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Post-Ironic Aesthetics of the Apocalypse: From Christian Imaginaries to Digital Meme Culture

Abstract: Every known culture has constructed an apocalyptic imaginary, and every religion includes an end-of-the-world scenario. The human impulse to envision the end is rooted in the awareness of our mortality. However, apocalyptic imaginaries evolve with the social transformations, reflecting the core anxieties and symbolic frameworks of their times. This paper aims to investigate how the aesthetic of apocalypse in Western countries has changed in recent years, through the modification of apocalyptic narratives emerging from social memes. “Gen Z is so unserious”, “Gen Z is only afraid of job and pregnancies”, “Historians will skip our generation” are some of the trending comments under videos of people facing catastrophes (both climatic and geopolitical) with irony and a cynical serenity. “When you are struggling with your excel file but see a nuclear mushroom cloud out the window” and a large smile of relief appears on the face of the creator, with the song “Happy Xmas (War is Over)” by John Lennon in the background. These are not signs of disengagement, but collective coping mechanisms of the new generations, an integral part of a new “post-ironic aesthetic” that welcomes tragedy and makes it viral. Three interwoven dynamics are central to this transformation: a) TikTok and the irony saturation; b) trauma normalization in the social narrative; c) the experience of crisis not as an exception, but as an ongoing condition. These factors will be examined in relation to cultural and aesthetic frameworks, showing how the contemporary representation of the apocalypse reveals not just a stylistic shift, but a deeper transformation in the way societies process fear, anxiety and meaning in the digital age.

Introduction

Over the last decade, the apocalyptic imagination has re-emerged as one of the dominant frameworks through which collective fears and global instability are represented. From climate anxiety to geopolitical conflicts and the spectre of artificial intelligence, contemporary culture seems obsessed with its own end. Yet this obsession no longer speaks the language of prophets or theologians: it circulates through memes, TikToks, and viral trends. What once appeared as revelation has now become repetition, endlessly reproduced across screens. Eugen Weber observed that “apocalypse long furnished the key to human history. Even if today it provides only a plain folks’ gloss on history, it deserves serious attention” (Carey, 1999, p. 10). This paper agrees with the first part, but not the second. The apocalypse still furnishes the key to human history—only its grammar has changed. This paper investigates how apocalyptic imaginary has evolved in the digital era through what I call post-ironic aesthetics. While the term “post-irony” occasionally appears in media studies, it has rarely been examined in aesthetic terms. I use it to describe a mode that neutralizes tragedy through humor—an oscillation between sincerity and cynicism, detachment and despair. In this sense, post-ironic aesthetics transforms irony into both shield and symptom. Gen Z, the generation born between 1997 and 2012, provides a paradigmatic case. Having grown up amid economic precarity, climate collapse, and the collective trauma of COVID-19, Gen Z has been shaped by perpetual crisis. Its cultural production—especially in digital spaces—reveals how catastrophe is metabolized through humor and self-reflexivity. As noted by Zeng and Abidin, “young people’s collective generational identification is a symptom of being subjected to specific societal inequities and oppressions” (Zeng, Abidin, 2021, p. 4).

Irony here is not apathy but overexposure—the psychic response of a generation that has lived too long beside disaster. Digital platforms are not neutral in this process. “As technologies change,” writes Tufekci, “they alter the architectures of visibility, access, and community” (Tufekci, 2017, p. 119). The same can be said for aesthetics: the apocalypse has migrated from the theological to the algorithmic—from Revelation to recommendation. Within this environment, humor becomes a survival strategy. Gen Z’s ironic sensibility often embodies the Italian phrase *ridere per non piangere*—“laughing so you don’t cry”—a laughter that neither denies pain nor transcends it, but renders it shareable. Memes and short videos function like miniature artworks: playful yet morbid, comic yet catastrophic—the new *Dance of Death* of our digital age. Against this background, the paper asks: how has the aesthetic of the apocalypse been transformed by digital media, and what does this reveal about our collective relation to fear, hope, and meaning? The first section reconstructs the traditional logic of apocalyptic representation, from Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei* to Dürer’s and Meidner’s visual catastrophes. The second analyses the emergence of post-ironic aesthetics within digital culture, where humor and cognitive dissonance structure the viral circulation of catastrophe. The final section focuses on the post-COVID moment, when irony became saturated, trauma normalized, and crisis permanent. The apocalypse, once a revelation of the end, has become the everyday form of its postponement. In the world of infinite scroll, we no longer await the Last Judgment—we refresh it. This shift marks not only a change in media form but in our collective capacity to imagine closure; post-ironic aesthetics signal the exhaustion of revelation itself.

