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**‘Apocatastasis’: redefining tropes of the apocalypse  
in Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean’s *Signal to Noise***

**Abstract**

‘The world is always ending, for someone.’

This article closely analyses the comic *Signal to Noise*; arguing that this text redefines common tropes and symbols of the apocalypse (clock, sundial, bible, skeleton and so forth) in order to depict the apocalypse as an ongoing, static state. It examines the effects of this redefinition, specifically considering the depiction of time as cyclical and the denial of reality. By redefining the end of the world as cyclical, personal, and (in many senses) apocryphal, *Signal to Noise* rewrites the notion of the apocalypse in postmodern terms.

The article argues that the comics medium is essential in achieving this. It demonstrates this by discussing the interplay between word and image; the effect of the comic’s individuality of style (collages and abstract art; together with poetry and stream-of-consciousness language); the role of the alterity created by the aesthetic of the comics medium (where everything is overtly stylised/false); and the notion of non-linear time as epitomised by the comic book page.

## Apocatastasis: redefining tropes of the apocalypse in

### Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean's *Signal to Noise*

'We are always living in the final days.' (9.8)<sup>i</sup>

From Nostradamus to science fiction, humanity's fascination with the end has taken many forms. Modern media have interpreted the apocalypse in a variety of ways: whether as literal setting or event, extended metaphor, or constant threat. Popular bands have sung about 'The End of the World [as we know it]' (R.E.M., 1987; Ash, 2007) and in 2003 rock band Muse demanded an 'Apocalypse Please'. Respected and popular writers such as Richard Matheson (*I Am Legend*, 1954), Stephen King (*The Stand*, 1978), and Cormac McCarthy (*The Road*, 2006) have created post-apocalyptic worlds; and films such as *Mad Max* (George Miller, 1979), *Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984), *The Day After Tomorrow* (Roland Emmerich, 2004) and *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006) use similar settings. Others such as *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) and *Apocalypto* (Mel Gibson, 2006) instead utilise the term as extended metaphor. Other genres such as zombie fiction also frequently rely on post-apocalyptic settings, for example as seen in Robert Kirkman and Charlie Adlard's *The Walking Dead* (2003-present), Max Brook's *World War Z* (2006) or Isaac Marion's *Warm Bodies* (2010).

Alternatively, the apocalypse is used as a plot device or ongoing threat in films such as *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978) and in television series such as *Doctor Who* (1963-present), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Heroes* (2006-2010). This usage has also been long-present in comics, and in fact DC Comics' *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (Marv Wolfman and George Pérez, 1985) relied on this trope to redefine and reconstitute its

character universe(s).<sup>ii</sup> In this way the apocalypse has been used and reused by popular culture and its artefacts to the point where we might even say it is perpetually present. As such, maybe a traditional definition is now obsolete and millennial fictions such as these have created and are relying upon a new conception of the term.

This article will discuss the re-presentation of the apocalypse in Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean's *Signal to Noise*, which tells the story of the Director; a filmmaker dying of cancer who continues to work on his final movie, despite knowing he will never finish it. Titled *Apocatastasis*, this film is set in the final hours of 999AD and tells of a group of villagers who journey to the top of a nearby mountain to await the end of the world. This article will demonstrate how *Signal to Noise* breaks with the established meaning of the term 'apocalypse' in a variety of ways, instead defining this concept as multiple, using both macrocosm (the village in the film) and microcosm (the Director as an individual). The comic redefines the tropes traditionally used to convey the apocalypse such as the clock face which, it will be argued, instead represents time as cyclical and is also used to invoke the notion of the apocryphal or counterfeit. The article concludes by examining the effects of this redefinition of the 'apocalypse' as something static, constant and false; specifically considering the resultant questioning of reality and problematisation of temporality<sup>iii</sup> and the ways in which the comics medium informs this process.

