting to construct an effective exit strategy, but fundamentally only

¹ Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism*. 2008, p 1.

² Jameson, Fredric. *Seeds of Time*. 1994, Intro, p xii. Columbia University Press.

³ Fisher, Mark. *The Weird and the Eerie*. 2017, p 75.

succeeds in isolating herself from her community, ditching the loved ones and embracing the notion, if not the practice of self-sufficiency.

She's brutal with a bow and arrow. It's the chosen weapon of choice by the contemporary survivalist for its quietness and the ease with which one can make their own ammunition. Archery has been around since around 10,000BC. Oddly, so have gardens. I guess protecting your interests developed around the same time. Or the beginning of our co-dependence with technology. Here, it 'separates the human actor from the human cost'⁴ in a more effective way than most of our other tools have done. An effect which has only increased the farther we exist from our projectiles. The less tactility we exchange.

Look. I love an apocalypse as much as the next misanthropist. Bring me your tidal waves and hurricanes, your comets, and subterranean horrors. Bring me your defective planetary cores, your accelerated climate change, your extinction level events. I'm here for it. If the waves are monolithic and unforgiving, if we glaciare the entire northern hemisphere, if the fires melt the earth into stone, if the volcanoes sweep humanity from the face of the earth, I'm here for all of it. I'm tired. We're really bad at sorting out our miserable failings and I lack the imagination any more to fix anything close to this magnitude. I'm not alone.

We have collectively been waiting for the apocalypse ever since sludge #1 crawled from the primordial ooze, viewed its first shooting star and told sludge #2 all about it. Perhaps it's our tendency to exaggerate which started the idea, but it was religion which popularised it. Originally told as moral tales to keep the masses under control, eschatology is the original monster-under-the-bed practice. We've been telling it to each other to generate the fun version of anxiety since time began. 'In ancient religious traditions beyond Christianity — including Judaism, Islam and Buddhism — it is a common narrative that arises in moments of social and political crisis, as people try to process unprecedented or shocking events.'⁵ I guess living on its periphery for so many generations has taken some of the fun out of it. Now we're just all quietly terrified, shaking inside the shell of our thin delicate, penetrable skin and looking for a bunker to hook up with for the ultimate cuffing season.

What religion started, and capitalism nurtured, popular media glorified. Prepper culture buys into the dialogue with abandon and extends the nature of those 'conquest narratives [which] all follow what we might call heroic journeys or New Testament architectures.'⁶ Every *survivor vs everything* film or book that has ever been produced follows a predictable path of events: Recognise self as survivor > A period of challenge from the situation/environment, a lengthy but summarised Good Moral Struggle to earn the right to continuing survival > A moment of Respite: the Survivor comes across a horde of treasure/food/comfort and a safe environment in which they could choose to stay and see out the devastation > Inevitable rejection of safety in favour of continued participation in systemic breakdown (one is not a survivor unless one is surviving) >

⁴ Rushkoff, Douglas. *Survival of the Richest*. 2022, p 51.

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/02/us/coronavirus-apocalypse-religion.html>

⁶ Rushkoff, Douglas. *Survival of the Richest*. 2022, p 67.

More struggle. The struggle is the key, after all > Death/End of world/Chance to rebuild/Resignation.

Very rarely, though, does the apocalypse release us as entirely as the final images from the 1959 film *On the Beach* which show a series of dramatically unpopulated streets in Melbourne as final proof of the effects of nuclear war. It is a sanitised ending, no bodies, just a few pieces of paper drifting through the streets. Its inherent eeriness exists outside of time. There is no rot, no decay. Everything which could happen, has. Whoever is left to witness this apocalypse is likely inhaling the same air that killed everyone else and will soon follow. Out of sight is out of mind here. 'The longer we ignore the social, economic and environmental repercussions, the more of a problem they become. This in turn motivates even more withdrawal, more isolationism and apocalyptic fantasy...The cycle feeds itself.'⁷

I live in a funny little town. Last year a prepper store opened up on the main street across from the hunting store. It didn't survive for long, [which I will always find deeply funny, alongside the very notion of a prepper store. A commercial enterprise which sells you things in order to survive the eventual dissolution of society, which at this time, is most decidedly represented by the notion and existence of commercial enterprise. I mean, also, you can buy canned goods anywhere] and I only had one minor interaction with a prepper who was looking for their back door, but unfortunately knocked on mine instead.

Now, it's an interesting day when you're expecting the smiling face of the postman only to be confronted by a paranoid middle-aged white man in desert-storm camouflage carrying a large duffle stuffed with angular protuberances who examines you with great distrust while also trying to get into your building. We had a brief conversation where I had to convince him that I was not actually the prepper store he was looking for, while he insisted that I must be because his superior orienteering skills and geographic knowledge assured him that he was correct. After schooling him on the oft-deceptive intricacies of town planning, he eventually left. I offered him directions which he refused. I hope he got home safely. I was, it must be said, disappointed by the interaction.

The website knowpreparesurvive.com exists for men like this. And yes, men, for survival apparently, is a singularly manly pursuit. Sarah Walker has a lot more to contend with out there in the post-apocalypse landscape than she might have bargained on. I hope the ghillie suit works out.