1. Traditional Representations of the Apocalypse

Throughout Western history, apocalyptic narratives have offered a symbolic and aesthetic framework for confronting fear, loss, and crisis. From the earliest Judeo-Christian texts to the frescoes of Orvieto and the Sistine Chapel, the apocalypse has never been merely a prophecy of destruction but a language for representing anxiety and restoring meaning. Written in times of persecution, the Book of Revelation translated political trauma into a cosmic narrative of redemption. As McGinn observes, apocalyptic thought is structured around three key convictions: a unified conception of history, pessimism toward the present and its imminent crisis, and the belief in the final triumph of good over evil (McGinn, 1979). In this sense, the apocalypse is both a theology of crisis and a theology of meaning. The patristic tradition reinterpreted this structure in moral terms. In *De Civitate Dei*, Augustine transformed eschatology into an interior horizon of ethical responsibility: the end was no longer an external event to await, but an inner orientation of the will. “No longer imminent, the end is immanent,” as Kermode later summarized (Kermode, 2000, p. 25). Medieval and early modern art expanded this narrative visually, transforming terror into beauty. The frescoes of Signorelli and Michelangelo aestheticized judgment; Dürer’s *Apocalypsis cum figuris* (1498) translated Revelation into reproducible images, turning divine prophecy into a shared, almost “viral” spectacle. In Dürer, apocalypse became an event of mass perception: theology mediated through technology. By the early twentieth century, Ludwig Meidner’s *Apocalyptic Landscapes* (1912–13) transformed this vision into psychological expressionism. His collapsing cities and burning skies reflected not divine justice but social disintegration—the apocalypse internalized as modern anxiety. From Dürer to Meidner, the end of the world moved from revelation to representation, from salvation to symptom. Kermode, in *The Sense of an Ending*, codified this shift by showing that apocalypse functions as a narrative mechanism: a way for humans to impose order on temporal chaos. “Almost any excuse,” he wrote, “is good enough to trigger apocalyptic anxiety,” because imagining the end is how we give time meaning (Kermode, 2000). Berger later challenged this existential reading, arguing that apocalyptic writing is not merely a projection of mortality but a response to historical trauma: “Apocalyptic writings respond to social crisis; they are not primarily expressions of a universal wish for closure” (Berger, 1999, p. 34). Trauma and apocalypse mirror one another—both shatter conti-

nuity and demand reconstruction through narrative. This therapeutic dimension explains the endurance of apocalyptic forms. From the *Book of Daniel* to nuclear and climate imaginaries, apocalypse serves as a mechanism of coping through storytelling. As Malcolm Bull noted, “infinite duration is difficult to conceive,” so imagining the end becomes a cognitive necessity (Bull, 1995, p. 1). Whether in theology, art, or digital culture, apocalyptic imagery mediates between despair and hope. Revelation’s function was never solely predictive, but revelatory: to illuminate the meaning of suffering within history. From Augustine to Meidner, from Dürer’s woodcuts to Berger’s trauma theory, the apocalyptic narrative transforms fear into intelligibility. Its forms evolve, but its purpose remains: to reveal the logic of crisis, even when that logic is the one of the collapse. As McGinn asks, have we truly abandoned apocalyptic thinking, or merely replaced it with “scientific surrogates”? (McGinn, 1979). The question bridges past and present: from parchment to pixel, from the sacred manuscript to the viral meme, the apocalypse still mirrors its age. Only now, the mirror is algorithmic.