### The illusion of salvation

The traditional understanding of 'apocalypse' may be best defined as a religious event bringing about the end of the world.<sup>iv</sup> However, the term technically refers to the unveiling of God, and not to the destruction of the world, just of our preconceptions. Despite this, the apocalyptic tradition has in general focused on the material consequences of this event and

attempts to set a date for Armageddon began as early as the first century AD. This tradition has continued, for example the nineteenth-century Millerite movement deduced an exact date of October 22<sup>nd</sup> 1843 from biblical interpretative principles (O’Leary, 207). More recently – and memorably – concerns about Y2K technology provided another proposed date for the end of the world that did not happen. The most recent rumoured apocalypse was taken from the ‘long count’ Mesoamerican calendar (used by the Mayan culture, amongst others) which shows a cycle of 5126 years that ended in 2012 (the most common date suggested being 21 December 2012). However, translation into the modern Gregorian calendar means this apocalyptic date could be wrong by at least 60 days, and in addition there is no evidence that the end of the Mayan calendar cycle has any doomsday relevance – astrologists such as Phil Plait have argued that it simply marks the beginning of a new sun cycle (O’Neill 2012; Plait 2008).

That Armageddon has failed to materialise to date has discredited other such specific resolutions of the temporal theme, although not the concept. Writers such as Hal Lindsey have resorted to a different terminology and in *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) Lindsey instead lists a set of criteria for Armageddon, rather than using religious literature and principles to deduce an exact date. Although this book implied the apocalyptic year to be 1988, Lindsey’s use of terms such as ‘generation’, which has multiple connotations, prevented this from being conclusive. This strategy is echoed by preacher Jerry Falwell, who stated in a sermon that ‘I expect the Lord to return in the 21st century to Rapture at his church. [...] No one knows the day or the hour, but in my heart I believe it because there are no more predicted events that need to happen before our Lord can return.’ (Thomas Road Baptist Church, Lynchburg, Virginia, 27 August 2006) (*Media Matters*, 2006)

In non-religious terms, the Y2K panic that pervaded society during the final few

months of 1999 seems an obvious example of secular belief in the end of the world. Since then, our cultural climate has sustained an awareness of the 'environmental apocalypse' proposed by many news sources (see for example McKie, 2007), although the term is not officially endorsed by the majority of environmental groups. However, it seems nonetheless present in the representations of politics and mass media, for example as represented by films such as *An Inconvenient Truth* (Davis Guggenheim, 2006) and *A Crude Awakening: The Oil Crash* (Basil Gelpke and Ray McCormack, 2006), which predict the apocalyptic consequences of our everyday actions. Other films such as *Darfur Now* (Ted Braun, 2007) use the apocalyptic trope to discuss civil war problems and social attitudes.

The apocalypse has thereby come to be defined in multiple ways by a variety of sources, whether secular or religious. *Signal to Noise* addresses this multiplicity and in Chapter 7 the text comments that 'Armageddon gives us a view of a salvation that is *a) collective, b) imminent, c) miraculous*' (7.7). The phrasing of this extract, set out as either a list or multiple-choice, implies a scepticism on the part of the speaker that is echoed at other points in the comic. *Signal to Noise* includes multiple interpretations of the apocalypse, referencing demons, the Rapture, and aliens (8.2). However, all are depicted in negative and diminished terms. The text describes the religious event of the Rapture as 'Some people floating lonely', accompanying an illustration of grey-hued figures suspended from single balloons, hanging motionless in the sky with their heads lowered. More modern perspectives such as Scientology are also referenced in a similar manner: '...others rescued by little lemur aliens with huge copper eyes [...] Everyone goes to the moon.' The banal sweeping statement ('to the moon') undermines these beliefs and, in this way, a collective apocalypse is depicted in the most sceptical of terms.

