

*Media Construction of Apocalypse:
Halley's comet and the end of Mayan
calendar through the lens of discourse analysis*

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Abstract

The research paper deals with media representation of apocalyptic predictions. It aims to describe how the apocalypse is represented / constructed in media discourse and what functions can the apocalyptic predictions perform. The theoretical background is highly interdisciplinary: the research was formed and inspired by concepts of Carl Gustav Jung's analytical psychology and by the historical context of the apocalyptic visions, including contemporary theories of collapse. Moreover, the paper connects classic anthropological conceptualisations of ritual, as well as the psychoanalytical/sociological notion of ontological security, to the media-apocalyptic seriality. The research paper employs discourse analytical approach suggested by James Paul Gee, enhanced by selected Jungian categories, for in-depth comparative analysis of printed and online media texts focused on the return of Halley's comet in 1910 and the end of Mayan calendar in 2012. The paper suggests that – by various forms of ritualizing the apocalyptic events' prediction – the media have the potential to symbolically revitalize the society and strengthen ontological security of its members. The objects of prediction (the comet and the calendar in this case) can actually serve as objects of projection of collectively unconscious anxieties, activated by social-political context. However, the research suggests that the media discourse on apocalypse articulates a historically invariable cause of the apocalypse – the self-destructive tendencies of the human race.

Keywords: apocalypse, apocalyptic prediction, collapse, Jung, collective unconscious, projection, discourse analysis

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Introduction

„Disappointed the world didn't end? Fret not, there's another apocalypse on the way...“ the website of *Daily Mirror* assured on December 21st 2012 (Mirror.co.uk 2012/12/21). The electronic version of *The Independent* entertained its audience by the headline „Viking apocalypse: End of the world predicted to happen on Saturday (but don't cancel your weekend plans yet)“ (Independent.co.uk 2014/2/19). The same apocalyptic event had been mediatized also by the online version of a popular Czech weekly *Reflex* at the end of November 2013: „A new date of the end of the World has been set, 22nd February 2014, when an apocalypse comes according to Vikings“ (Reflex.cz 2013/11/30). Apparently, humankind managed to survive both the predicted events. However, these examples alert us that predictions of the end of the world are a globally widespread and regularly occurring media and social phenomenon.

This paper examines discursive construction/representation¹ of apocalyptic visions in the media. The aim of the paper is to shine new light on these predictions, to pose and address the question why they occur with most probably increasing frequency: is there any pleading or urgent message behind their frequent occurrence and beyond their literal sense?

This study was exploratory and interpretative in nature, based on analyzing media coverage of two events that triggered the media discourse about the possibility of the end of the world: the return of Halley's comet near the Earth in 1910, when a collision of the two celestial bodies and/or contamination of the Earth's atmosphere by cyan in the comet's tail was predicted by astronomers (among others, by influential Camille Flammarion), and the end of Mayan calendar in December 2012, when various forms of catastrophe were expected by visionaries and thousands of their followers². The research aims at (1) grasping discursive mechanisms of media construction of apocalypse; (2) the descriptive level of analysis in combination of several interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives should offer some insight into the relation of the apocalyptic visions in media to crises of complex societies. Moreover, the discursive comprehension will enable me to (3) discuss the question whether and how media construct the causes of the predicted apocalypse and methods of its delay as historically invariable.

After briefly outlining the interdisciplinary theoretical background of the research I shall put these goals in the concrete terms of research questions, emerging from the theoretical concepts and literature review. In the first part of the paper I shall also introduce particular type of discourse analysis, selected (and adjusted) as the method of studying media representation of apocalyptic predictions, and shortly mention the research sample. In the reminder of the paper I will present some of the main research

¹ The research is based on the constructivist approach to representation (see e.g. Hall 1997 and below) – therefore I am using the terms „representation“ and „construction“, both referring to meaning, as synonyms.

