5

Secular Apocalyptic Themes in the Nuclear Era

> Our tragedy today is a general and universal physical fear so long sustained by now that we can even bear it. There are no longer problems of the spirit. There is only the question: when will I be blown up? —William Faulkner, Nobel Prize speech, 1954

Apocalyptic ideas traditionally have been associated with religious eschatologies, but American secular culture also has contributed to widespread beliefs, images, and expectations about the end of the world. The concept of a meaningless apocalypse brought about by human or natural causes is a relatively recent phenomenon, differing dramatically from religious apocalyptic cosmologies. Instead of faith in a redemptive new realm to be established after the present world is annihilated, secular doomsday visions are usually characterized by a sense of pessimism, absurdity, and nihilism.

Secular apocalyptic ideas have become increasingly pervasive in contemporary American society; these notions, however, are not unique to the twentieth century. Visions of the world destroyed by humans, as well as by natural cataclysms, began appearing in fictional literature in the 1800s. According to Warren Wagar, Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) was the first of such works, and the majority of these early secular doomsday writings, like religious apocalyptic visions, offered the hope of a renewed and transformed society after the destruction of the world (1982:11–13). Nineteenth-century secular visions of worldly destruction and renewal were not limited to literature; the Marxist promise of world revolution and redemption of the working class is an explicit form of secularized millenarianism. As Eric Hobsbawm notes in his *Primitive Rebels*, the political ideals of socialism and communism resemble the millenarian "hope of a complete and radical change in the world" (1965:57,

93–107). These nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century visions of worldly destruction and transformation were usually optimistic in their evaluation of apocalypse, viewing it not as the end but the beginning of the transformation of society.

Since the end of World War II, visions and beliefs about the end of the world appear to have become increasingly pessimistic, stressing cataclysmic disaster as much as previous millenarian visions emphasized the imminent arrival of a redemptive new era. Numerous observers have noted that the romantic, millennial vision of America as a redemptive paradise or pristine wilderness has been challenged and altered during the latter half of the twentieth century, becoming more bleak and apocalyptic in nature (see Rovit 1968; Ketterer 1974; Zamora 1982a). Literary critics have made similar assertions in their attempts to characterize the "postmodern condition" as an apocalyptic psychological and social milieu involving individual and collective perceptions of the decay and destruction of art, culture, philosophy, and meaning (see Baudrillard 1988; Jameson 1984; Kamper and Wulf 1989): "a *fin-de-millennium* consciousness which, existing at the end of history . . . uncovers a great arc of disintegration and decay against the background radiation of parody, kitsch, and burnout . . . a suicidal nihilism . . . on the violent edge between ecstasy and decay" (Kroker and Cook 1986:8–9). Numerous scholars have suggested that the prophetic apocalyptic imaginings of the past have become secular apocalyptic realities in recent decades. As one writer notes, "Images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Holocaust, Vietnam (rendered by filmmaker Francis Ford Coppola as *Apocalypse Now*) give unalterable contours to the landscape of contemporary memory. Apocalypse is no longer a dark shapeless terror, but a statistically documented event, complete with date, time, and place" (Kawada 1985:x).

The pervasiveness of secular apocalyptic ideas became particularly evident in the 1970s and 1980s. Many books written by academics, scientists, and social critics predicted or warned of the cataclysmic destruction or gradual decline of humanity as the result of human and natural causes. As Michael Barkun notes, these influential forecasts of imminent global disasters began appearing in the early 1970s with Barry Commoner's *The Closing Circle* (1971) and the Club of Rome's publication *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972) (Barkun 1983:263). Among the more prominent of numerous books that address the possibility of naturalistic or human-made cataclysms are Roberto Vacca's *The Coming Dark Age* (1973), Robert Heilbroner's *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect* (1974), L. S. Stavrianos's *The Promise of the Coming Dark Age* (1976), Isaac Asimov's *A Choice of Catastrophes* (1979), Fred Warshofsky's

Doomsday: The Science of Catastrophe (1977), and Jonathan Schell's *The Fate of the Earth* (1982). These and other works delineate various destructive scenarios, ranging from astrophysical, climatological, and geological disasters to nuclear disasters, societal breakdown, the "population bomb," economic exploitation and collapse, the greenhouse effect, pollution, ozone depletion, toxic waste, and technological collapse.

In addition to secular apocalyptic literature, secular organizations exist that warn of imminent apocalypse, such as DOOM: The Society for Secular Armageddonism, which is "a non-religious group dedicated to promoting public awareness of the coming end of the world." Based in San Francisco, the organization has established a telephone "Hotline of Doom," which provides callers with a brief message about the causes of the end of the world:

> We believe the apocalypse is at hand, and our reasons for this belief are overwhelming: chemical and biological weapons, nuclear proliferation, deforestation, the greenhouse effect, ozone depletion, acid rain, the poisoning of our air and water, rising racism, massive species loss, toxic waste, the AIDS pandemic, the continuing population explosion, encroaching Big Brotherness, and at least another thousand points of blight. These aren't just conversational topics for cocktail parties; they're Grade-A, unadulterated harbingers of destruction. One hundred percent, bona fide specters of doom. And they're all proof that we don't need God to end it for us. The coming end will be a strictly do-it-yourself apocalypse.

The message ends with a bell tolling in the background and with a promise that future telephone messages will provide profiles of specific global threats and refer callers to groups resisting these threats. The society received more than ten thousand calls from September to December 1990 (Dial-a-Bummer 1990:22).

Emphasizing the destructive capabilities of human beings, secular predictions of doom describe unredemptive worldly cataclysm brought about by ignorance, technology, or chance natural disasters. Of the various secular apocalyptic scenarios imagined, visions of and beliefs about the world destroyed by nuclear weapons remain among the most widespread and fatalistic. In this regard, many secular apocalypticists are in agreement with religious apocalypticists who consider nuclear apocalypse to be inevitable.

Since the development of nuclear weapons, a sense of profound anxiety and uncertainty has existed in American society about a future in which nuclear warfare is a possibility. As Paul Boyer's *By the Bomb's Early Light* (1985) and Spencer Weart's *Nuclear Fear* (1988) demonstrate, the development and

use of nuclear weapons in the mid-1940s dramatically altered American thought and culture. For some Americans, nuclear weaponry represented military superiority or the promise of a techno-utopian future; for others, the bomb evoked feelings of helplessness and fatalism about the future of humanity. In his study of the effect of nuclear weapons on American culture and consciousness between 1945 and 1950, Boyer notes, for instance, that the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan in August 1945 fueled fears of irrational mass death and collective annihilation, as well as a loss of faith in technology, progress, and the future (1985:278–281). The feeling of fatalism that arose after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and that persists today despite the end of the Cold War, is described by Alfred Kazin: "The bomb gave the shape of life, outer and inner, an irreversible charge; a sense of fatefulness would now lie on all things . . . we are still struggling—often enough without knowing it, all too often in total resignation—with every effect and implication of that change" (1988:1).

Since the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, enormous developments in nuclear weaponry and delivery systems have further increased contemporary fears about nuclear annihilation. The bomb dropped on Hiroshima, the equivalent of 12,500 tons of TNT, was small by current standards, with warheads of that size now considered to be merely "tactical" weapons (Schell 1982:36). A typical nuclear warhead currently has an explosive capability of 2,000,000 tons of TNT, the equivalent of all the bombs exploded in World War II (Sagan 1986:13). Experts estimate that in the mid-1980s the United States had approximately 27,000 nuclear weapons and the Soviet Union roughly 33,000 (Broad 1992:4A), enough destructive power to obliterate more than a million Hiroshimas (Sagan 1986:13). The doctrine of nuclear deterrence, or Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), based on the premise that nuclear war can be avoided if each nuclear superpower has an arsenal that can completely destroy the entire society of any aggressor in a retaliatory second strike, made the self-destruction of humanity a genuine possibility during the Cold War era. A large-scale nuclear war not only might result in the complete destruction of civilization in less than an hour but could conceivably result in human extinction and the extinction of other life forms (Sagan 1986:13–18; Schell 1982:93–96).

Despite the end of the Cold War and the resulting arms control treaties and unilateral actions that have designated a significant portion of the nuclear stockpile to be "retired," nuclear fears and the nuclear threat persist today. Concerns have been expressed about the control of nuclear weaponry in the now-independent former Soviet republics, stemming from the fear of clan-

destine sales to black marketeers, theft by terrorists, nuclear disasters resulting from the improper storage of radioactive materials, and the possibility of former Soviet scientists disseminating knowledge about nuclear weapons by working for other countries (Broad 1992:4A). Current nuclear anxieties are also related to the export of nuclear technology and the possibility that nuclear weapons will be developed and used by hostile nations or terrorist groups within the United States. At the turn of the millennium, the nuclear bomb remains the most concrete embodiment of humanity's potential for global self-destruction, continuing to fuel fears and fatalism about inevitable apocalypse.