### An endless procession of little apocalypses

The version offered by *Signal to Noise*, however, is quite different. '[T]here's no big apocalypse' says the Director at one point, 'Just an endless procession of little ones.' (7.1) As befits a comic focusing on the death of a single person, the apocalypse is defined as personal and individual. The text states: 'The world is always ending, for someone. [...] What have you got? One hundred years or much, much less until the end of your world.' (9.8) In *Arguing the Apocalypse*, Stephen O'Leary offers a similar perspective, saying: 'The proper reply to the question [of when will the Last Judgment occur], then, is "It has already occurred; it is always about to occur; it is here now and always has been."' (220) This is a postmodern view, whereby the end of the world is multiple and constantly happening. It also calls to mind Jean-Francois Lyotard's definition of postmodernism, as 'not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant' (Lyotard 1984, 79). The collectively understood notion of a final death might also be described as the kind of legitimised 'grand narrative' that postmodernism denies. Andrés Romero-Jódar (2012: 1008) argues that in *Signal to Noise* time 'is not perceived as a lineal movement towards the future, but as a coherent present which significantly associates event with the past', demonstrating that the comic depicts time in multiple ways, as both subjective and objective. Romero-Jódar points out that while the structure of the comic (Preface, Interface, Postface) recalls an 'objective division of time as past, present and future', this is set against a subjective depiction of time in the world of 'the village' and also disrupted and fragmented at key points in the narrative. *Signal to Noise* thus accords with a wider tradition of philosophical thought also seen in Bruno Latour's assertion that *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991).

Rewriting the apocalypse as personal and imminent also aligns with the tenets of a

comic-book world. In the superhero mythos, for example, the apocalypse is little more than a plot device, as there is always a greater impending danger (Kawa, 216). A similar air imbues *Signal to Noise* which overtly states 'Apocalypses are always just around the corner' (8.1). The text not only revalues and recycles the apocalypse but also the images attached to it; for example pictures of x-rays (1.4) and clock gears (6.6) are repeated. Such repetition is further emphasised by the regular panel arrangement employed by the majority of pages, which use a 4 x 4 grid of same-sized panels.

That said, the tropes and symbols used in *Signal to Noise* are traditional enough to allow us to still understand the comic's events as apocalyptic. The film the Director is making is established early on as a symbolic parallel to his life and it therefore seems fairly obvious that the apocalypse facing his villagers parallels his own death. The Director comments 'I'm making a film in my head' and 'I'm not writing anything down' (1.6), thereby maintaining the plot's visionary and mythical status. This is also emphasised by the anonymity of the village, which is never named. In addition, the movie is introduced as a dream of his, which recalls this tradition of apocalyptic visions, as in the Biblical book of Daniel, or St John's Revelations.

The notion of generation is also employed by the comic to comment on the apocalypse, for example when the Director sees his reflection in the mirror and observes 'for an instant I thought it was my father staring back at me' (5.1). His creations, his movies, are referenced similarly as he says 'I never had any flesh and blood children, you know. Only words, and paintings, and images of light that flickered in the darkness, and were too soon over.' (9.2) These familial images, while calling to mind Lindsey and Falwell's redefinition of the apocalypse in vague terms, also reference the notion of generational, cyclical life. This is emphasised again later in the text when the Director comments 'You are not dead, until

every person that knew you is dead as well' (6.5). This offers another definition of death, one which revolves around understanding memory as life; recalling the existence of the villagers in the Director's mind.

In this way, *Signal to Noise* links its redefinition of the apocalypse (as recurring, multiple and constant) to the term's traditional usage by employing some of the same strategies of expression and treatment of concepts. These include the dream motif, the use made of generations, and the concept of thought as life.

### There is a village in my mind

The village of the film functions at its most basic level as a metaphor for the Director's life, and its apocalypse signifies his own death in a similar manner. The Director says 'There is a village in my mind. A world in my mind' (6.1), and again the expanded metaphor and repetition stress the significance of this statement. However, at other points in the text it is also stated that 'you are the village' (5.2). As such, the symbol is defined more generally as representative of the world inside an individual. Its internally symbolic nature is further emphasised by visual strategies such as entering and leaving it via the human body, as shown at page 9.6 where, after a series of pull-back shots between the seventh and twelfth panels, the characters ultimately become the lines on the Director's hand. This metaphor is also picked up in the text's words, for example when the Director mentions 'lives, etched in the criss-crossings of our palms' (2.1). It is also emphasised through association, as when he says 'the village looks like a model. Like a toy. You could crush it with your *hand*.' (2.1, my emphasis)