2. Apocalypse during the Digital Era: From Revelation to Viral Irony

2.1. From Prophecy to Simulation

If McGinn’s threefold structure of apocalyptic imagination—unity of history, pessimism about the present, and hope for vindication – can still serve as a hermeneutic key, then the twenty-first century presents a peculiar case. These elements persist, but in distorted form. The unity of history has become algorithmic synchronization; pessimism about the present, a “memeable” mood; and the hope for redemption, an ironic posture. In the 20th century, Frances Carey already recognized how “symbolism, futurism, and expressionism provided vehicles for imagining apocalyptic ideas. [...] The First World War became the crucible for all manner of apocalyptic and messianic apprehensions” (Carey, 1999, p. 279). Dürer’s *Apocalypse* woodcuts and Ludwig Meidner’s *Apocalyptic Landscapes* expressed that same fusion of anxiety and revelation: catastrophe as revelation of truth. Their aesthetic was tragic and prophetic. Ours is comic and viral. The millennial promise has become static: a “millennium without future,” a paradise of plenty that brings no pleasure. This marks the threshold of what Broderick calls the *post-apocalyptic condition*: a culture that “has learned to stop worrying and love—if not the bomb—a (post-holocaust) future” (Broderick, 1993, p. 363). Apocalypse has become permanent background noise—a mode of being rather than a moment in time. Baudrillard’s insight that “everything has already become nuclear, far-away, vaporized” (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 34) perfectly anticipates our contemporary condition: an apocalypse on replay, emptied of revelation and saturated with spectacle. In *The Transparency of Evil* he predicted a society of “hyper-relations,” where communication becomes “more social than the social itself” (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 12). Social media have fulfilled this prophecy: the “network” has replaced transcendence with circulation, the symbolic with the algorithmic. In this sense, digital apocalypse is not a prediction but an interface—an endlessly updated image of the end.

2.2. The Viral Aesthetic: From Shock to Meme

Susan Sontag once noted that shock has become one of the most important criteria of value and incentives to consumption (Sontag, 2003). In the age of infinite scroll, shock is no longer exceptional but structural: tragedy must be viral to exist. This defines the aesthetic condition of post-irony – catastrophe as both message and entertainment. As Richard Dawkins theorized in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), the “meme” acts as a cultural replicator. Digital culture, however, has turned this metaphor into infrastructure. Memes now form the basic units of meaning production within the memescape – “evolving tapestries of self-referential texts collectively created, circulated, and transformed by participants online” (Phillips & Milner, 2017, p. 30). They are hybrid artefacts—humorous, political, tragic—whose circulation itself constitutes the aesthetic event.

As Goriunova (2014, p. 55) observes, memes emerge “in a grassroots manner through networked media” and gain global traction through virality and remix. Viral reproduction is thus not incidental but essential to post-ironic aesthetics: a digital apocalypse that fails to spread is not apocalyptic at all. TikTok epitomizes this logic. As Divon and Eriksson Krutrök (2023) show, “users translate trauma into content and transform the profound gravity of war via templates for content creation” (TikTok(ing) Ukraine, 2023, p. 120). Catastrophe becomes a short, affective performance—humorous, ironic, stylized. Virality replaces mourning; engagement replaces comprehension. Baudrillard’s “viral” once meant contamination, not popularity, yet the analogy endures: “Bodies and minds are irradiated by signals and images,” he warned, and this culture “produces the most murderous viruses” (1993, p. 37). In the digital apocalypse, circulation is both the symptom and the disease. This aesthetic logic becomes particularly evident in the viral trends circulating on TikTok and other short-form video platforms, where apocalypse appears less as an event to be feared than as a collective joke to be shared. After a moment of geopolitical tension, in June 2025, a recurring format featuring the caption “*The world when it’s almost my turn to be an adult*” set to Kesha’s *Die Young* or *Blow*, or Nicki Minaj’s *Starships*, while clips of intercontinental bombings or dystopian video-game footage play in the background—became viral. Variations include “*Summer 2025 is going to be amazing—World leaders:*” accompanied by *Party Rock Anthem*, transforming the imminence of global war into a party montage. The comment sections articulate the same tone of weary detachment:

“Why don’t presidents just lvl bro?”

“My first world war, kinda nervous.”

“This generation panicked more when it almost lost TikTok.”