Bomb Culture and Nuclear Lore

Ideas about the inevitability of nuclear apocalypse were expressed immediately after the detonation of the first atomic bomb at Alamogordo, New Mexico, on July 16, 1945. Popular images, narratives, and conceptions at the time often implied that after the invention of the bomb, humanity could not reverse its inevitable path to destruction, and that scientists had created an uncontrollable weapon that would ultimately destroy the world. For instance, stories about Robert Oppenheimer, the director of the first atomic bomb tests, correlate his interest in ancient mythology with ideas of inevitable apocalypse. Upon seeing the first atomic mushroom cloud in the New Mexico desert, Oppenheimer supposedly envisioned the Hindu deity Krishna in the form of the All-Devourer, and then recalled the following verse from the *Bhagavad Gita*:

> If the radiance of a thousand suns
> Were to burst into the sky
> That would be like the splendor of the Mighty One.
> I am become Death,
> The shatterer of worlds.   (Chilton 1986:129–130)

In this account, and in many others, the atomic blast is associated with cosmic destructive power, a manifestation of mythic images of death and worldly destruction. Numerous reports compared the blast to the creation of the world and the Second Coming of Christ. The published accounts of the first bomb test described it in almost euphoric terms, with prose and imagery resembling the language of the Book of Revelation. For instance, General Thomas F. Farrell characterized the explosion as follows:

The effects could be called unprecedented, magnificent, beautiful, stupendous and terrifying. No man-made phenomenon of such tremendous power had ever occurred before. The lighting effects beggared description. The whole country was lighted by a searing light with the intensity many times that of the midday sun. It was golden, purple, violet, grey and blue. It lighted every peak, crevice and ridge of the nearby mountain range with a clarity and beauty that cannot be described but must be seen to be imagined. It was that beauty the great poets dream about but describe most poorly and inadequately. Thirty seconds after, the explosion came, first the air blast pressing hard against people and things, to be followed almost immediately by the strong, sustained, awesome roar which warned of doomsday and made us feel that we puny things were blasphemous to dare tamper with the forces heretofore reserved to The Almighty. (Groves 1962:303–304)

The sinister connotations of nuclear weapons as devices of inevitable apocalypse were also reinforced by popular depictions of the physicists who worked on the development of the atomic bomb. Similar to the legendary Faust character, atomic scientists were often portrayed as evil geniuses or maddened technological wizards engaged in nuclear alchemy, obsessed with harnessing the sacred powers of the universe, who would ultimately destroy the world in the pursuit of divine, forbidden knowledge (Weart 1988:21).

In contrast to these apprehensions and negative depictions, the commercial exploitation and enthusiastic promotion of "atomic" goods and styles began immediately after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Countless businesses adopted the word "Atomic" as part of their title; bartenders concocted "Atomic Cocktails" (a luminous green beverage of Pernod and gin); burlesque clubs in Los Angeles advertised "Atom Bomb Dancers"; department stores had "Atomic Sales"; atomic bomb songs proliferated in popular music; and designers created atomic jewelry (in some instances from the greenish, glass-like, and perhaps still radioactive melted sand from the Alamogordo test site) (Boyer 1985:10–12).[1] This lighthearted adoption of the signifier "atomic" seems to have been a reaction to deeper anxieties about the bomb, serving as a means of subduing the fear of the atomic threat; by associating the atomic bomb with commodities and commonplace events, its destructive capability was domesticated and incorporated into everyday life.

Widespread beliefs during this time expressed ambivalence about new technologies and reflect feelings of individual helplessness concerning the prospect of nuclear apocalypse. In the 1950s, push-button devices were symbols of convenience, modernity, and technological ease; yet the destructive potential of technology was represented by beliefs about the "Doomsday But-

ton," a red button that, when pushed, would destroy the world. As one observer notes, "there was one common household object that was inextricably linked to the threat of nuclear annihilation—the push button. The President of the United States was widely viewed as having a push button on or in his desk that would trigger atomic war as surely as a housewife could activate her dishwasher. And in the Kremlin there was another push button, with just about the same power" (Hine 1989:132). The push-button efficiency of dishwashers, television sets, washing machines, and vacuum cleaners simplified life and provided entertainment, but the same technological efficiency had made a push-button apocalypse a reality. The belief that the world could be ended by pressing a button both reflected and reinforced feelings of helplessness and apocalyptic inevitability. Once the button was pushed, nothing could be done to stop the process because the technology was for the most part overwhelmingly sophisticated and beyond one's understanding and control. Apocalypse was no longer a cosmic event executed by supernatural deities; it was now reduced to a mundane, technological absurdity.

While adults have pondered the possibility of a push-button apocalypse, the culture of the bomb and an awareness of the threat of the nuclear cataclysm have also been a part of the experiences of children growing up in the postwar era. Youngsters sent away for atomic-bomb-ring toys promoted on the back of Kix cereal boxes, ate red-hot candies called Atomic Fireballs (still marketed today), read comic books that described the nuclear destruction of worlds, and played A-bomb games on playgrounds.[2] By the late 1950s, the imminence of a nuclear attack pervaded the consciousness of most American schoolchildren living in large cities as they sat through lectures about the atomic bomb and civil defense and practiced air-raid drills. Children in some school districts in high-risk target areas were issued metal dog tags for the purpose of identifying them if they were lost or burnt beyond recognition in a nuclear attack (in New York City, free dog tags had been issued to 2.5 million children by 1952) (Jonas and Nissenson 1994:39).

Duck-and-cover drills were common in major cities: at the sound of the school siren or when the teacher yelled, "Drop!" children would dive under their desks with their hands clasped behind their necks and their faces shielded. The ever-present threat of nuclear attack was further conveyed by civil defense films, such as the well-known reel starring Bert the Turtle, who teaches children to "Duck and Cover." In actuality the duck-and-cover strategy offered little protection in the event of major nuclear attack, and at least some children seemed aware of this, as the following interview with sixth graders in 1963 reveals:

> *Teacher:* Are there shelters at your school, Susan?
>
> *Susan:* No, there aren't any. . . . But I don't really think these drills would do much good at all. Because in such bombings as an atom bomb and if it was as close as one hundred miles off, the radiation would in time reach you. . . .
>
> *Teacher:* And what do you think, Robert?
>
> *Robert:* I think that if a radiation-type bomb were to be dropped near or on you, you wouldn't have a chance. . . .
>
> *Susan:* It wouldn't seem right to me at all if I were one of the only people who lived. And so, I would really prefer to die in a bombing. . . .
>
> *Teacher:* Kathy?
>
> *Kathy:* I'd rather die and let some person live who would be more helpful to whoever survives—like a doctor. (interviews with Mrs. Elsa Knight Thompson's sixth-grade class, San Francisco, California; cited in Barasch 1983:86)

Though not necessarily representative of children's responses to the prospect of nuclear war, these statements express recurring ideas associated with the nuclear bomb: imminent death, the futility of efforts at personal survival, and feelings of guilt if one were to survive. In reality, duck-and-cover drills may have been performed more for adults than for children, providing a semblance of safety, order, and personal control when confronted with the massive destructive power of the bomb. Such drills not only offered a sense of protection in the face of an uncontrollable threat but emphasized the efficacy of human effort and personal action through a ritualized duck-and-cover response, a secularized version, perhaps, of magico-religious practices customarily performed in situations characterized by danger, uncertainty, and helplessness.

The fallout shelter frenzy that climaxed in 1961 may have served similar functions, providing people with an active response to the threat and perceived inevitability of nuclear destruction. Although shelters were established in public buildings (still identifiable by yellow and black "Fallout Shelter" signs), the U.S. government encouraged people to build fallout shelters beneath their homes or in their backyards. Individual initiative and personal survival in the event of nuclear attack were stressed rather than the survival of the larger community. Entrepreneurs and popular magazines marketed bomb shelters to families, promoting them as practical additions to suburban homes.[3] Offering the hope of survival through proper preparation and resourcefulness, bomb shelter dealerships boomed and merchants

sold items thought necessary for life underground in the event of a nuclear attack.[4] Although *Life* magazine's cover story on September 15, 1961, claimed that ninety-seven out of one hundred people would be protected from the bomb in a shelter, in actuality, most fallout shelters within ten miles of ground zero would have functioned as crematoria, incinerating or asphyxiating people.

For a while belief in the effectiveness of fallout shelters persisted, and moral debates arose concerning the ethics of sharing one's shelter with negligent neighbors who had not bothered to build one for themselves, and whether gunning them down if they attempted to break into the family shelter was okay. Fallout shelter lore also involved speculation about what emerging from a shelter after a nuclear war would be like. Often these imagined scenarios were compensatory fantasies in which the problems of current society were eliminated—after the apocalypse, life would be simpler, the world would be less crowded and perhaps purified, and the duty of the surviving men and women would be to get down to the business of repopulating the planet.

The mania for shelters not only reflected popular perceptions concerning the imminence of nuclear war but may have been a momentary outburst of the hope of survival in the face of the nuclear threat. This hopefulness gradually deteriorated after the acknowledgment that shelters offered little protection against intercontinental ballistic missiles that could annihilate entire cities within thirty minutes and that, launched from submarines, could obliterate coastal targets within a couple of minutes. Once the facts about a post-nuclear-holocaust world and the horrors of nuclear winter were revealed—worldwide fallout, subfreezing temperatures, and the destruction of the ozone layer—fallout shelters and civil defense seemed increasingly futile. With increased knowledge about the realities of a full-scale nuclear conflagration and its aftermath, fatalistic resignation appears to have become the predominant response, even among some civil defense authorities, as the following statement by the deputy director of New York City's Office of Civil Preparedness indicates:

> A Russian submarine forty miles off New York can lob missiles at New York City that from launch to detonation will take seven seconds. In that time, the military command has to discern the attack at its headquarters in Colorado, and notify Albany, and they notify us, and we have to notify fifty-six precincts to turn on the sirens, and the people who hear them will run into buildings and will be turned into sand in a few seconds anyway. (Lieutenant Robert Hogan, August 1979; cited in Barasch 1983:85)