² I have chosen the two cases for two reasons: their time distance and different base and character of the predictions (i.e. astronomical versus mayistic/esoteric). The time distance and substantive difference of the events should allow keeping the comparison of media representation of apocalyptic prediction freed of homogeneity of the types of predicted apocalypse and their social-political circumstances.

findings with representative examples of the analysed media articles and, what is more important, I will point out several unexpected and potentially significant motives.

Theoretical-methodological base

Contexts of apocalypse

The idea of the end of the world - whether the universe, the Earth or the human civilization – and therefore also existence of media texts about the eschatological conception has proved to be historically universal in European and American civilization. The notion of the end of the world, usually followed by a new beginning, is firmly embodied in Jewish-Christian mythological tradition, and also codified in the *Books of Prophets* or the *Revelation of Saint John the Divine* (Bible 2012; Weber 1999; Delumeau 1999).

However, the notion of apocalypse is ideologically liquid: it tends to be filled with social and political content of the day. For example, in recent years, the Devil's trap has been believed to reside in new technologies such as microchips, satellites and bar codes, or in some forms of political-economical establishment, e.g. trusts and international organizations, introducing new level of Satan's capability to control people. The threat of an extensive ecological disaster brought about by human irresponsibility becomes another powerful driving force of apocalyptic predictions (Weber 1999). However, the ideological volatility does not mean that this secularized eschatology ceased to employ biblical and religious metaphors as well as traditional content – for instance, the late modern apocalyptic notions keep raising feelings of guilt and maintains the self-disciplinary appeal (in foucauldian sense) to the recipients of apocalyptic messages (Methmann – Rothe 2012). This unity in diversity inspires the question if – despite the ideological variability concerning the specific filling of the apocalyptic conception – there are some discursive mechanisms of construction of apocalyptic visions shared by media of different times, as well as the question whether and how the media construct any cause of apocalypse as historically invariable, spreading through different political and social settings.

As some writers (e.g. Delumeau 1999, Weber 1999) have observed, emerging rather regularly from thirteenth century on, the waves of eschatological fear expressed in predictions of the end of the world usually coincide with social and political crises such as riots, wars or epidemics. Thus, historiography suggests that mediated apocalyptic visions usually emerge more frequently in the societies that are having serious troubles (Weber 1999; Bárta 2011). Several major historians investigating collapses of complex societies - like Oswald Spengler (2010), Joseph Tainter (2009) or Jared Diamond (2008) – indeed share the conviction that the Western society is gradually drawing near the moment of collapse. The vivid scenarios (often similar to pop-cultural adaptations of the apocalyptic predictions) they depict, based on observing individual components of decline, not only suggest some factors that could intensify apocalyptic fear, but they can be also interpreted as an illustration of the fact that not even the scientific discourse avoids the expansion of the apocalyptic fear. However, with regard to the media, the question remains – do the mediated visions of the end of the world play any important role within the dialectics of collapse and regeneration of the complex society in which these visions appear?

Nevertheless, the question of role and function of media representation of apocalypse in connection of its social and political circumstances seems to be more complex. The apocalyptic fear as a modification of archaic fear (Rollo 1993) is a collectively unconscious content that must be necessarily projected – that is, transferred into external objects (Jacobi 1943; Jung 1981). The mechanism of projection, thoroughly examined by Carl Gustav Jung and his colleagues (for the cultural/collective dimension, see especially Jung 1990), is easily imaginable as concretization of archetypical characters (gods, demons) or their identification with living beings; likewise, projection is applicable to processes and situations. For example, projected/mythicized natural disasters or astronomical events are rather

...symbolic expressions of the inner, unconscious drama of the psyche which becomes accessible to man's consciousness by way of projection – that is, mirrored in the events of nature (Jung 1981: 6).

The main theoretical premise behind Jung's claim is that the late modern narratives about the return of Halley's comet and its effects on the Earth or about the fatal impact of the end of the Mayan calendar's cycle express rather a collectively unconscious aspect of social processes than a tangible, immediate threat. In other words, the apocalyptic pattern, the archetype of Death and Rebirth³, may manifest itself in media as the process of the end of the world, being

only formally determined, not in regard to their contents (...). (...) This implies then that the archetype is pre-existent and immanent as a potential "axial system". The solution in which the precipitate is formed, the experience of all humanity, creates the images that crystallize on this axial system and that fill themselves out in the womb of the unconscious to figures ever more distinct and rich in content (Jacobi 1943: 42-43).