“Guys we can’t do this, I’m not in the mood.”

“I THINK WE DIDN’T THANK BEYONCÉ ENOUGH.”

Such jokes mark the distance between political catastrophe and everyday affect. They turn fear into collective play, what Berger might call the *exhibition* rather than the *revelation* of crisis. Instead of unveiling divine meaning, these micro-performances expose the absurdity of a world in which global annihilation has become just another content genre. Another example is a viral meme showing a person struggling with an Excel spreadsheet, suddenly smiling with relief as a nuclear mushroom cloud appears outside the window—set to John Lennon’s *Happy Xmas (War Is Over)*. The incongruity between sentimental pacifism and comic resignation epitomizes the affective dissonance of post-irony: catastrophe as punchline. Recent environmental disasters have also been absorbed by this same logic. During *Hurricane Milton* (October 2025), users recycled Michael Jackson’s *Earth Song* or danced to *Here Comes the Hurricane, Legendary Katrina* while voguing in front of storm footage. California wildfires generated edits where flames illuminated ironic reenactments of *The Hunger Games* speech—“The fire is catching! And if we burn, you burn with us!”—quoted verbatim in the comments. Even explicitly eschatological events, such as the viral belief that the *Rapture* would occur on *September 23rd*, became material for satire. TikTokers mocked US-Americans selling their possessions or teachers allegedly releasing students early “so they wouldn’t hit the ceiling when lifted to Heaven”. The mix of sincerity and ridicule condensed the very essence of digital apocalyptic discourse: the need to make fun of what terrifies us, precisely because no other reaction feels possible. If, as Jameson argues, each cultural form is an imaginary resolution to a real contradiction, these memes function as symbolic compromises for a generation that experiences crisis as both omnipresent and unmanageable. They aestheticize exhaustion, transforming fear into shareable irony – *laughing so you do not cry* at the end of the world.

2.3. Post-Irony and Cognitive Dissonance

Why does post-irony dominate our relation to catastrophe? The answer may lie in the psychology of *cognitive dissonance*. As Leon Festinger (1957) demonstrated, when people hold two con-

flicting cognitions—as awareness of threat and inability to act—they experience acute discomfort and attempt to reduce it. In the digital era, irony performs this regulatory function: it transforms unbearable awareness into bearable laughter. The collapse between tragedy and comedy is not new. As O’Leary observed, apocalyptic discourse itself can be read through “frames of acceptance,” tragic or comic (O’Leary, 1994, p. 200). The comic frame offers symbolic relief from evil through laughter and distance. In the context of social media, this relief becomes automated: scrolling replaces catharsis. The post-ironic meme is the 21st century’s *comic apocalypse*—the laughter that masks powerlessness. Here the insights of Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* become essential (Berlant, 2011). Gen Z’s ironic apocalyptic humor is not mere superficiality but a form of affective survival. “Cruel optimism” names the attachment to fantasies that sustain us precisely when they prevent our flourishing. Apocalyptic memes work in this way: laughing at the end of the world gives a sense of agency and control, yet this same laughter normalizes crisis. Post-ironic aesthetics thus function as both *coping mechanism* and *symptom of paralysis*. This double movement also resonates with Virilio’s notion of the “integral accident”: every new technology invents its own catastrophe. Social media’s integral accident is the viralization of disaster—the transformation of collective trauma into entertainment. The apocalyptic meme is a miniature catastrophe loop: it anesthetizes panic through repetition, transforming horror into habit.

2.4. *The End Without Revelation*

Danowski and De Castro wrote that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (Danowski and De Castro, 2017). Jameson argues that the utopian impulse—the cognitive capacity to imagine transformation—has collapsed under late capitalism. What remains is its photographic negative: a proliferation of dystopian and apocalyptic imaginaries. The digital apocalypse is the visual form of this exhaustion (Jameson, 2005). Žižek, in *Living in the End Times*, describes the affective consequence of this collapse: we now “live inside the end,” exposed to endless interruptions that destroy symbolic meaning (Žižek, 2010, p. 292). Berger had already diagnosed this transformation in literary terms: the *post-apocalyptic* is no longer a genre, but a *narrative condition*—a way of writing and feeling in the aftermath of trauma. In this landscape, irony replaces prophecy. As Kumar puts it, “postmodernists take refuge in irony and a sort of juvenile frivolity,” expressing boredom rather than belief (Kumar in Bull, 1995, p. 215). The apocalypse no longer announces a new world; it loops the old one. The revelation has been replaced by refresh. This mutation of the apocalyptic imaginary reveals something fundamental about our era. What was once the promise of transcendence has become an aesthetic of circulation. What was once revelation has become repetition. The digital apocalypse is not the end of history but the endless rendering of its image.