From its very introduction, then, the village is overtly fictional. The Director comments of the pictures on his walls 'I pillage their faces, their expressions, their eyes [...]



have stolen many of them for the crowd' (3.1). Although these images then 'take on a life of their own' (2.1), revealing his sources in this way demarks the village as imaginary. It therefore exists in self-conscious fictionality, a point which is further emphasised by the film summary the Director gives in a press conference at the start of the comic, where he says of his movie 'It's about the end of the world *that never happened*, at the end of the *last* millennium.' (1.2, my emphasis)

In this manner, *Signal to Noise* denies the notion of a single, final Armageddon and instead offers a definition of the apocalypse as a series of little deaths, which (if we consider the above discussion of memory-as-life) may not even be physical. This version is postmodern both in its multiplicity and its invocation of an ongoing, ever-present death, a denial of finality that recalls the Lyotardian definition of postmodernism. Romero-Jódar argues that the subjective depiction of time in the world of the village contrasts with its objective depiction in the 'real' world of the comic. However, the text also uses the fictional movie being written by the Director as a metaphor: to simultaneously define his individual, personal death as the end of a world. The common trope of the writer as God is thereby invoked, and death is represented by both macro- and microcosm.

### Cyclical and sequential art

The most obvious recurring symbol used in *Signal to Noise* is the clock face. It is used in a variety of forms and contexts: whether as a repeated image in enclosed panels (6.5), splash pages depicting a close-up of its cogs and gears (2.5-6) or collages where it appears on a tattered poster or is superimposed on the Director's heart (4.2, 6.6). It may seem a somewhat obvious symbol to represent the passage of time; however interpretation of this motif in *Signal to Noise* is more complex than it first appears. For, like the Mayan calendar,

the clock face does not represent the linear passage of time as a timeline or digital watch might. Instead it calls to mind a notion of time as cyclical; as each day ends where the next begins, at midnight. The other symbols used emphasise this strand of meaning, for example where a watch face, compass and sundial are all employed alongside the clock (6.1-2).

Deconstruction of this sequence (shown at fig. 1) produces interesting results. The regular grid layout calls to mind the regular passage of time, the ticking of a clock. We begin at the closest point, with the cogs and gears within the watch, and pull back to focus on the watch face. This contains an inner circle showing compass points, which perhaps also reference the notion of a world within, and inside this a further eight or so numeric dials are present. The panels continue to be lightened as the angle widens, to the point of overexposure and a sudden flash of colour, before the clock face is replaced by a sundial box. This lessens to shadow and brings us to the profile of a face, which subsequently gives way to what appears to be a bible, which is then juxtaposed with the text 'But I won't die'; again referencing the notion of the writer-as-God. The panel then breaks down into pixelation at the bottom of the first page, suggesting its viewpoint is now moving closer to the object in question rather than continuing to pull back. Moving on to page two, the pixels then take on the shapes of people and faces; memories that are captioned with the word 'Remember'. The face is replaced by 'A watch face' that again is repeated using a closer perspective and finally gives way to static from which a photograph of 'a young girl in the rain' emerges.

It is worth noting the anthropomorphic terminology used on the second page, where the caption 'A watch face' links the picture of a human face (upon which numbers have been superimposed) and a dial face. The individual and personal nature of the apocalypse is thereby recalled through body parts such as faces and hands; terms which also refer to

clocks and watches. Further, this sequence seems to be circular – we suspect that, if we pushed forward into the photograph of the girl, pixelation would soon give way to another world of cogs and dials. As such it emphasises the cyclical nature of time as also represented by the clock face. The comics medium brings a postmodern emphasis to this message as, within comics, narrative time is also represented as spatial rather than linear. This takes place both within the panel, whose events occur as we read its contents from left to right; and also on the page itself – as all around the present panel are surrounding panels depicting past and future events. As such, this sequence may perhaps be defined as cyclical (rather than sequential) art, whose form replicates its content.