Nuclear Apocalypse in Popular Literature

American literature expresses similar themes of inevitability and resignation concerning nuclear apocalypse. Although apocalyptic ideas historically have been widespread in literary works, critics have observed that the notion of apocalypse and entropy became increasingly common concepts in the 1950s and 1960s and have been dealt with by many contemporary American writers (Lewicki 1984:xvi; Zamora 1982b:97).[5] Among the better known popular works that address the idea of accidental and meaningless nuclear annihilation are Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957) and Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler's *Fail-Safe* (1962) (later made into successful films). Secular apocalyptic ideas are particularly prevalent in the science fiction and fantasy genre, and works with increasingly pessimistic and fatalistic themes seem to have proliferated in the nuclear era (see Boyer 1985:257–265; Rabkin et al. 1983). Ward Moore's satiric *Greener Than You Think* (1947), for instance, chronicles the end of the world brought about by an aberrant strain of grass created by scientists (a metaphor for nuclear fallout) and describes the fatalistic worship of inevitable doom that ensues. Another particularly fatalistic depiction of the end of the world is *Level 7* (1989 [1959]) by Mordecai Roshwald, in which the inhabitants of a seven-tiered fallout shelter are slowly killed level by level by radiation from a nuclear cataclysm. As the lethal radiation seeps toward them, the inhabitants of the deepest level create a new religion in which strontium embodies the elemental force of evil (Boyer 1985:354). Themes of inevitability and helplessness concerning nuclear apocalypse are also central to Walter Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1982 [1959]). Miller describes a post-apocalyptic religious order—the pious monks of the Order of St. Leibowitz the Engineer—who live in a monastery in the Utah desert, where they worship the relics of their physicist founder and venerate the blessed nuclear blueprints housed in the shrine of the sacred fallout shelter. The monks' efforts to keep the knowledge of nuclear physics from secular society ultimately fail, and the world is destroyed by humans once again. *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) by Ray Bradbury also contains several stories with explicit secular apocalyptic themes; the best known is probably "There Will Come Soft Rains," in which the machines in a techno-utopian home continue to perform their functions long after the extinction of the human species by nuclear catastrophe.

Similar themes are expressed in the writings of Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., who often depicts the inevitable destruction of society from an absurdist viewpoint. In *Cat's Cradle* (1981 [1963]), for instance, the protagonist describes the approach of doomsday brought about by the substance *ice-nine*, created by a

scientist known as the Father of the Atom Bomb. When accidently dropped into the ocean through a series of absurd occurrences, *ice-nine* triggers a chain reaction that freezes the earth's oceans and waterways, leading to the eventual extermination of all life. In *Slaughterhouse Five* (1984 [1969]), the time-traveling Billy Pilgrim has visions of inevitable apocalypse, which are in fact prophetic, with the end of the world brought about by a test pilot from the planet Tralfamadore who accidently ignites the universe while testing a new fuel for his flying saucer.

A sense of doom and decline is also exemplified by much of the writing associated with the Beat movement in the 1950s, the first generation of writers after the invention of the bomb. Whether in the form of the apocalyptic transcendentalism of Alan Ginsberg's "Howl" and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, the melancholy fatalism of Paul Bowles, or the unredemptive vision of decadence and decay of William S. Burroughs, Jr., the writing of numerous Beats is often characterized by a sense of inevitable societal destruction. Ginsberg's "Howl," for instance, with its revelatory language condemning the modern world, proclaims the doom of American civilization—"Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen!"—and presents banal images of waiting for the H-bomb: disillusioned, exhausted beatniks sit "through the stale beer afternoon in desolate Fugazzi's, listening to the crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox" (Ginsberg 1965:17, 10). Ginsberg's apocalyptic indictment of America disputes the prophetic vision of the American millennial paradise, declaring instead the end of American innocence and glory.

The writings of William S. Burroughs, Jr., in particular, provide an emphatically unredemptive vision of American society in a state of disintegration and decadence. According to one biographer, Burroughs's preoccupation with nuclear apocalypse is the basis for much of his writing: "For Burroughs, the Bomb and not the birth of Christ was the dividing line of history. The Bomb stole the relevance from all that had preceded it, and from its ramifications Burroughs constructed a worldview. . . . After the Bomb, Burroughs had a sense of everything going wrong. He had visions of world death and death-in-life" (Morgan 1988:55). Burroughs's surrealistic sense of doom, anarchy, and nihilism is exemplified in *Naked Lunch* (1966 [1959]), in which there is little plot or character development but instead a sequence of macabre occurrences in a hellish, post-apocalyptic, drug-addicted society. Burroughs depicts a world destroyed, characterized by violence, fear, paranoia, and a sense of fatalism. The characters in the novel wander through a wasteland devastated by nuclear war, hopelessly addicted, with incurable diseases and afflictions, resigned to their fate. Burroughs's *Cities of the Red Night* (1981), in which

a lethal virus destroys humanity, and his *Apocalypse* (1988), a collaborative project with graffiti artist Keith Haring, also express a sense of imminent, unredemptive, worldly doom. Burroughs's vision of the End is conveyed without remorse or sentimentality—a nihilistic, nuclear-age Book of Revelation, which accepts the inevitability of the End without hope of renewal.

The complete absence of the theme of millennial redemption characterizes these works and much recent apocalyptic literature. As one critic observes, "More representative of recent decades is a reversion to the savagery and destructiveness of the original biblical paradigm, but without its sanction in a transcendent other world. Much of our literature of absurdity and black comedy is a form of black apocalypse—grotesque visions of an ultimate violence which destroys not to renew but to annihilate a world which is regarded as an affront to being" (Abrams 1971:426–427). The visions of a meaningless apocalypse presented in recent literature vary in terms of the nature of the destruction of the human species. In some instances the extermination of humankind occurs in an immediate and violent manner; sometimes it happens slowly, a gradual decline. The themes of helplessness, despair, and fatalism in these writings most often directly reflect the threat of nuclear annihilation.

The Nuclear Bomb in American Art

Images of an inevitable and meaningless apocalypse also pervade contemporary art, although according to several observers, depictions of nuclear apocalypse did not become a frequent subject in the arts until the 1980s, with most artists actually avoiding nuclear apocalyptic themes or responding with a sense of despair, denial, or psychological numbing (Lifton 1987:257–272; Weart 1988:391–404).[6] Although explicit nuclear apocalyptic imagery was uncommon, apocalyptic attitudes may have been implicitly expressed in much of the art that appeared after the bomb:

> Abstract Expressionists shut out the world to paint the insides of their minds, but the images came out explosive, splayed and splattered over the canvas with the violence of an irrational force. . . . The style contained large amounts of self-destructiveness and denial: the canvas had to suffer violent transformations—wiping out, covering over, continually destroying in order to go beyond. . . . Only now is a connection becoming visible between the mushroom cloud and de Kooning's disintegrating "Women," Pollock's tangles of debris, Still's creviced darkness, Rothko's spreading reddish glow, Gottlieb's cold orbs, or Reinhardt's absolute negation. (Levin 1988:38)

Several art critics have asserted that the emphasis on ephemeral and "dematerialized" art, as well as the pop art glorification of banal commodity culture and its insistence that all objects are equally meaningful and thus utterly meaningless, reveals distinct apocalyptic tendencies (Gumpert 1983:47). The emphasis on the process of creating art rather than the final art product itself, exemplified by action painting or performance art and "happenings," has been interpreted as being possibly related to nuclear apocalyptic fears and feelings of futurelessness (Schell 1982:164–165).[7] Such observations about the influence of images and fears of nuclear apocalypse may appear somewhat overstated, but the personal statements of some artists themselves seem to confirm these interpretations (see Gumpert 1983:55–81).

During the 1980s, artists began to express explicitly nuclear apocalyptic themes and fears. Numerous exhibits and group shows dealt with apocalyptic ideas in art, such as the Terminal New York show in Brooklyn in October 1983; the Apocalyptic and Utopian Images in Contemporary Art exhibit in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, in 1983; and the extensive The End of the World: Contemporary Visions of the Apocalypse show held at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City in 1983–1984. Similar to contemporary apocalyptic literature, the art exhibited in these shows was characterized by a sense of imminent worldly disaster and social decay, the banality and meaninglessness of the end of the world, and apocalyptic gallows humor.[8]

Atomic Bombs, Nuclear Apocalypse, and Societal Catastrophe in Film

Many filmic portrayals of the End also express a sense of the meaninglessness, absurdity, and inevitability of nuclear apocalypse. The two best-known films that portray a nuclear doomsday, *On the Beach* (1959) and *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), have been seen by millions of individuals. Other doomsday films from the same period include *Fail-Safe* (1964), *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (1961), and *Panic in the Year Zero!* (1962). In these and numerous other films of the apocalyptic genre, technology is often portrayed as awesome, unmanageable, and yet banal in its destructiveness. In *Fail-Safe*, for instance, the nuclear annihilation of Moscow occurs as the result of a technological malfunction. *On the Beach* depicts the lives of a handful of people who survive a large-scale nuclear war and await their fate as a radioactive cloud approaches. As the lethal fallout draws near, the scientist (played by Fred Astaire) contemplates the causes of the End and concludes, "The world was probably destroyed by a bunch of vacuum

tubes and transistors." In *Crack in the World* (1965), a scientist searching for new energy sources sets off an atomic bomb in the center of the earth and the world begins cracking in two; in *The Day the Earth Caught Fire*, the earth is knocked out of orbit and sent spinning toward the sun as the result of coincidental and concurrent nuclear bomb tests in the United States and Soviet Union. As the earth gets hotter and people prepare for the End, teenagers cope with the prospect of doomsday by engaging in rock-'n'-roll riots in the streets.