3. *Post-COVID continuity and the viralization of trauma*

Having outlined the structural logic of viral irony, the following section explores how this logic crystallized after the pandemic, when irony became both omnipresent and exhausted. If irony was once a rhetorical tool to mark distance, today it risks collapsing under the weight of its own ubiquity. TikTok, perhaps more than any other platform, has transformed irony from a discursive stance into an aesthetic grammar. Through its short-loop format, algorithmic personalization, and participatory affordances such as duets and stitches, the app rewards immediacy, imitation, and repetition—three principles that perfectly fit the logic of post-irony. Every tragedy can become a template; every emotional response, a sound. As Divon and Eriksson Krutrök notes, “users leverage TikTok’s technological features to create meme-based templates for communicating the realities of warfare,” turning trauma into an audiovisual vernacular (Divon and Eriksson Krutrök, 2023, p. 119). These “platform vernaculars,” as Gibbs et al. describe them, are genres of communication born from the affordances of the medium itself (Divon and Eriksson Krutrök, 2023, p. 124). TikTok’s grammar encourages an expressive simultaneity where sincerity and mockery

coexist. A user can show the ruins of a bombed building, add a pop song, overlay a caption like “POV: waiting for the world to end,” and generate thousands of likes. The effect is one of *affective dissonance*: the content oscillates between empathy and detachment, horror and play. This ambivalence is precisely what defines post-ironic aesthetics—the capacity to inhabit contradiction without resolving it. “Beyond its features for video production,” Divon and Eriksson Krutrök continue, “the platform’s powerful audiovisual grammar of memes redefines conventional coping mechanisms by allowing trauma to be explored through play, subversion, and performative affect” (Divon and Eriksson Krutrök, 2023, p. 125). From this perspective, TikTok can be seen as the ideal medium for the post-ironic condition. Its algorithmic logic dissolves hierarchy and context, placing a war clip next to a recipe tutorial, a natural disaster beside a dance challenge. In Virilio’s terms, this acceleration of image circulation produces a state where catastrophe becomes consumable entertainment: the disaster aestheticized through speed. Virilio wrote that “we live in the shadow of all kinds of bombs that don’t go off—virtual catastrophes that never take place” (Virilio, 2000, p. 26). TikTok’s endless scroll performs this latency of disaster; the apocalypse is always one swipe away, perpetually imminent and perpetually deferred.

The three dynamics of post-COVID apocalyptic aesthetics

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point in the representation of catastrophe. If pre-pandemic digital irony still relied on detachment, the prolonged isolation and global uncertainty of the lockdown years made irony implode inward, transforming it into a collective coping mechanism. In the aftermath, three intertwined dynamics crystallized and accelerated the rise of a post-ironic aesthetic of the apocalypse: (a) the saturation of irony as the dominant cultural language; (b) the normalization of trauma through social media narration; and (c) the transformation of crisis from a discrete event into a continuous state of being.

These dynamics do not merely describe a generational mood – they reveal a structural change in the aesthetic economy of catastrophe. Again, what Berger called the *revelation of the crisis* has turned, in the digital age, into its *exhibition*: the apocalypse no longer unveils hidden truths but displays the already-known horror of everyday life.