Here Jolan Jacobi puts forward the view that the content of an archetype is changeable, although its essential structure remains constant, and implies that the actual shape of the archetype resonates with its social-political circumstances. This view further elaborates the notion of increasing frequency of apocalyptic visions during critical periods (see above). Indeed, the social-political circumstances in fact *activate* the archetype, because its realization is a form of instinctive, psychologically necessary response to empirically real social processes (Jacobi 1943). Thus, the analysis is expected to answer the question if, how and to what extent do the ways of discursive construction of apocalyptic visions suggest that the objects, supposedly having the apocalyptic capability (the comet and the calendar), could work as projection objects of collective unconscious tensions, activated by social-political conditions of the day.

Nevertheless, the question of function concerns not only the objects of predictions as such, but also media: what do the media texts, considering the mechanism of projection, serve for? Several psychoanalytically and anthropologically grounded analyses of popular culture propound the view that many media texts and products of popular culture may be reckoned as semantic analogies of myths, dreams and even

³The archetype of Death and Rebirth is a proto-type representing renovation, revitalization, improvement, the process of transformation, or change of the previous essential structure (Jung 2003).

rituals, as they employ mythic imagery (Jung 1990; Eliade 1975). This similarity, based on the observation that also contemporary media texts reproduce meanings of mythic structures, displaying the nature of collective psyche (Jung, 1981), may help to understand the role of apocalyptic visions in media: in the process of reading myths, including those that are transmitted by mass media, people are stepping out of time, leaving both personal lifetime and historical periods, immersing in trans-historical, mythic time. While experiencing myths, we are letting the sacred atmosphere to spread through ourselves, becoming “contemporaries” of sacred events, gods and heroes:

As a summary formula we might say that by “living” the myths one emerges from profane, chronological time and enters a time that is of different quality, a “sacred” Time at once primordial and indefinitely recoverable. (Eliade 1975: 18)

Thus, experiencing the apocalyptic myth may symbolically re-generate its participants; a person taking part in the ritual of the end of the world and its renewal becomes a coeval of this ritually mediated adventure, and so she or he starts her or his existence anew from the beginning (Eliade 2006). Attractiveness of the media predictions of ends of the world could be partly explained in the terms of the desire to experience different time rhythms, in terms of the revolt against historical time, in terms of the fight for the chance of getting rid of the burden of historical time that leads solely to death.

Surmounting the linearity of time, cyclic character and seriality is another feature of apocalyptic visions that helps to grasp the role of media representation of the end of the world. In her classic critique of the discourse about AIDS, Susan Sontag (1989) mentions the shift from expectant to continual apocalyptic threat:

Apocalypse is now a long-running serial: not "Apocalypse Now" but "Apocalypse From Now On." Apocalypse has become an event that is happening and not happening. (Sontag 1989: 88)

The media broadcast the apocalyptic series, periodically threaten with imminent doom, stemming from the hypertrophy of the features of modernity, simultaneously assuring of the absence of serious dangers, reproducing the grandiosity of modern states and the faith in their stability. As a result, this series may strengthen ontological security⁴ of its consumers, endangered by the apocalyptic content of the series: the alternation of safety and threat, risk and hope promotes the notion that every collapse and crisis is followed by regeneration and positive change. Moreover, the cyclic nature of media as such implies that the media is a phenomenon based on the comforting principle of consumption regularity and content continuity (Volek 1998; Kohoutek – Čermák 2009). Thus, paradoxically enough, it seems that the media contents with apocalyptic or catastrophic theme could be involved in the reconstruction of ontological security in two different manners: for one thing, owing to their generally indestructible, omnipresent and cyclic character (or their continual from), and for another, because of the constant claiming and disclaiming concrete predictions of the end of the world (or the series content).