The site is filled with imagery like ads for the latest end-of-the-world film:

He carries some basic supplies and lives by his survival skills.

[It's always a he. Always.]

There are no firearms in his world.

[Bummer dude, that sounds like a rough day. Also, *his* world. Yes.]

⁷ Rushkoff, Douglas. *Survival of the Richest*. 2022, p 9.

Society collapsed years ago.

[This is *the* penultimate moment for me. Because, of course it did, according to whatever your vision of Society is. To some of these men it collapsed with feminism. It collapsed before they were born. It collapsed when their father's fathers told them it did. It has collapsed in part a thousand times. It collapses every time someone else manages to secure a grain of equity. It collapses every time a woman doesn't return a smile. What a delicate bastard Society must be.]

There's no infrastructure in place to manufacture any new equipment.

[We can never trust the government, or the corporations, the neighbours, or anyone except ourselves. We can make our La-Z-Boy recliner chairs with built-in cup holders out of sticks and snare wire.]

*For him food is scarce, and if he wants to eat, he must hunt.*⁸

Knowpreparesurvive.com is only one out of a cesspit of survivalist websites, but I'm going to mock this one exclusively for their enthusiastically militarised graphics and excessive use of exclamation points. In any event, for a page about learning archery and selling shit, it's a bit dramatic, but I guess we're discussing theoretical life and death here. Apparently over 3 million people in the USA describe themselves as preppers, a figure I find distressing. They are well accommodated for. In addition to the on-grid world of the internet there are numerous books, tv series, workshops or forums which also exist, and which have assisted in the nurturing of a performative version of uber-masculinity. This in turn has 'intensified the crisis motif to cultivate anticipation of an apocalyptic event that promises a final resolution to white male alienation.'⁹

White men are having a rough time. National Geographic's reality tv series *Doomsday Preppers* offers 'a theatrical space to perform their feelings of rage and victimhood, deliver monologues about the collapse of civilization, model their armaments, rehearse paramilitary battles with post-apocalyptic marauders, and exhibit their masculine know-how.'¹⁰ It's only one out of so, so many.

I'm glad they have an outlet. Oh, and an arsenal. What could go wrong? Meanwhile, online, the developing correlative mentality of prepper and incel seems a match made in white supremacy heaven, both enacting the processes of re-masculinisation with the same fervour with which women undertook surgical re-virgination throughout the early 2000's. Something something gender panic something something. Or maybe even something something competitive super-binary genderfication something something. Everything always has to be a contest.

Apocalypse, after all, is about who can win. Capitalism is too. Both constructs require an endgame which distinguishes winners from losers. We really cannot understate their connection, or their mutual reliance on scarcity as a mechanism for control. We are currently surrounded by more *stuff* than has ever existed, producing more food waste than we ever have [about a third,

⁸ <https://knowpreparesurvive.com/gear/archery/8-reasons-preppers-learn-archery/>

⁹ Casey Ryan Kelly (2016) The man-pocalypse: *Doomsday Preppers* and the rituals of apocalyptic manhood, *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 36:2-3, 95-114.

¹⁰ Ibid.

worldwide of *everything* we produce. Over 1.3 billion tonnes. An inconceivable amount.¹¹], living longer than we ever have, pillaging from the planet like hungry pirates on a bender, yet have such an unadulterated fear of scarcity that we cannot even recognise its lack.

Take the recent covid pandemic [yes, we're still in it] where the big five US tech companies' 'combined market capitalization rose 50% to over \$8 trillion by the end of 2020....Each new strain of the virus led to another stock boost for the companies.'¹² This at a time when the virus attacked the most vulnerable, the least supported, the most exploited, the poorest workers. Meanwhile, fear of scarcity has led the increasing prepper population and its associated economy, where 'doomsday prepping is a \$500 million a year industry, driven by fears of terrorism, economic collapse, pandemics, natural disasters, and World War III.'¹³ The future has become 'less a thing we create through our present-day choices or hopes for humankind than a predestined scenario we bet on with our venture capital but arrive at passively.'¹⁴

Sarah Walker is in big trouble. She's destined to be. Our world has embedded within us a reliance on scarcity as a means of continuing consumer survival. Everything in her bug-out bag is geared towards the assumption that life as we know it will continue when everything about the apocalypse suggests that it enthusiastically won't. I give her maybe twelve hours. No offense.

Walker is playing at devastation, which is understandable. It's hard to comprehend the actual end of days when every day feels like a tipping point. We just don't have the kind of attention span to maintain the correct responses to imminent and continuing precarity. What we do know, however, and what I suspect she does too, is that contrary to the predominant survival ideology, it is us working together which will provide the possibility of not just subsisting but thriving. Walker is using *Target Practice* to laugh at our inability to take care of ourselves but also at our inability to give or ask for help when needed.

Scratch that, we're all in big trouble.

¹¹ FAO Save food Global Food Waste and Loss Initiative. Also, theworldcounts.com

¹² Rushkoff, Douglas. *Survival of the Richest*. 2022, p 43.

¹³ Feuer, Alan. "The Preppers NextDoor." *New York Times*, 26 Jan. 2013. Web. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/27/nyregion/the-doomsday-preppers-of-new-york.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>.

¹⁴ Rushkoff, Douglas. *Survival of the Richest*. 2022, p 7.