(a) The saturation of irony

The overproduction of ironic content—what we might call the *saturation of irony*—has exhausted its distancing power. On TikTok, irony no longer functions as critique but as affective infrastructure: it binds users together through shared absurdity. “Gen Z is so unserious” became a viral tagline precisely because it condensed this paradoxical mood. The unseriousness is not ignorance but exhaustion—a way to survive a timeline that alternates war footage, climate collapse, and celebrity gossip. Irony here performs the same psychic role that Berger attributes to apocalypse: it reveals crisis by exhibiting it. In *After the End*, Berger writes that “apocalypse is a semantic alchemical process: it burns and distills signs and referents into new precipitates” (Berger, 1999, p. 7). The meme economy performs exactly this transmutation: tragedy becomes trend, despair becomes style. This saturation has moral consequences. As Chouliaraki in *The Ironic Spectator* notes, “irony refers to a disposition of detached knowingness” that, when confronted with suffering, “complicates the posture of cool cynicism” by constantly oscillating between scepticism and empathy (Chouliaraki, 2013, p. 2). In the case of TikTok, this oscillation is accelerated to the point of collapse: the same user can laugh at the prospect of the apocalypse and cry over a cat in the next video. The result is not indifference but an overexposure that dulls sensitivity. The more we share, the less we feel.

(b) Trauma normalization and the banality of catastrophe

Social media might have not only transformed how trauma is shared, but how it is felt. The new culture of connectivity “influences human interaction on an individual and community level,

while the worlds of online and offline are increasingly interpenetrating” (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 4). Platforms impose *sharing* and *following* as social values (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 20–21), making virality an imperative. The aestheticization of pain becomes unavoidable, because every experience—grief, fear, war—must be made visible to exist. What once required solemnity now demands engagement. The logic of “likes” turns suffering into performative affect. In this sense, TikTok’s participatory culture replaces testimony with iteration: trauma no longer needs to be narrated, only remixed. As Divon and Eriksson Krutrök observes, “videos become recycled and repurposed for new memeified contexts, reconceptualizing the temporal boundaries of cultural trauma” (Divon and Eriksson Krutrök, 2023, p. 132). Trauma becomes recyclable content. Virilio’s “aesthetics of disappearance” returns here in a new form: the disappearance of meaning within the excess of representation. Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* helps articulate this paradox. “Crisis is not exceptional to history,” she writes, “but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what’s overwhelming” (Berlant, 2011, p. 10). Post-COVID media cultures exemplify this “crisis ordinariness.” The end of the world is no longer an event but a condition; catastrophe has become the background noise of daily life. Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism* captures the affective consequences: “They know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can’t do anything about it... reflexive impotence” (Fisher, 2009, p. 21). The meme that jokes “the world when it’s finally my turn to be an adult” encapsulates this mixture of awareness and resignation: the laughter is real, but so is the despair.

(c) *The continuity state: from crisis to condition*

Berger had already foreseen this transition. In *After the End* he wrote that “modernity is preoccupied by a sense of crisis... yet this sense now coexists with another: that the catastrophe has already occurred, and what remains is only a complex form of stasis” (Berger, 1999, p. XIII). His insight describes perfectly the post-COVID feeling of continuity. Since the pandemic, new global emergencies—from the war in Ukraine to the Middle Eastern crisis and the accelerating environmental collapse—have reinforced this sense of permanent instability. The pandemic marked the moment when the apocalypse ceased to be imagined as *the end* and became instead *the structure* of experience. As Žižek put it in *Living in the End Times*, the end is not an event but “a situation”—a permanent existential horizon (Žižek, 2010). This continuity state explains why Gen Z’s apocalyptic humor feels simultaneously hopeful and hopeless. In the meme “When I look outside the window,” users pair footage of natural disasters with cheerful pop songs, captioned as if awaiting some cinematic finale. Another viral trend—“This summer is gonna be amazing”—juxtaposes cheerful captions with scenes of geopolitical tension or climate chaos. The humor arises from the collision of tone and content, an aesthetic of dissonance that mirrors the structure of crisis itself. These trends are not trivial; they constitute an archive of affect. They document how a generation metabolizes fear through irony, transforming the unrepresentable into the shareable. The meme “Gen Z is so unserious,” for instance, is not only a joke but a diagnosis: unseriousness as collective coping. In this sense, digital apocalyptic humor performs the same cultural function that Dürer’s *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* or Meidner’s *Apocalyptic Landscapes* once performed: it visualizes catastrophe in forms that are both terrifying and strangely beautiful. Where Dürer’s engraving froze the moment of divine judgment, TikTok loops it indefinitely. The apocalypse has no end because the scroll has none. If Kermode saw in apocalyptic storytelling a way to “make sense of the end”, today’s post-ironic apocalypse reveals the impossibility of closure. The meme offers no revelation, only repetition. Yet, following McGinn, even this repetition sustains a structure of meaning: the conviction that time is still related to eternity, even if eternity now takes the form of an infinite feed. The viralization of trauma, then, is not merely a symptom of numbness but a new aesthetic response to a world of constant crisis. Irony becomes both anesthetic and analgesic: it dulls the pain while allowing us to