⁴ Anthony Giddens (1991) uses the term in the sense of trust in the reality of the self, the reality of other social subjects and the stable social and material conditions of the self's existence.

The key questions arising from the theoretical background may be listed as follows:

1. How do the media construct apocalypse?
 - 1a) Which *discourses* are employed?
 - 1b) Can Halley's comet and Mayan calendar serve as *objects of projection* of collective unconscious fears of political/economical/ecological disaster?
2. What is the role of media in the dynamics of collapse and regeneration?
 - 2a) Can apocalyptic predictions in media work as *rites of passage* – can they symbolically revitalize civilization?
 - 2b) Which discourse practices employed within media representation of apocalyptic predictions may strengthen *ontological security*?
3. What causes of the predicted apocalypse do the media construct in the discourse about the end of the world?
 - 3a) Are some of the causes of the apocalypse *historically invariable*?

Method

The attempt to answer the research questions and to assess adequacy of the theoretical reflections requires investigating and understanding media representations of the predictions of the end of the world. Therefore, as a research method I opted for discourse analysis, more precisely, an in-depth analysis of the media-discursive construction of apocalypse, further deepened by selected analytically-psychological concepts.

The broad theoretical-methodological approach of discourse analysis does not need to be described in detail here; however, it is useful to mention it is focused on the dialectical relation between a text and its social-political context, so that it ranges

between microanalysis of a concrete text and macroanalysis of social and political contexts, in which the text appears (Zábrowská 2009: 75).

Thus, the method is in full compliance with the research aim to understand the connection of media texts and archetypes to their contexts.

Among many types and models of discourse analysis I chose the model of James Paul Gee (Gee 1999), based on the constructivist assumption that whenever we speak or write, we and our communication partners reconstruct reality by simultaneously constructing *seven building tasks*, seven aspects of the situational reality: *significance, activities, identities, relationships, politics of social goods, connections and sign systems and knowledge*. All these parts of any piece of language – of any linguistic situation – are mutually interconnected, altogether creating a meaningful system, in which any aspect gives meaning to the remaining six of them (Gee 1999). As mentioned above, while analyzing these categories, I was trying to explain the media-constructive principles using selected analytically-psychological concepts: archetypes, made conscious by the process of projection (Jung 1993).

Selection of the media texts for further investigation was rather complex. First, I searched for those types of media existing both in 1910 and 2012 that included the end of the world into their agenda. Besides daily newspapers (the most read serious press in both cases) several esoteric magazines and scientific magazines were identified as suitable for data retrieval. Moreover, during the exploration process a new potentially significant type of media emerged in each of the years: humorous magazines in 1910 and websites dedicated to the end of the world in 2012. Subsequently, sixty newspaper and magazine articles in total were selected⁵ and divided into six groups based on (1) the year and (2) the type of the general Discourse of the text – a set of rules for speaking about a topic in question (Gee 1999). (Three Discourses were defined: the Discourse of common sense, the esoteric Discourse and the scientific Discourse.) The format of this paper does not allow me to present the newspaper/magazine articles and the process of the analysis; however, I shall enrich the next section with several illustrative examples.

Research findings and discussion

The most obvious finding to emerge from the discourse analysis of the media texts of 1910 is that the media employ diverse discursive mechanisms to construct various levels of apocalyptic *spectacle* (see Debord 2007; Kellner 2007):

Common desire to become witnesses to the spectacle that only once in the life of mortal beings presents itself caused that last night was not only holiday of astronomers, but also an event for the general public. (Národní listy 1910/5/19)

The spectacle embraces also liminality of *rites of passage* (see Turner 1969), bacchantic frolicsomeness and carnival humour (Bachtin 2007).