The masterpiece of apocalyptic gallows humor is Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove—Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. In this film a paranoid General Jack D. Ripper launches a preemptive nuclear attack on the Soviets in order to preserve "our precious bodily fluids," which he believes are being contaminated by a global communist conspiracy to fluoridate the world's water supply. Ripper's assistant frantically tries to stop the attack and breaks the secret recall code, recalling the B-52's. However, one bomber gets through and the bomb is dropped, straddled by a wahooing airforce major played by cowboy actor Slim Pickens. The bomb activates the Soviets' doomsday machine, and the world is destroyed. *Dr. Strangelove* satirizes the Cold War fears of the 1950s, but its underlying theme is the inanity of the end of the world. Human attempts to avert the preemptive attack ultimately fail, and once the technology of annihilation is activated, apocalypse is unalterable by human effort. The film's title exemplifies the psychological transformation of nuclear fear into a helpless, fatalistic acceptance of the bomb and ultimate doom. Human powerlessness to avert apocalypse is further represented by the destruction of the world by a "doomsday machine" that cannot be stopped once set in motion, a metaphor perhaps for nuclear proliferation leading humanity down an inevitable road to destruction.

In addition to films that depict a meaningless nuclear apocalypse are the dozens of atomic bomb mutation films, particularly in the low-budget, "B-movie" category. In such films, nuclear bombs and radioactivity inevitably result in the creation of monsters, mutants, and threats to society and individual existence. Among the better-known of such films are *Them!* (1954), in which massive, migrating ants exposed to radiation at an atomic test site invade the sewers of Los Angeles and *Attack of the Crab Monsters* (1957), with atomic radiation creating, on an isolated island, oversized crabs that decapitate scientists, eat their heads, and gain their intelligence. In the *Beginning of the End* (1957), radioactive fertilizer results in monstrous grasshoppers who converge on Chicago; in *It Came from Beneath the Sea* (1955), San Francisco is attacked by a radioactive octopus that destroys the Golden Gate Bridge and Market Street Tower before being torpedoed to bits.

A related film type involves dinosaurs being revived from their primordial slumber by an atomic blast. In *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), a prehistoric creature brought to life by an atomic bomb test in the Arctic swims to New York City and attacks Manhattan, stomping on people in Times Square and Wall Street, and taking a bite out of the roller coaster at Coney Island. The first Godzilla film, *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* (1954), released in Japan a year later, had similar themes, with the four-hundred-foot radioactive dinosaur trampling Tokyo. The same basic plot is used in a British version entitled *The Giant Behemoth* (1959), in which a brontosaurus with radioactive breath burns the skin off people, attacking London and destroying the House of Parliament. By the end of the 1950s, films about oversized monsters created or unleashed by atomic energy—likely personifications and projections of the fear of nuclear annihilation and radioactivity—had become a sci-fi subgenre. By ultimately defeating or taming these cinematic beasts, the otherwise uncontrollable threat of imminent nuclear destruction was perhaps symbolically vanquished in the context of a movie theater.

The mutating effects of radiation on human beings served as the basis for numerous other films. In *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957), the protagonist passes through an atomic cloud and suddenly begins shrinking, so that his suburban home ultimately is transformed into a place of terror. In *Creature with the Atom Brain* (1955), atomic zombies—nuclear death made manifest—stage a mass attack; and in George Romero's cult classic *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), radioactive material brought back to earth by a space vehicle causes corpses to return to life. Like similar films in the radioactive-mutants-battle-humans genre, flesh-eating zombies become the personification of the invisible, deathly power of radioactivity, threatening to destroy civilization as they stalk and cannibalize the living. In other films the invisibility of radioactivity is transmuted into tangible, creeping, blob-like monsters that destroy everything in their path. For example, in *X The Unknown* (1956), radioactive mud from the center of the earth dissolves people as it searches for isotopes; in *The H-Man* (1958), fallout changes people into an oozing green slime that then eats other humans. In *The Blob* (1958, starring Steve McQueen), the radioactive goo is a bright red color from the blood of people consumed in a supermarket, a theater, and a diner. Like the threat of nuclear annihilation and radioactivity, these atomic blobs are mindless, inhuman, and impersonal, disintegrating and devouring unsuspecting victims.

A related subgenre consists of movies that portray a post-apocalyptic world, from cult classics such as *World without End* (1955), *Teenage Cave Man* (1958), *The Omega Man* (1971), *A Boy and His Dog* (1975), and the numerous *Planet of the Apes* films (late 1960s and 1970s), to the highly successful *Mad Max* (1979),

The Road Warrior (1982), and *Mad Max Beyond the Thunderdome* (1985), and the more recent *Judge Dredd* (1995) and *Waterworld* (1995). These films depict life on earth in the aftermath of nuclear war or some other global catastrophe, such as the melting of the ice caps (*Waterworld)* or a plague (*Omega Man*), with the survivors usually living in a state of post-apocalyptic savagery or often battling mutants in the ruins of destroyed cities. In Roger Corman's first science-fiction film, *The Day the World Ended* (1956), an atomic blast has transformed those exposed to radiation into horned, three-eyed, four-armed mutant cannibals with telepathic powers who attack unradiated humans sheltered in a mountain cabin. In *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (1970), the mutant humans dwell underground and worship a nuclear bomb in the buried ruins of Grand Central Station. In one scene they congregate before the nuclear missile, the "Holy Weapon of Peace," and chant, "I reveal my inmost self unto My God!" In the same film the splitting of the atom serves as the source for an apocalyptic nursery rhyme, as children sing a post-nuclear-holocaust version of "Ring around the Rosie":

> Ring-a ring o' neutrons
> A pocketful of positrons,
> A fission! A fission!
> We all fall down.

Whether the survivors of nuclear cataclysm deify or fear the bomb, they usually have been transformed by it into subhumans—mutants, monsters, savages—who live underground, under siege, or enslaved by evil tyrants. In a few films (for example, *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil* [1958] and *Five* [1951]) the remnant survivors are portrayed as postwar Adams and Eves who will remake the world, liberated by the bomb from a corrupt, overly technological civilization. But in the majority of such films, the post-apocalyptic world is inhabited by degenerated barbarians and inhuman creatures, victims of forces beyond their control, battling for survival on a brutal and ruined planet.

Humor in the Nuclear Age

With the exception of a few films, such as *Dr. Strangelove*, explicit apocalyptic gallows humor is relatively infrequent in film. Cartoonists and illustrators, on the other hand, generally have had fun with the topic of doomsday. In particular, the stereotyped image of a bearded and robed doomsayer holding a sign with some humorous twist or wordplay is a frequent object of parody. For instance, an illustration by Gahan Wilson depicts an anguished, bearded

doomsayer in sandals attempting to sell balloons, pennants, buttons, and baseball caps that read "THE WORLD IS COMING TO ITS END" (Griffin 1979:xiv). In another cartoon, a bearded doomsayer in sandals is shown racing into a bar with a sign that reads "THE END IS UPON US!" and frantically shouting to the bartender: "Double Scotch, and *hurry!*" (*Medical Economics*, February 3, 1990, 169). The series "Grin and Bear It" shows a bearded doomsayer in a suit in an urban setting carrying a sign that reads "DOOMSDAY IS NEAR"; a cheerful-looking woman asks him, "Will there be a doomsday sale?" (July 29, 1988, "Wagner," North America Syndicate, Inc.).

Cartoons and illustrations about doomsday are pervasive and usually satirize doomsayers, but jokes about nuclear apocalypse seem to be relatively scarce and express a sense of ironic inevitability:

Did you hear the World War III knock-knock joke?"
No.
Knock, Knock.
Who's there?
(Silence!).   (Dundes 1987:viii)

What do you do if they drop the bomb?
What?
Hide under a table, put your head between your legs, and . . . kiss your ass goodbye!

What should you do in case of a nuclear attack?
What?
Get a shovel and a sheet and walk slowly . . . to the nearest cemetery.
Why slowly?
You mustn't start a panic.   (Weart 1988:239)

What do you do if they drop the bomb?
I don't know, what?
Get a six-pack, go up on your roof, and enjoy the show.[9]

Parodying civil defense instructions, these jokes express an absurdist sense of helplessness in the face of nuclear doom. The third joke, for instance, not only mocks civil defense evacuation plans as ludicrous, but also the instructions to "stay calm" in the event of a nuclear attack, with doomed citizens marching fatalistically to their own graves. Similar themes of futility and absurdity characterize the fourth joke, with its gallows humor derived from the equation of

nuclear apocalypse with Fourth of July celebrations or some other public display. The spectators have no choice but to embrace doomsday, watching the End from their rooftops and perhaps even cheering, between swigs of beer, as the apocalyptic fireworks illuminate the sky.

Comparable humor about the futility of civil defense efforts and the possibility of surviving a nuclear attack is reflected in what is commonly referred to as "Xeroxlore"—printed or written materials that are reproduced by means of photocopiers, Xerox machines, and fax machines. Such xerographic lore tends to be a reflection of popular beliefs and concerns, and usually is unofficially or illicitly reproduced and informally displayed (see Dundes and Pagter 1987; Dundes and Pagter 1992).[10] The following example of Xeroxlore was widely circulated in the 1970s:

<div align="center">

NOTICE

Office of Civilian Defense

Washington, D.C.