### Midnight for the world

The clock symbol is also used to introduce a further strand of fiction within the narrative, when the Director muses on an apocryphal story about midnight mass in Rome at the 999AD millennium. Within this fiction, a crowd gathers outside St Peters to watch the great clock chime in the New Year:

The hands of the great clock edge toward the top of the dial. Tick, tick, tick. The clock begins to strike midnight. And then... Then it stops. Just stops. People scream. Some die: their hearts stop with the clock. There is panic and madness and fear, in this dark midnight. (6.3-4)

The clock then starts again, chimes twelve times, and the people return to face their world.

On these pages, the word 'tick' is placed at isolated points, spacing out its delivery and evoking the pause between each awaited sound. Form mirrors content in this way, also shown as the crowd's madness and panic is represented by indistinct images of distorted faces looming from the dark background (6.4). This background splash page is laid behind the ongoing narrative; and perhaps this is a comment on humanity's underlying madness –

hidden beneath and controlled by a cog-like structure of sanity? Such an interpretation is supported visually by the face created from overlaid collage materials on the first page; and also verbally by the subsequent comment 'We impose patterns on what we experience' (6.5), which captions a picture of clock mechanics.

The Director notes that the story cannot possibly be true, as 'the dial face clock was not invented until the 1300s, and the minute hand took another 300 years to appear' (6.4). However he further observes that 'with no clock the story is meaningless' (6.5), a comment which is juxtapositioned directly alongside the above statement regarding the imposition of patterns on experience. This thereby comments on the multiple possibilities for defining time as mentioned above.

The apocryphal nature of this vignette is also emphasised by a notion of cyclical time that is conveyed both visually and textually – as when, for example, the anticipated end is described as 'midnight for the world' (6.3). This phrase is suspect since, as discussed, midnight does not equate with finality and may be viewed equally as the dawn of a new day; just as the 'end' of the Mayan calendar arguably only marks the start of a new sun cycle (like an odometer rolling over from 9 to 0) rather than an ending (Plait, 2008). The panels at the foot of page 6.4 also indicate falsity as a panoramic series of pictures masquerade as sequential ones, and this technique may also reference the fictional status of what is being told.

In this sense the clock motif returns us to the self-conscious fictionality already invoked by the 'village in my head'. This again comments on the apocalyptic tradition – as the Director says of his previous movies: 'In my worlds people died / And I thought that was honest. I thought I was being honest.' (4.2) His argument appears to be that he believed his movies to be truthful because they contained death; whereas in fact the complete opposite

is true. This is not only because 'They were actors. And they played at being dead' (4.2), but also because *Signal to Noise* has revealed the notion of a singular apocalyptic death to be a lie.

As such, the apocalypse instead becomes a tool with which to comment on reality as, in the final pages, the Director writes himself into his own movie. He states 'I finished the script. [...] It's real, now. It exists in its own right, apart from me.' (9.1) The Director then enters his movie, via a close up shot of his hand at the bottom of this page. After reassuring his villagers 'It won't happen. Honestly. It isn't the end' (9.2) he proceeds to wait with them, and offers the reader a commentary, breaking the fourth wall to looking directly at us and addressing us directly as he does so.<sup>v</sup> This sequence closes with the announcement 'It's time' (9.2) and the double splash page that follows freezes the moment for us, showing the mountainside alone from its surroundings, floating in space. This static scene certainly appears to be an apocalyptic moment, although we are unable to deduce any tangible event or signal that might indicate this; even the colours used (i.e. the choice of blue rather than red) provide no clue.

The next pages allow our return from the village to the Director's reality as his hand falls to his side, indicating his death. Neon line drawings of fantastic animals appear here and have been used previously at emotional moments in the comic, and therefore these may indicate the departure of life. However, even as the Director's life ebbs away, it is revealed on the facing page that the villagers are still alive – that 'Nobody died.' (9.6) Even the 'real' apocalypse of personal death is undermined by the presence of this statement.