live with it. What was once a revelation of the end has become the ordinary form of survival within its endless deferral.

Conclusion

Returning to the implicit but crucial question—does it still make sense to speak of “apocalyptic representation” today, given how radically its narrative and symbolic structure have changed?—the answer is yes. The apocalypse remains a profoundly human construct, a symbolic form that mirrors both the fears and the survival strategies of its time. Across history, it has served as a grammar of crisis: a way of turning disorder into meaning. To follow its transformations is to trace the history of our collective imagination – from the eschatological hope of Revelation to the digital irony of the meme. As McGinn observed, apocalyptic thinking is not merely an “aesthetic of crisis,” but a way of conceiving history as a meaningful totality—a narrative that moves toward judgment and renewal (McGinn, 1979). In the digital age, this teleological tension persists, though stripped of transcendence. The apocalypse no longer points toward the “New Jerusalem”; it loops endlessly in our feeds. Revelation becomes repetition: wars, disasters, and collapses circulate not as prophecy but as performance. What changes is not the essence of apocalypse but its medium and affective logic. If earlier epochs externalized the end in mythic or religious forms, the digital age internalizes it within everyday aesthetics. The infinite scroll becomes the new eschatological time—a temporality of waiting without arrival. Berger’s idea that “apocalypse and trauma are congruent” is particularly relevant here. Digital apocalyptic humor performs the same psychic function that religious eschatology once provided: the symbolic domestication of fear. Yet the tone has changed. The ironic memes or TikTok clips transform catastrophe into play, laughter, and repetition – mechanisms of emotional regulation that mirror the impossibility of mourning. Where Revelation offered cosmic consolation, the digital apocalypse offers coping through sharing. Following Tufekci’s insight that changing technologies reshape the “architectures of visibility, access, and community,” we may extend this to aesthetics (Tufekci, 2017). Platforms such as TikTok or Instagram are not neutral tools: they are the new stages of revelation, where circulation replaces transcendence and visibility replaces vision. Within this structure, Gen Z’s post-ironic humor crystallizes a key affective shift. Its logic corresponds to what in Italian we call *ridere per non piangere* – “laughing so you don’t cry.” It expresses an adaptive response that transforms despair into endurance. Irony becomes not denial but metabolism. The meme functions as a secular ritual of survival, acknowledging helplessness while preserving a fragile sense of agency. The post-ironic aesthetics of apocalypse thus expose the affective double bind of the present: the exhaustion of utopian imagination and the simultaneous need to make sense of the end – even if only through laughter. Yet, as Berlant’s notion of *cruel optimism* reminds us, the very means that help us endure crisis—humor, irony, connection—also entrench it. We laugh together, but remain stuck.

Studying these dynamics is not mere cultural curiosity; it reveals how meaning, emotion, and community are being reconfigured in an era of permanent emergency. The post-COVID landscape has normalized catastrophe. Crises no longer rupture experience but become its background, absorbed into the aesthetics of everyday life. As Berger foresaw, “modernity’s ceaseless activity is only a complex form of stasis”: an apocalypse without end, where revelation turns into repetition and crisis into continuity.

In the end, the apocalypse remains a privileged mirror of human thought—not because it predicts the future, but because it reveals what a society cannot bear to articulate directly. In the 21st century, the mirror has changed form: from sacred vision to scrolling screen, from revelation to repetition, from prophecy to parody. We laugh at the end of things not out of indifference, but because laughter is the only gesture left to remind us we are still here.

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