INSTRUCTION TO PATRONS ON PREMISES

IN CASE OF NUCLEAR BOMB ATTACK

</div>

UPON THE FIRST WARNING:

1. STAY CLEAR OF ALL WINDOWS.

2. KEEP HANDS FREE OF GLASSES, BOTTLES, CIGARETTES, ETC.

3. STAND AWAY FROM BAR, TABLES, ORCHESTRA, EQUIPMENT AND FURNITURE.

4. LOOSEN NECKTIE, UNBUTTON COAT AND ANY OTHER RESTRICTIVE CLOTHING.

5. REMOVE GLASSES, EMPTY POCKETS OF ALL SHARP OBJECTS SUCH AS PENS, PENCILS, ETC.

6. IMMEDIATELY UPON SEEING THE BRILLIANT FLASH OF NUCLEAR EXPLOSION, BEND OVER AND PLACE YOUR HEAD FIRMLY BETWEEN YOUR LEGS.

7. THEN KISS YOUR ASS GOODBYE.   (Dundes and Pagter 1992:105)

Like other types of xerographic folklore, this example imitates the style and rhetoric of an "official" document but ultimately mocks institutional instructions, expressing cynicism about surviving a nuclear attack, like the joke mentioned above with the same punchline.

Folklorist and noted scholar of humor Alan Dundes states that people joke about that which is of utmost concern and that jokes serve as a means of projecting anxieties or allowing for psychological catharsis (1987:viii). The infrequency of verbal humor about doomsday indicates that apocalyptic fears and anxieties are scarce, that fears associated with the subject are so great that people consciously avoid joking about it, or that this avoidance is unconscious. Numerous psychologists have demonstrated that a common response to perceptions of imminent death or disaster is denial (e.g., Becker 1973). Robert Jay Lifton, in particular, says that a common response to the threat of nuclear war is conscious or unconscious denial and "numbing" (Lifton and Falk 1982:3–12). This denial is one possible explanation for the relative lack of explicit verbal humor about the end of the world.

Certain topical joking cycles, however, particularly disaster or "sick joke" cycles, may indirectly express fears and anxieties about nuclear apocalypse. According to Willie Smyth, the graphic images of death and mutilation that characterize Challenger Shuttle jokes, for instance, express not only disillusionment with capitalism and fears of personal death but widespread anxiety about global annihilation and fears of destructive technology that can no longer be controlled (1986:254). In an article on the same subject, Elizabeth Simons states that the gruesome imagery and prevalence of sick jokes is directly related to the events of World War II and the influence of the media: "Since World War II the world itself seems to have grown sicker. The Holocaust and the dropping of the atomic bomb broke all earlier sense of the limits of people's inhumanity. . . . The explosion of the Challenger Seven was yet another unprecedented death (to be added to death by Holocaust, atomic explosion, and nuclear accident)" (1986:265–266).

Images of large-scale disaster and the distrust of technology were also manifested in Chernobyl jokes and popular responses to the accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant near Middletown, Pennsylvania, in 1979. After the Three Mile Island disaster, facetious greetings among residents included "My, you look radiant!" or "You're glowing today!" but beliefs and rumors about the dangers of exposure to radioactivity (e.g., sterility, genetically mutated offspring, increased rates of infant mortality) spread rapidly, a reflection of the suspicion that authorities were withholding information, as well as uncertainty about the long-term effects of radiation (Milspaw 1981;

Malsheimer 1986). The nuclear disaster that occurred in Chernobyl, Ukraine, in 1986, provoked similar beliefs and rumors, as well as jokes with ironic and macabre themes that expressed anxieties about uncontrollable nuclear technology ("What has feathers, glows in the dark, and cooks by itself? Chicken Kiev"; "What do you serve with Chicken Kiev? A black Russian"; "What's the weather report from Kiev? Overcast and 10,000 degrees"). These jokes were responses to specific nuclear disasters, but they also express underlying fears and anxieties about nuclear doom.

Cultural critic Kim Levin asserts that the invention of nuclear weapons had a direct influence on American humor and vernacular speech: "The bomb spawned the humor of the '50s, the sick jokes, the Little Willie rhymes, the moron jokes. It crept into the slang: teenagers trying to shut out the world only succeeded in 'bombing around' in crowded Chevy's" (1988:38). In his analysis of the phenomenon of "Dead Baby Jokes" that proliferated in the 1960s, Alan Dundes states that these jokes reflect widespread anxieties about abortion, contraception, and the carnage of the Vietnam War, but also express fear of technology: "Certainly a large percentage of the dead baby jokes explicitly describe babies being ground up by a variety of modern conveniences, e.g., lawnmowers, blenders, razors blades, garbage disposals. Is the joke cycle warning of the possible or probable fate of modern man? Are we doomed to be destroyed by uncaring machines that we ourselves have created allegedly to make life easier and more pleasurable?" (1979:153). Although dead-baby jokes do not explicitly refer to nuclear war, the gruesome imagery of babies being mutilated, burned, and obliterated may unconsciously or symbolically express prevailing fears of nuclear annihilation, which intensified around the time the jokes became current. Children represent, as Robert Jay Lifton remarks, a "symbolization of our own future, of the process of being part of the great chain of being and the flow of generations" (1987:23). The mutilation and obliteration of children (the symbolic destruction of the future) that characterizes the sick and cruel joke cycles that have become especially popular since the 1950s may express to some degree the sense of radical futurelessness that is often a psychological response to threat of nuclear war.

Speech forms, neologisms, and euphemisms associated with nuclear weapons also seem to express a sense of futurelessness and the view that nuclear apocalypse is an inevitability beyond human control. The common use of the expression "the bomb" when referring to the multitude of nuclear warheads that exist in the world reflects popular perceptions of nuclear weapons as a single, massive, inescapable, omnipresent force of destruction. Often in popular speech "the bomb" is described as if it were a superorganic

or supernatural entity with a power and will of its own, beyond human comprehension and control, that ultimately will destroy humanity. According to Paul Chilton, the rhetoric about the bomb frequently has religious connotations associated with supernatural awe and the notion that the bomb's development was somehow destined and inevitable (1986:127–142). He refers to this specialized language associated with nuclear weaponry as "nukespeak," and declares that nuclear metaphors and even grammatical constructions evoke the supernatural character of the bomb and serve to condone nuclear proliferation and acceptance of the idea of nuclear war (1986:128). The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, for instance, has often been referred to as inevitable, rather than something that might have been avoided. Statements about nuclear weapons harnessing the "basic power of the universe" or being a "force from which the sun draws its power," "a vast and mysterious power," embodying the "revelation of the secrets of nature," equate the bomb with supernatural agency. As Chilton observes, "One is left with the supposition that men were not ultimately responsible for the invention and use of the atomic bomb; it was given to them by some outside force" (1986:132). Nuclear weapons, rather than human action, become the agents of apocalypse, with the bomb bestowed with an uncontrollable power that is out of the hands of human beings.

A sense of helplessness and fatalism in the midst of overwhelming forces may evoke what Rudolf Otto, in his book *The Idea of the Holy*, describes as a sense of the numinous: an ineffable sense of terror, magnificence, and limitless power ("absolute overpoweringness"), as well as feelings of personal powerlessness, mystery, danger, and a sense of the "wholly other" (1958:12–24). Thoughts about the enormous destructive power of nuclear weapons and the inevitability of nuclear annihilation may precipitate feelings similar to what Otto called the *mysterium tremendum*—a sense of overwhelming awe, fear, dread, and "a terror fraught with an inward shuddering such as not even the most menacing and overpowering created thing can instil" (1958:14).

The sense of the numinous, like fatalistic beliefs and behavior, is often characterized by the admission of one's own powerlessness and the submission of one's self to a greater power, whether God, fate, or some other external determining agency. As the embodiment of incomprehensible and terrifying destructive power, nuclear weapons may be ascribed with a numinous terror that in the past was associated only with the supernatural, and may inspire similar feelings of helplessness and perhaps an embracing of one's powerlessness. In this way, perhaps, the bomb itself may become a symbol of unalter-

able, supranormal fate for the secular apocalypticist, as a numinous and uncontrollable power that will determine individual fate and the fate of humanity.

Survivalists and Secular Millenarianism

Even though secular apocalyptic ideas pervade American literature, art, film, popular culture, and folklore, secular apocalypticists themselves are not as easily identifiable as religious apocalypticists because they generally do not form into groups or actively solicit members. Some do, however, share and express their beliefs in imminent apocalypse with like-minded individuals.

Many people who identify themselves as survivalists, for instance, anticipate the destruction of current society through a series of catastrophic occurrences, such as nuclear war, worldwide economic collapse, epidemic disease, environmental disasters, or race riots. Preparation for imminent worldly destruction involves developing "survival skills," stockpiling food and weapons, and establishing refuges in remote areas. Determining how widespread survivalism is can be difficult because most survivalists consider anonymity and secrecy crucial to their safety during these cataclysms. The few studies that exist on the subject indicate that survivalism tends to appeal to Caucasian males of conservative or independent political affiliations, but also that survivalists are an eclectic group of individuals and not easily categorized (Coates 1987; Houglum 1986; Linder 1982; Myers 1982). The proliferation of survivalist books, magazines, newsletters, catalogs, and supplies, as well as survivalist shops, conventions, and consultants, reveals that interest in survivalism seems to have increased in recent years, with as many as three million people estimated to be involved in this movement (Linder 1982:11).

The sense of unavoidable cataclysm that motivates much survivalist behavior is exemplified by the following statement by survivalist writer Mel Tappan, who is generally acknowledged as one of the "founding fathers" of the survivalist movement:

> We are about to witness the profound disruption of this country and, possibly, the entire civilized world. Barring some *deus ex machina* miracle, there is no longer any practical way to prevent it and, unless you are willing to believe for yourself that what I am telling you here is truth, you will probably become a victim of this holocaust without ever having the opportunity to strike a blow in behalf of your country or yourself. (Tappan 1981:1)

Survivalist publications and newsletters consistently maintain that impending catastrophes will completely destroy society as it currently exists. According to one writer, "What all survivalists share is a belief that something terrible will happen soon, and that people had better get ready for it" (Myers 1982:12). Whether that eventuality is envisioned as economic collapse, racial conflicts, or nuclear war, many survivalists insist that these future catastrophes are inevitable.

