

Agata Bielik-Robson

SEMINAR:

Apocalypse, Now: The Culture of the End in Philosophical Perspective

Author:	Prof. dr hab. Agata Bielik-Robson
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	AUTUMN Semester All Years
HOURS	30

FREQUENCY	3 x 45 every two weeks
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THE COURSE CORRESPONDS TO TOPICS: Contemporary philosophy, history of ideas, social thought, political thought.

ASSESSMENT:

- The course is available to all students (General course open to all students)
- The course to be conducted in English
- Credit requirements: active participation in classes
- Time of classes: Alternate Tuesdays, 17-20, both *in situ* and hybrid
- Begins: 17:00
- Duration: 17:00-20:00 (4 x 45 minutes) every two weeks (for a total of 30 hours)
- Commencement date:

COURSE AIMS AND CONTENT:

Today, we are repeatedly told to live in an epoch of the end. The idea of living in the end times became today so hegemonic and widespread that it began to generate a new universal “existential mood” or *Stimmung*, to borrow Martin Heidegger’s term. Thus, living in end times is not just a matter of individual experience, but determines the present cultural context as a whole. We live in a “culture of the end”, and this can be observed in all social fields, from art to politics, from science to humour. For a very long time, i.e. from the 2nd century onwards, the concept of the “end” in the Western tradition involved an ambiguous connotation: it meant both the limit and the goal, both catastrophe and utopia, both despair and hope, both radical anxiety and freedom to a future development. Today, however, we are more and more surrounded by the “existential mood” of despair and anxiety which is based upon the irreversible loss of the world, without any promise of a new beginning. The ambiguity of the “end” is more and more conceived in a unilateral sense of the irrevocable limit, rather than the desired goal which entails the expectation of something new and better. Rather than the dialectics of despair and hope, of anxiety and freedom, of catastrophe and utopia, we are witnessing today a radical disjunction between the negative and positive elements, with a strong advantage given to the former. The new

Stimmung is decidedly pessimistic and, because of its all-pervasive negativity, demobilizing: the imminent apocalypse can only be passively awaited, because there is no hope of preventing it. Hence, the questions which the seminar wants to answer: *What is so different in today's images of the end with respect to the past ones? When did this change occur? And why?*

By answering these questions, the seminar will aim: 1) at stating a deeply reflected philosophical diagnosis the present moment of the "culture of the end," by analysing the structure and logic of the various narratives of the end, particularly the reasons and causes for the detachment of their two leading affects, despair and hope; 2) at recovering for our present culture the idea of the end that is not necessarily bound only to despair and anxiety, but rather sees the latter as inextricably linked to hope and, consequently, to other affirmative affects and concepts such as courage and freedom to actively strive towards a new social change. While we witness today the dramatic passage from the uniformly optimistic goal-oriented hope to the equally uniformly pessimistic end-awaiting desolation, the seminar wants to consider a dialectical possibility of a new hope arising directly out of despair, without, at the same time, invalidating it: a new positive attitude/ *Stimmung* which could shake the passive mood of universal doom and once again begin to motivate our actions.

KNOWLEDGE TO BE ACQUIRED:

Participants are expected to acquire: (1) a basic orientation in the philosophical theories of linear temporality and history; (2) a knowledge of arguments used in the polemics between various philosophical and theological schools referring to the concept of the apocalypse.

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES:

Knowledge:

- Improved knowledge on the place and role of the humanities, the social, exact and natural sciences in early and contemporary culture;
- Comprehensive understanding of the terminology of the humanities and social sciences and knows how to use it;
- Knowing in depth the relationships among different humanities disciplines studying works of art in culture and the sociological context of cultural activity;
- Knowing and understanding the main methods of analysing and interpreting products of culture in conjunction with tradition;
- Having good organized knowledge on the main trends in philosophical and social thought in a historical and contemporary perspective.

Skills:

- Selecting and interpreting information from different textual, iconographic and electronic sources;
- Analysing artistic, philosophical and sociological texts using the appropriate research tools, and presenting the results of such work;

- Basic research skills enabling the formulation of research problems from the humanities, philosophy, literature, and arts;
- Basic skills in using interdisciplinary research methods and tools to analyse phenomena of contemporary culture;
- The capacity to take part in conferences, symposia and discussions on literary, artistic and philosophical topics.

Social Competence:

- Understanding the dynamics of scientific, cultural and social development and keeping up with new research methods and paradigms;
- Understanding the principles of tolerance and cultural differences;
- Understanding the importance of Europe's cultural diversity and heritage;
- Participating actively in cultural and social life taking advantage of all forms offered by media, the arts and science

TIME & VENUE:

IFiS PAN (Staszic Palace) – Tuesdays fortnightly: 17.00 – 20.00. Mostly *in situ*, occasionally hybrid

The Syllabus

1. **Introduction to the Course.** The preliminary lecture outlining the problem of the end in modern humanities in historical, as well as philosophical-theological perspective.
2. **Apocalypse: from the Book of Revelation to Joachim da Fiore. Part 1.** Reading: St John, *Book of Revelation*. Questions: What is the apocalyptic genre? How and why did it emerge?
3. **Apocalypse: from the Book of Revelation to Joachim da Fiore. Part 2.** Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (fragments on Joachim da Fiore and Hegel). Questions: To what extent was the concept of apocalypse secularised in modernity?
4. **Linear Time: from the Beginning to the End. Part 1.** Reading: Susan Buck-Morss, *Year 1. A Philosophical Recounting* (MIT Press, 2021). Questions: What does it mean to think in terms of linear temporality? What are the existential and political consequences of living and thinking in terms of historical development: both the beginning and the end of history?
5. **Linear Time: from the Beginning to the End. Part 2.** Reading: Susan Buck-Morss, *Year 1. A Philosophical Recounting* (MIT Press, 2021). Questions: What differentiates the optimistic narratives of universal progress from those of the universal fall? Can these two come into a combination? What is the true narrative of Western modernity?

6. **Tarrying with the Apocalypse.** Reading: G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (fragments). Questions: What is Beautiful Soul and why is it dangerous? How can the apocalyptic mode of thinking be used in the philosophical dialectics? Is dialectics born out of tarrying with the idea of the end?
7. **Differance or How to Defer the Apocalypse.** Reading: Jacques Derrida, "Not Apocalypse, not Now" and "On the Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted by Philosophy." Questions: In what way does the Derridean concept of the differance continue the Hegelian project of dialectical tarrying with the apocalypse? Why is the notion of delay central to the Derridean affirmation of the world?
8. **Living with Entropy or the Hope in Reverse.** Reading: Walter Benjamin, "Theological-Political Fragment." Questions: What does it mean to be according to the 'rhythm of transience'? How can we still have hope in the dying universe? Is happiness possible despite the entropic shape of our finitude?
9. **Living through Entropy: Agamben's To Be Like Not-Be.** Reading: Giorgio Agamben, "*Sulla fine del mondo*" ("On the End of the World") and "Bartleby, the Messiah" (*Potentialities*). Questions: Can the end be internalised and become a new ground of being? Is Agamben's 'living-through-entropy' a variant of the Heideggerian *Gelassenheit*?
10. **Conclusions: The Neutralisation of the End.** No reading for this final session. Summary and discussion of all conceptual threads. The final question: Can the enigmatic and inescapably theological concept of the end be neutralised thanks to the procosmic philosophical discourses focusing on tarrying with (Hegel), the deferral of (Derrida) or simply ignoring (Benjamin/ Agamben) the end? Can we still restore a spark of hope in the midst of the apocalyptic despair?