Furthermore, the results suggest that in 1910 the media texts notifying of the end of the world have the capability to clearly articulate the causes of predicted apocalypse, related to the social changes ongoing in the modernized societies:

You accursed human creature, alas, alas, alas! You did not live as a Catholic and it shall be badly paid you back. (...) You haughty people, do not you have enough trains, cars, tramways, now you want to fly up, in the aeroplane to Eden? (Kopřivy 1910/5/12)

The media of 1910 criticize – in a humorous language code – the characteristic features of the modernization process: secularization, emancipation, industrialization including introducing modern industrial technologies into war, alphabetization etc. (Havelka – Müller 1996; Giddens 1991). They pillory the church for changeable morals, simultaneously pronouncing the realization that science is no substitute for the church when it comes to distribution of certainty and security. Some of the texts go even further, celebrating the failure of scientific messianic desires, regretting neither the loss of big narratives nor unpredictability of future:

⁵ Only articles thematizing the given apocalyptic prediction based on the return of Halley's comet or on the end of Mayan calendar were included in the research sample.

And perhaps it is good [that the science is unable to provide certainty]. (...) So it is almost certain we shall escape without any disaster on the terrifying day. Because everything is, thank God, uncertain. And where the uncertainty is, hope rules. And where the hope reigns, life blooms. Long may live the uncertainty! (Národní listy 1910/2/20)

Both the cognition that science did not succeed in substituting the church in the process of distribution of ontological security and the absence of disillusion with this loss of certainty is in fact fully postmodern (Lyotard 1993; Best – Kellner 1997; Giddens 1991).

The mode of ritualizing the end of the world by the media texts of 1910 is comparable in complexity to that employed by the media texts of 2012. The daily press of 2012 I investigated was distinctly calling for revitalization, even attempting – just as traditional ritualized or enacted myths do – to symbolically dissolve the linearity of time:

No downfall. According to the Mayas, a new era begins. (MF Dnes 2012/1/19)

Even without the end a new beginning may come. (MF Dnes 2012/12/22)

Another way of revitalization appeared to be discursive implementation of the archetype of Death and Rebirth; or, to put it simply, stating that the end of the world has already taken place. In *Mladá fronta DNES*, the daily newspaper representing daily press of 2012, this symbolically accomplished apocalypse had two different forms:

After all, the rule of communism and the end of the world is the same thing. (MF Dnes 2012/12/21)

...the end of the world is not supposed to come before tomorrow, but Bugarach, a small village in south France has already been experiencing it for some time (MF Dnes 2012/12/20).

In the first case, the threat of “the rule of communism” represents Czech local notion of apocalypse (elsewhere, I have called its collectively unconscious dimension “communist complex”; Kotišová 2014); the second example shows that the mass panic is considered to be worldwide form of apocalypse. If the apocalypse is constructed as identical with the mass panic, scientists are expected to fend it off. Representatives of scientific knowledge, especially astronomers, intertextually present in the media texts, fulfil the archetype of Hero (more precisely its modification, Wise old man⁶) fighting against the panicking Shadow⁷/Dragon, seizing control over the apocalyptic discourse. Thus, in contrast to the media of 1910, the media of 2012 reproduce the modern myth of scientific omnipotence, the capability of science to deliver salvation.

What could this discrepancy be attributed to? Is the distinction between modernity and late modernity too subtle to permeate media representations, or, on the contrary,

⁶ The archetype of Hero is typically used in combination with Dragon, together representing the classical duality of good and evil, whereas Wise old man is a modification of the general Hero, emphasizing rationality and wisdom (Jacobi 1943, Jung – Sharp 2005).

⁷ The archetype of Shadow is the dark side of Psyche, representing all its aspects that are hidden, suppressed, irrational and dangerous (Jacobi 1943).

too coercive to meet the discontinuities and inconsistencies of the processes and developments within human society? Is it defensible to mark some of the discursive strategies of the media of 1910 as postmodern? Both theoretical elaboration and more research on this topic needs to be undertaken before the questions are more clearly understood.

Having discussed one of the unexpected findings, the final section of this paper addresses the research questions. As I have indicated before, the analysis suggested that the representations of apocalypse in 1910 – more than a hundred years ago – and in 2012 share many motives.