Of the various apocalyptic scenarios prepared for by survivalists, nuclear conflagration is by far the most predominant (Coates 1987:9; Houglum 1986:69–70; Myers 1982:13). Unlike individual responses to the threat of nuclear war that are characterized by denial, avoidance, or escapism, survivalists have developed specific plans for dealing with the nuclear destruction of society. Researcher James Coates maintains that survivalism is a means of directly coping with the fear of nuclear annihilation and "the terrors of post-Hiroshima life on a fragile and unfriendly planet. . . . Instead of worrying about how to prevent the coming holocaust, these Survivalists have devoted their energy to planning how to prosper by it" (1987:9).

In his book *Life after Doomsday*, prominent survivalist author Bruce Clayton states that of the numerous potential cataclysms that threaten the United States (such as famine, epidemic disease, economic collapse, political and religious disruption, and various natural and environmental calamities), "nuclear war is both the greatest possible catastrophe our nation could ever face and the most immediate and continuous threat to our lives" (1980:14). After conducting a statistical analysis on the probability of a nuclear cataclysm occurring in the near future, Clayton concludes that "under these circumstances, the advent of nuclear war can be regarded as a certainty. Only the date is unpredictable" (1980:15). Like religious apocalypticists, the beliefs and rhetoric of many survivalists assert that predicted future events are unalterable by human effort. Instead of being part of a divinely ordained plan for the world, survivalists contend that these cataclysmic events will inevitably occur as the consequence of "natural laws," human ignorance and violence, uncontrollable technology, governmental ineptitude and deceit, or conspiracies by sinister groups.

Survivalist literature assures readers that with the proper planning, preparation, and training they will endure even the most devastating catastrophes. As Clayton states, "Believe it or not, *even a nuclear war is survivable.* With an eye toward realistic preparation, you can see to it that your family and a small group of friends will be able to live through the holocaust and the post-attack period with a minimum of unpleasantness" (1980:17). Clayton provides exten-

sive information about survival strategies, discussing in detail various types of shelters, plans for evacuation, food storage, foraging, alternative energy sources, weapons, emergency medicine, the tactics of self-defense, and the psychology of managing people during a disaster. Some survivalists have formed groups and purchased property in rural areas that they plan to inhabit once society collapses or when urban areas become too dangerous. The more retreatist survivalists have relocated to remote areas where they await the apocalypse. By providing individuals with a plan of action, survivalism may transform a sense of helplessness or resignation about inevitable societal destruction into an ethos of self-reliance and self-salvation.

Although there are some religious survivalists (midtribulationists and posttribulationists) who believe that coming catastrophes are part of the foreordained tribulation period that they will have to endure prior to the Rapture, it appears that the majority of survivalists expect that imminent worldly cataclysms will be natural or human-made. Some of these secular survivalists, however, envision the renewal of society after its destruction. Like other millenarians, these individuals are pessimistic about the current society and believe that future disasters will hasten the transformation of the world. Similar to dispensationalists and the Baysiders, who regard apocalypse as a purification of the earth prior to the establishment of a millennial paradise, these millenarian survivalists anticipate a catastrophic cleansing of the planet, the abolishment of government, and a state of unlimited, anarchistic freedom.

As Michael Barkun notes, some Christian Identity survivalists envision an apocalypse that will involve the genocide of specific racial or religious minorities (1990; 1994:213–217). The racist millenarian tendency of this paramilitary minority within the survivalist movement is exemplified by the writings of Kurt Saxon, who states that World War III "will be a blessing for survivors. We can start anew, hopefully avoiding past errors . . . the earth's surplus population is long overdue for a culling" (Myers 1982:45). Saxon's writings anticipate a WASP golden age free from "foreign," nonwhite inhabitants, who, he asserts, will have been eliminated during the collapse of civilization. Another racist post-apocalyptic scenario is described by researcher James Coates, who observes that the survivalist right is characterized by the idea "that the world is on the verge of some form of catastrophic renewal, after which the stage will be set for them to eliminate the Jews, blacks, Hispanics, Catholics, and others who are their targets" (1987:10). Using the eschatological images of the Bible to support its ideology, the apocalypse imagined by the survivalist right is the pivotal moment in which a contaminated society will be destroyed and humanity "cleansed" of racial and religious "impurities." Life after apocalypse

often is envisioned as an Edenic terrestrial paradise with white Adam-and-Eve-like survivors repopulating a pristine planet.

The millenarian aspects of survivalism clearly resemble religious apocalyptic traditions that emphasize the salvation of a select few rather than society as a whole. The dangers and crises that threaten humanity are viewed as unsolvable by human effort, and, like many religious apocalypticists, most hard-core survivalists have "given up" on a corrupt society that they consider to be doomed. Although human action is regarded as futile in averting catastrophes and saving society, personal salvation is possible through self-sufficiency, retreatism, and the development of certain prescribed skills and behaviors. The feelings of powerlessness otherwise evoked by fears of nuclear annihilation and other imminent disasters are displaced by elaborate preparations that provide the hope of surviving doomsday. Unlike the promise of planetary escape in the Rapture, the protection afforded by the Baysiders' "spiritual armor," and other assurances of supernatural intervention or protection, secular survivalists must rely on their own skill, resourcefulness, and rugged individualism to endure societal destruction. The majority of survivalists seem to embrace the fatalistic view that nuclear war and other cataclysms are inevitable, envisioning themselves as post-apocalyptic pioneers who will be the dominant inhabitants of a devastated new frontier and who will gradually rebuild society from the ruins.

Visions of Apocalypse in Punk Subculture

Survivalism is one of the more obvious examples of secular apocalyptic thinking, but ideas about imminent societal destruction also have been a part of the worldview of numerous other subgroups in the United States during the past four decades, particularly so-called countercultures and youth subcultures.[11] Unlike various groups in the 1960s and 1970s that expressed the millenarian hope that society would be transformed and redeemed, the behavior and rhetoric of members of the punk subculture in the late 1970s was characterized by pessimism, nihilism, and a sense of impending societal destruction. Apocalyptic ideas were not necessarily the defining characteristic of punk worldview; however, a sense of imminent doom was a dominant theme, consistently expressed in song lyrics, fanzines, newsletters, posters, manifestoes, beliefs, and behavior. As Dick Hebdige observes, "The rhetoric of punk was drenched in apocalypse: in the stock imagery of crisis and sudden change" (1979:27). Greil Marcus, commenting on early punk music, notes that it "was

millenarian from the beginning, certain to lead the listener into the promised land, or forty years in the wilderness" (1989:5). The apocalyptic temperament of punk ethos and aesthetic is also suggested by Ted Morgan, who observes that "the punk scene flourished with the coming of the age of the first generation raised on the concept of nuclear annihilation, the Soviets having announced in 1950 that they had the Bomb" (1988:537). Although the apocalyptic themes of punk worldview have been noted by other writers (cf. Laing 1978:124), as well as punks themselves, extended analyses of this aspect of punk rhetoric, belief, and style have not been made. This discussion concentrates on various manifestations of the punk culture in late 1970s and early 1980s, before punk was transformed into a variety of other subcultural and musical movements.[12]

Punk made its debut in the popular media in the summer of 1976, primarily as the result of the scandalous antics of the rock band the Sex Pistols. Much of the attention focused upon their style of body adornment, their loud and "obnoxious" music, their "self-mutilation" (burning their arms with lighted cigarettes and scratching their faces with needles), and their obscene behavior (cursing on a nationally televised talk show and performing a "spitting and vomiting act" at Heathrow Airport). It was not long before a variety of other punk bands appeared, the members of which generally had little or no prior musical training. These initial groups emphasized a raw, amateur musical style and a self-effacing, "anti–rock star" approach. The do-it-yourself attitude of punk is epitomized by the often-cited advice in the punk fanzine *Sniffin' Glue*, which has an illustration of three finger positions on the neck of a guitar and the caption, "Here's one chord, here's two more, now form your own band."

In general, early punk subculture was characterized by antiromanticism, anticommercialism, and the lack of distinctions between musicians and fans. It also quickly became renowned for a style of adornment calculated to disturb and outrage: dyed hair, mohawks, studded leather jackets, torn clothing, bondage wear, profaned religious articles, tattooing, and safety pins piercing the nose, lips, and ears. Claiming to be anarchists and nihilists, punks offended as many people as they could: some were distressed by the profanation of religious objects and the use of sexually "deviant" paraphernalia; others were disgusted by the emphasis on the sordid and obscene. Punk behavior and rhetoric evoked a "moral panic"—a general horror and condemnation in the popular media that spread throughout society. Punks were demonized and depicted in stereotypical ways as "folk devils" that threatened national morals and the social order (Hebdige 1979:157–158).