The ending of the comic is set some months later and shows Inanna, the Director's assistant, collecting his possessions. She is given the script, entitled 'Apocatastasis' and sits down to read (10.4). As she does so we are treated to a repetition of the movie scenes with

which the book opens, but in more concrete form. In this, the written script, prefixes such as 'perhaps' have been removed and the phrasing has become more definite. But more importantly, the final panels shown here reveal the Director standing with his villagers on the hill, waiting for the end of their world. His continued existence in his movie again subverts the notion of a final death, instead replacing it with the previously noted option of living in fiction, or in memories.

### Art is without noise

*Signal to Noise* relies heavily on both its unique aesthetic and the workings of the comics medium itself to inform its meaning and this article will briefly discuss these elements before concluding. The three main elements underlying a semiotics of comics can be defined as the depiction of time-as-space, the construction of an open narrative that relies upon the reader's contribution, and the creation of a stylised, false alterity. As already noted, the redefinition of time as cyclical and the use made of physical motifs such as the clock are emphasised by the time-as-space narratology of comics.

However, the style of *Signal to Noise* also seems to highlight the medium's reliance on interpretation. In reading a comic, the reader works alongside the creators as a kind of contributory author, by interpreting the panel contents and filling in the gutters. Rather than employing the usual comics style of 'pop art', *Signal to Noise* is composed of collages and cut ups from a range of mixed media. Its style ranges from the photorealistic to the completely abstract and thereby puts a renewed focus on the interpretative power allowed to the reader. This is further emphasised by the representational possibilities allowed to certain panels, for example as where the lifelines on the Director's hand become a series of blobs reminiscent of a Rorschach inkblot test (2.4).

This aesthetic also creates the hyperreal, as the medium's non-realistic style and use of panels-as-signifiers offer fictional seeing rather than literal representation. The comic-book world is an alterity, realised in stylised art and constructed through the interplay of world and image. No matter how much the setting may resemble our own, it is not the same: it is this world re-placed and dis-located. Comics do not offer a representation of reality but, rather, an entirely fictitious world – or worlds. The medium's narratology and aesthetic thus helps sustain the presence of alternate realities (such as the village) within *Signal to Noise*.

'Everything has a meaning or nothing has. To put it another way, one could say that art is without noise.' The comic begins with this quotation from Roland Barthes, taken from his 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative'. This citation seems aptly suited to a text where what seems to be 'noise' is in fact a 'signal' – whether this is couched as oblique stream of consciousness, extended metaphor, or abstract art. The debate is paraphrased later in the text in the differing perspectives of characters: the Director's neighbour, Reed, who states 'It's all patterns. Or it would be if you could see the big picture' (7.1); and Inanna, who believes there is only ever 'the illusion of order in the chaos' (7.6).

To conclude, then, *Signal to Noise* draws upon much of the language and structuring of eschatology in order to establish and rewrite the notion of the apocalypse. By offering and commenting upon a fictional reality (the world of the village) it also invokes the idea of the writer as God and in so doing is enabled to reference both secular and religious notions of Armageddon. However, it does not simply present a modernist perception of death as individual and personal; or even what we might commonly understand as a postmodern perception of the apocalypse as multiple and constant. Using motifs such as the clock face, *Signal to Noise* establishes an understanding of time as cyclical. In so doing it questions the

notion of reality, undermines the existence of endings, and offers instead an understanding of the apocalypse as stasis.

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Notes:

<sup>i</sup> *Signal to Noise* contains no page numberings so references will be cited as here, which corresponds to chapter 9, page 8.

<sup>ii</sup> See Murdough 2006 for a full discussion.

<sup>iii</sup> See Romero-Jódar 2012 for a discussion of this theme in the context of trauma.

<sup>iv</sup> Eschatology, the theological and philosophical study of the end of the world, spans multiple religions. It therefore seems obvious that as a discipline it possesses inherent contradictions, depending on which belief system one subscribes to. As such this article will limit its discussion of the religious perspective to the Christian tradition.

<sup>v</sup> The imaginary wall (at the front of a theatre stage or enclosed three-wall set) which separates the show from the audience. It has since been adapted to refer to the boundary between fiction and the audience in many media.

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#### Captions:

Fig. 1: *Signal to Noise*, pp6.1-2  
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