First, in both cases the media emphasize symbolical revitalization. Thus, the revitalizing discourse may be considered to be historically invariable discursive mechanism employed by the media in the process of representing an apocalyptic prediction. Symbolical revitalization is often supported by theatrical discourse, circulating in the pieces of text that are turning the predicted catastrophe into spectacle, a play, a ritual.

But why the media stress just revitalization and ritual? It seems that an apocalyptic vision in media and its object – in this case, the Halley's comet or the Mayan calendar – may work as a vehicle of a message about social, political or ecological problems that could be serious or even fatal in near future, because they are being articulated at the occasion of an apocalyptic prediction. In other words, I suggest that as the media connect the apocalyptic predictions with its parallel social context (with the context's dismal aspects), the predictions and their objects become objects of projection of collective unconscious fears, activated by hints of real crisis. The local Czech case of manifestation of the communist complex mentioned above may be used as an example of this mechanism: a part of the collective unconscious of Czech post-socialist population might contain the fear of recurrence of the communist past and may consider it – based on existing indicators⁸ – to be a realistic scenario. Thus, the fear is projected to media representations of apocalyptic predictions, activated – probably by many different factors – during the moments of endangered ontological security and escalated apocalyptic fear (Weber 1999; Rollo 1993).

Second, the ability of the media to project collective unconscious, and also the conspicuousness of the revitalizing discourse suggest that a media representation of an apocalyptic prediction may work as a *rite of passage* that revitalizes civilization. However, the form of ritualization and therefore revitalization differs. In 1910 the media seem to explicitly search the collective conscience, they are openly joking about the collective guilt, turning the prediction into spectacle. In 2012 the symbolic revitalization is more deeply embedded in discourses: journalists call for new beginning, new chance for human civilization, they are trying to dissolve the linearity of time.

In addition, these findings further support the idea that the cyclic character of apocalyptic predictions and their cancellations that are endlessly repeating can, in the upshot, strengthen ontological security of the media consumers, because, first, the

⁸ A series of recent surveys shows that the communist party (KSČM) is increasingly popular in the Czech Republic: for results of a poll from October/November 2012, see *Stem.cz* (2012/11/14, the red sector).

constant rotation of safety and threat promotes a cyclic view on development of affairs and second, the media as such are a reliable, omnipresent and continual phenomenon (Volek 1998; Kohoutek – Čermák 2009). However, more research on audience's perception of apocalyptic visions in media needs to be undertaken before the association between the predictions and their consequences for ontological security is more clearly understood.

Third, the general cause of the end of the world articulated by the media I studied is the same in both cases: human guilt, transgression of diverse principles varying from traditional Christian tenets to rules of ecologic behaviour. In addition, in both cases the human guilt is often specified as the self-destructive tendency of human kind, aggression and inclination to war conflicts. Thus, redress of the collective guilt – abandoning the aggressive tendencies – is implicitly constructed by the media as a method of postponement of the actual, real crisis or even collapse. Furthermore, the ritualization of apocalyptic prediction and symbolic revitalization as constructed within the discourse about the end of the world (see above) assist in symbolical postponement of the apocalypse.

However, as the perpetual return forms the core of the predicted, symbolical apocalypse's cautionary function, the media are unable to cancel it, and certainly unable to cancel the "end of the world" in the form of social, political, economical crisis. If the claim of some historians that the frequency of apocalyptic predictions increases during crises is right, the human civilization is in crisis; its outcome is unpredictable, though. Although the analysis has suggested that the media are capable of projecting collective unconscious fears of certain actualities that could probably become epicentres of conflicts and crises (ecological problems, new war technologies, totalitarian regimes), as Jung says, one never knows, if she sees trees, or the wood (BBC 1959/10/22). Therefore it is very difficult to say where the real problems, activating collective unconscious fear, lead. Most probably, they will result in another prediction of the end of the world. The very next apocalypse, according to Mayan calendar update, comes in September 2015.

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