Punk became popular when it did because it was a grassroots reaction to the mass marketing, commercialism, and elitism that characterized mainstream rock music; it also captured the mood of the time, giving expression to many of the frustrations and concerns of youth, such as a high unemployment rate, dismal economic conditions, and a pervasive attitude of desperation and futility (Laing 1978:123–125; Hebdige 1979:23–29). The fatalistic underpinnings of punk are noted by Tricia Henry, who states that punks "felt they had 'no future' (one of the slogans which became synonymous with the punk world view), and that their lives had been predestined by a society run by people with unfair advantages (i.e., money and political power). When they finished high school, if they did, they either couldn't find work or were doomed to jobs which they found unbearably boring, and which offered no creative challenge and very little pay" (1989:1). The punk motto "no future," which summed up the sense of fatalism inherent in early punk ethos, comes from the Sex Pistol's song "God Save the Queen" (1977), which became an international punk anthem. In it, Johnny Rotten screams:

> God save the Queen
> The fascist regime
> It made you a moron
> A potential H-bomb
>
> God save the Queen
> She ain't no human being
> There is no future
> In England's dream
>
> No future
> No future
> No future
> For you. . . .

The sense of cultural pessimism, futurelessness, and nihilism expressed by the Sex Pistols appealed to disaffected youth around the world, and punk quickly became a global phenomenon. Because early punk music was generally not promoted by the record industry or played on the radio, knowledge about the subculture was communicated primarily by word of mouth at record stores, nightclubs, and other meeting places, as well as through correspondences and hundreds of fanzines run by punks themselves, such as *Punk, Sniffin' Glue, Search and Destroy, Rotten to the Core, Slash, Maximumrocknroll, Damage, World War III,* and *Flipside.* The grassroots character of punk is

exemplified by the fact that even though "God Save the Queen" was banned on British radio and some stores refused to sell the record, it rose to the top of the music charts in England.

Unlike British punk, the American punk movement was not so much a response to economic oppression as an expression of alienation from and disgust for mainstream values. Like their British counterparts, however, American punks often embraced a sense of societal disintegration, fatalism, and futurelessness. As a former punk from New York put it: "I liked that time of decay. There was a nihilism in the atmosphere, a longing to die. Part of the feeling of New York at that time was this longing for oblivion, that you were about to disintegrate, go the way of this bankrupt, crumbling city. Yet that was something almost mystically wonderful" (Savage 1991:133).

The sentiment that there was no future and that society was collapsing pervaded American punk fanzines and lyrics. The well-known documentary film about punks in Los Angeles, *The Decline of Western Civilization* (1981), by Penelope Spheeris, captures this sense of pessimistic inevitability, epitomized by singer Darby Crash of the band the Germs, who was one of the first and most influential punk singers in Southern California. Crash performed in a state of drug- and alcohol-induced oblivion and eventually committed suicide. Punk self-destructiveness often has been interpreted as an aesthetic style rather than an expression of a genuine sense of despair or fatalism, yet there were many punks who were absolutely fatalistic and completely serious about destroying themselves, and many did. The destructive aspect of the punk movement became ritualized in the form of slam-dancing, ceremonial violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and other forms of actual or symbolic self-negation.

This emphasis on destruction was palpable at punk concerts, which often felt like symbolic enactments, or perhaps celebrations, of the collapse of all social order, a momentary, cathartic release from societal constraints. The music shook the walls of the ramshackle clubs and ruined auditoriums in which it was played; band members screamed, collapsed, spit on the audience, had seizures, lacerated their bodies, and threw themselves into the crowd. Fans leaped up on the stage and did the same, hurling bottles and chairs, spitting their approval rather than applauding, and diving head first or somersaulting into the crowd. Punk dances also expressed this sense of destruction and negation: slam-dancing involved running and throwing oneself into the other dancers; and the pogo was a denial of all previous dance aesthetics, as individuals hopped up and down with their arms at their sides and crashed into one another. The editor of *Punk* magazine, John Holmstrom, who authored one of many initial punk manifestoes, states that a punk concert "is like an

assault, you know. What the kids want is World War III, and we're giving it to them" (Selzer 1979:119).

Although feelings of despair and anomie have been expressed by members of numerous youth groups, many punks elevated the idea of personal and societal negation to an aesthetic. The names of various punk bands illustrate this emphasis on destruction, futility, and decay: The Last; Damned; Damage; U.K. Decay; Dead Kennedys; Living Abortions; Null and Void; Suicidal Tendencies; Dead Boys; Wasted Youth; Rotters. The pseudonyms that punks often assumed emphasized the same themes, as well as self-effacement, parody, and the absurd: Johnny Rotten; Sid Vicious; Lorna Doom; Jello Biafra; Adam Bomb; Steve Havoc; Rat Scabies; Tequila Mockingbird; Alan Suicide; Phester Swollen.

The pessimistic and apocalyptic roots of punk music and aesthetics can be traced to earlier influences of musicians such as Lou Reed and the Velvet Underground, Iggy Pop, Patti Smith, Richard Hell, the New York Dolls, and the Ramones. In addition to celebrating street life, urban decay, and social outcasts, these musicians frequently expressed pessimistic, fatalistic, and apocalyptic sentiments. The abusive and destructive aspects of these punk predecessors are exemplified by Iggy Pop, who cut himself with broken glass during performances while he harassed and spit on his audiences. In his well-known song "Search and Destroy" (1973) he screams, "I'm the runaway son of the nuclear A-bomb / I am the world's forgotten boy / The one who searches and destroys." The association of nuclear weapons and the threat of global annihilation with images of personal or societal destruction is a recurring theme in punk and protopunk lyrics. Another source of punk doomsday imagery was reggae music, which is inspired by the millenarian beliefs of Rastafarianism, with its prophecies about the destruction of Babylon (identified variously as white colonialism, oppression, and capitalism). The music of David Bowie, who frequently addressed the theme of societal destruction and decay, also served as an inspiration for early punk apocalypticism. On his album *The Man Who Sold the World* (1970), Bowie sings, "The world is doomed / We can't make it any better"; and the predominant theme of the albums *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972) and *Aladdin Sane* (1973) is that of an alien who visits the earth, which is teetering on self-destruction. As Patricia Henry notes, "Punk rockers embraced Bowie's interests in gender ambiguity and doomsday imagery, while rejecting what they perceived as a distasteful interest in commercial appeal and monetary gain" (1989:36–37).

Punk lyrics about nuclear doomsday are blunt and explicit, and usually accompanied by extremely loud and fast music; sometimes the lyrics are

screamed; occasionally they are spoken with sarcasm or remorse. For instance, in the song "Random Relations" (1981), the lead singer of The Suspects sings slowly and fatalistically:

> I'm living in a world I really hate
> What can I can do?
> Reluctantly I take the bait
> Just like you. . . .
> We've been threatened with a terrible death
> Nuclear war. . . .
> There ain't no fallout shelter,
> No food to eat
> We'll have to take our chances
> With the shriveling flesh on the street.

Punk lyrics about doomsday are generally characterized by themes of total helplessness and despair. In some songs the lyrics are nearly unintelligible; however, the sense of inevitable doom is clear. In the song "4 Minute Warning" by U.K. Chaos (1982), the only comprehensible words, screamed at regular intervals, are "Hiroshima is here again! / Hiroshima is here again! / Four minute warning! / Four minute warning!" In "When the Last Day Comes" by The Insane (1982), the lyrics are mostly incomprehensible, but the song ends with sound effects simulating a nuclear explosion.

Graphic depictions of nuclear catastrophe are also common, narrated as if the bomb had just been dropped, and often detailing the gruesome aftereffects of a nuclear attack:

> I saw a blinding flash of light
> I felt the heat burn through my bones
> A giant mushroom in the sky
> The smell of burning human flesh
> The people scream in agony
> I stumble blindly through the heat
> Memories of life before. . . . (St. Vitus
> Dancers; "The Survivor," no date)

The gritty descriptions that frequently characterize punk visions of nuclear destruction are often provided by a dying punk survivor wandering through the radioactive rubble, who comments on the meaninglessness of apocalypse and condemns politicians. The image of the punk apocalyptic survivor is exemplified in one strip from the comic "Jimbo," by Gary Panter, in which the protagonist, a punk Everyman preoccupied with fears of nuclear annihi-

lation, survives an atomic explosion and runs barefoot and on fire through a burning, decimated city (Panter 1988). The band Vice Squad, in their song "Last Rockers" (1982), provides a comparable vision of nuclear doom:

> Stepping through the rubble
> My head's in a spin
> I hear them fighting the war
> No one can win
> I'm too young to die
> It's too late to live
> As politicians do the thing
> No God can forgive. . . .
> The time has come for us to die
> No memories left to cry
> No chance of a rebirth
> For the last rockers on earth. . . .
> Our job here is to remind
> A day may come in future time
> For we who fought on city streets
> And perished in atomic heat.

Whether consisting of angry or sarcastic statements, or candid, personal reflections that reveal individual fears about nuclear annihilation, punk lyrics often emphasize the destructive power of uncontrollable technology and depict the government as the immoral agent of doomsday. A fatalistic endorsement of nuclear annihilation is expressed in the Passion Killers' "Start Again" (no date):

> Nuclear forces out of control
> Let's start again
> Let's start again
> All buried down in an A-bomb hole
> Let's start again
> Let's start again. . . .
> Nothin's left, not a single soul
> Let's start again
> Let's start again.

In its simplicity, this punk rant epitomizes attitudes about the threat of nuclear apocalypse—feelings of helplessness, pessimism, gallows humor, and perhaps even a yearning for the End and a new beginning.

Numerous other songs, such as Mutual Assured Destruction's "Holocaust," Nick Cave's "City of Refuge," the Minutemen's "Dream Told by Moto," Cru-

cifix's "Annihilation," Elvis Costello's "Hurry Down, Doomsday (The Bugs Are Taking Over)," and the Crass's "Where Next Columbus?" express apocalyptic themes, describing the destructive capabilities of technology and various doomsday scenarios. In songs like Elvis Costello's "Waiting for the End of the World," Fishbone's "Party at Ground Zero," and R.E.M.'s cheerful "It's the End of the World as We Know It (and I Feel Fine)," the doomsday theme becomes a metaphor for other concerns and topics or is subordinate to other ideas. Punk expectations of doomsday are most often associated with nuclear apocalypse and resemble other contemporary secular visions that regard the End as an absurd event brought about by human ignorance, violence, or accident.

In addition to punk song lyrics and rhetoric, themes of worldly destruction also pervade punk art, album covers, posters, fliers, and fanzine illustrations. Images of demolished cities with punks, mutants, or punk skeletons with mohawk hairstyles wandering through the rubble are common, as are images of nuclear annihilation. For example, artist Winston Smith modified Edvard Munch's woodcut *The Scream* for the cover of *Fallout* fanzine, drawing a mushroom cloud behind the shrieking skeletal figure (*Fallout*, no date, issue 3). The depictions of mushroom clouds scattered throughout punk publications acquired an iconic quality; some were accompanied by nihilistic, gallows humor captions such as "SUPPORT NUCLEAR ANNIHILATION!" or "GOD Listens . . . PRAY FOR NUCLEAR ANNIHILATION" (*NO MAG*, "Close-ups' 83" issue, 1983, 15, 20).

Certain aspects of punk body adornment also may be interpreted as symbolic expressions of feelings about personal and societal doom. Some punks explicitly dressed like irradiated survivors of a nuclear catastrophe; others, pale and emaciated, resembling zombies or corpses, presented themselves as symbols of death or physical ailment, portraits of a diseased society that reflected the idea of futurelessness. Adorned in torn and tattered clothing, early punks decorated themselves with emblems and debris that signified depravity, doom, and decay (e.g., images of death, garbage, sexual fetishistic objects, swastikas). Hair was shaved in patches; the body pierced, mutilated, scarred, tattooed, tied with bondage wear, or smeared with fake blood. Makeup was used to give an impression of lifelessness, with lips painted in colors associated with death—black, dark brown, or gray-purple. The overall impression, as one ex-punk stated, was "kinda mealy looking—you know, kinda dead, like after World War III—the walking dead." Punk style was rife with images of death, destruction, and futility, with punks expressing their alienation through communal rituals of symbolic negation and personal acts of self-abuse. Presenting

themselves as symbols of a disintegrating and doomed society, punks enacted their own drama of societal cataclysm, creating the overall impression that they were sacrificing their bodies on the altar of postmodern despair (Wojcik 1995:7–20).

Although images of nuclear apocalypse pervade punk music, literature, art, and adornment to an extent unprecedented in previous youth subcultures, punk feelings about nuclear war may in fact be fairly representative of nuclear anxieties among contemporary youth. As research on fears of nuclear war among children and adolescents has indicated, a sense of fatalism, hopelessness, and resignation about the inevitability of nuclear war seems to be extremely pervasive among young people (Mack 1982). For instance, in a study that surveyed the attitudes of 1,424 adolescents, 82 percent believed that civilization would be destroyed in their lifetimes (Blackwell and Gessner 1983). Another study, mentioned previously, revealed that more than 33 percent of seventeen thousand high school seniors surveyed said they feared that nuclear or biological annihilation would be the fate of humankind within their lifetimes (La Farge 1987:27–28). A survey of the literature on children's fears of nuclear war concludes that "over the past 25 years, separate surveys of children and adolescents in varying locales have repeatedly indicated that children are expressing emotional distress related to the threat of nuclear war. Themes of fear, powerlessness, resignation, hopelessness, and despair are present to some extent in all samples" (Duncan et al. 1986:33). In another study, involving interviews with children from 1961 to 1982 about their thoughts on nuclear war, it was found that the primary means of coping with nuclear war anxieties was by denying the existence of the threat (Schwebel 1982:610), a response that supports Lifton's hypothesis about pervasive psychological numbing associated with the thought of nuclear war. The study also states, however, that those who did think about the possibility of nuclear war generally felt powerless and helpless, with some expressing feelings of bitter resentment and a sense of betrayal toward adults for bringing about a world with nuclear weapons (Schwebel 1982, cited in Duncan et al. 1986:30).

The sense of resentment, betrayal, anger, and helplessness associated with the threat of nuclear war is clearly expressed in the early punk subculture. Punks, in general, did not appear to be desensitized to nuclear fears but through their rhetoric and style often evoked graphic images of nuclear apocalypse, confronting the terror of the bomb directly. The grassroots, participatory, and noncommercial nature of the punk subculture allowed for the articulation of diverse ideas and concerns, particularly apocalyptic ones, that might not otherwise be expressed in dominant discourses.

Although any punks embraced the imagery and rhetoric of societal destruction, for others, apocalyptic themes were simply an expression of punk style, a fashion statement, a way to shock, or a means of articulating a sense of nihilism or anger. When I asked one ex-punk if the punk movement expressed ideas about the end of the world, he replied, "We didn't really talk about it that much, but there was the general attitude of 'Who cares? Everything's fucked and it'll probably get worse.'" Another ex-punk stated, "I would say, *definitely*, punk was apocalyptic. The bomb, the feeling that there was no future, no opportunities. But there were other things too—a lot of political ideas being thrown around." Another individual replied, "Some of it is [apocalyptic], but more nihilistic really. But punk was also a way to shock society, to wake up a dead society, show people how bad it is, that maybe everything's not all right." For some punks, then, the metaphor of apocalypse was adopted as a means of expressing a sense of social rebellion and societal dissatisfaction, as well as general feelings of fatalism and futurelessness.

Many of the ex-punks I spoke with stated that the punk worldview was characterized by its pervasive emphasis on destruction, epitomized, according to several individuals, by the lyrics of the song "Anarchy in the U.K." (1976), by the Sex Pistols:

> I am an antichrist
> I am an anarchist
> Don't know what I want,
> But I know how to get it
> I wanna destroy passers-by
>
> 'Cos I wanna be
> Anarchy. . . .
> Destroy. . . .

When I asked about the meaning of this emphasis on destruction, one ex-punk responded that it had no "meaning": "It was just destruction for destruction's sake." Another stated: "Punk was revolutionary in a way, but punk really didn't have a plan—just mindless anarchy—we just wanted to destroy everything."

This emphasis on "destruction"—personal destruction, societal destruction, the destruction of all dominant discourses—reveals the apocalyptic themes in punk. Having no political and economic power, and believing that they had no possibilities for improving their situation, many punks regarded their own lives as "doomed" and "fated." The punk emphasis on destruction and futurelessness seems to be an extension of feelings of personal helpless-

ness, anger, and a desire for the obliteration of an unjust society that punks felt had condemned them from birth. In this regard, the punk worldview bears some resemblance to the ideas of religious apocalypticists who express a contempt for society, reject the achievements of the modern world, regard the current social order as corrupt and unredeemable, and feel that the present world will be, or must be, destroyed. A shared sense of powerlessness and fatalism is integral to these visions of imminent societal destruction, in addition to the desire for an end to the suffering associated with a debased and evil world.

Although punk rhetoric calls for the destruction of a corrupt and bankrupt society, the punk Day of Judgment is not formulated as part of a coherent eschatology, and punks generally had no articulated plans for a redemptive new realm to replace a world destroyed. Devoid of the promise of societal redemption, punk ideas about the future often were both fatalistic and nihilistic, characterized by a sense of meaninglessness and doom.

The apocalyptic rhetoric that pervades the punk subculture and the other ideas and images about doomsday discussed in this chapter depict societal destruction as inevitable and offer little hope for the salvation of humanity. These secular doomsday visions are a radical departure from traditional apocalyptic beliefs and narratives that offer some promise of human survival, redemption, or worldly transformation. Although recent secular doomsday speculation may share themes with religious apocalyptic views, such as the wickedness and unrecuperability of humanity, it differs in its emphasis on the meaninglessness of doomsday brought about by destructive technology and human ignorance. The senselessness and absurdity of worldly annihilation is expressed repeatedly in secular doomsday thought—whether in the punk culture, in gallows humor of numerous authors and artists, in films such as *Dr. Strangelove* and *On the Beach*, or in popular jokes about the bomb.

Interpretations of worldly destruction as meaningful or meaningless are determined by the ways that individuals attribute causality in their explanations for the apocalypse. For example, nuclear weapons, famine, and environmental disaster, identified by dispensationalists as divinely determined signs that reveal God's foreordained plan, are considered by secular apocalypticists to be the causes, not the signs, of a meaningless End brought about by human beings. Although much secular speculation about worldly destruction is not fatalistic and postulates that people can prevent predicted cataclysms, many secularists do agree with their religious counterparts in their pessimistic evaluation of the present, the unrecuperable state of the human condition, and the sense that human beings are powerless to alter the fate of the world. Attributing no meaning to worldly destruction, secular visions of the End are

pervaded by images of the helplessness of human beings and their manipulation by larger, determining forces (the government, multinational corporations, the bomb).

Survivalism is an exception to this view of human powerlessness in the face of inevitable apocalypse. Rather than feelings of helplessness, survivalists seek a sense of personal control and self-salvation by preparing to endure anticipated cataclysms, perhaps even harboring the expectation of worldly renewal following the catastrophes. Survivalists, however, are atypical among secularists in their expectations of living through an apocalyptic scenario. Ideas about the unalterable destruction of the world, when lacking the mythic component of worldly renewal and the belief in divine control, ultimately may be expressed as a form of nihilistic fatalism. The next chapter further explores the nature of fatalism and its role in contemporary apocalyptic thought, and suggests reasons for the persistence and continued appeal of apocalyptic belief and behavior.