

Marina Garcés, Christine Hentschel | Interview | 13.09.2023

„As if we have not already destroyed many worlds before“

Marina Garcés in conversation with Christine Hentschel

Marina, it has been six years since your *Nueva ilustración radical* first appeared in Spanish and Catalan, where you critiqued our „posthumous condition“ as a sense of the present, in which the end is constantly looming over us, and where we imagine ourselves in some way already *after* our end. Since then, we have seen a worsening crisis of truth and a rise of authoritarianism around the world, a dramatic ecological crisis, a pandemic, the war in Ukraine and with it a once again tangible nuclear threat as well as a global hunger and energy crisis. What is wrong with thinking that this world is going to hell?

Neither I nor anyone else can know whether we are going to hell. The objective facts about the reality of the world say rather that hell has been with us for a long time. What I find alarming is the reactionary consequences of catastrophist ideology. There is an apology of apocalypse deliberately fed by the media and the culture industry that aims to destroy desire, domesticate rage and exert social control through fear and impotency. This ideology has a double message: it makes the older generations in rich countries feel their privilege and the fear of losing it, and it plunges both the young people in these same countries and many populations in poorer countries into despair and depression. It is possible that the world as we have known it is coming to an end. I do not feel sorry for that. The terrible thing is that we assume that the end of one world is the end of *the* world, as if we have not already destroyed many worlds before. It is a terrible way of forgetting that this world we now see shaking has risen on the destruction of others and on much death, as is happening again.

You have expressed your unease against apocalyptic reasoning for its tendency to kill our critical subjectivity and our political ambition for radically reimagining our way forward. Others believe it is fruitful to think via the end in order to wake up the public. Günther Anders, for example, insisted that we are actually not scared enough, not touched or concerned enough in the face of the immense threat we face as humanity. So where exactly would you see the biggest danger in thinking in terms of apocalyptic narratives? And how much negativity might we need for being critical in

times of massive planetary destruction?

Fear does not awaken and crises are neither an opportunity for change nor for salvation. I think these ideas are forms of religious thinking, even if they appear secular, because they reactivate the old idea that one must die in order to be reborn. Or to put it in the Hölderlin via Heidegger way: where danger is, grows the saving power also. Basically, any apocalypse awaits the revelation of an ultimate truth, which is what this term means. It is a very dangerous negativity and one that history has shown to be false. Human history is an ordeal, to take another religious image, and it has not gotten any better. I find much more interesting the counterfactual negativity, that which allows us to think about what has not happened, what has not come to be, what possibilities of life have been defeated or have remained on the margins of the visible, of the hegemonic, of the obvious. Reality is not exhausted in itself, and critical thinking has to give us the possibility of seeing this power.

The UN secretary general uses the image of us in a vehicle racing toward an abyss with our foot still on the accelerator – a prominent metaphor also in scenes such as collapsology and climate activism. In several European countries environmental activists engage in a kind of protest that operates with a strong gesture of saying „stop“ (to the ongoing destruction, the governmental support of the fossil industry etc.) by blocking roads, fixing their bodies to walls and bridges, or turning off pipelines. What do you make of this bodily performative gesture and where would you place it in relation to what you once carved out in *Nueva ilustración radical* as the concern with the „where“ of modernity, the „eternal now“ of postmodernity and the „until when“ of the posthumous condition?

There are two ways to stop: to slow down or to interrupt. I don't know if we are in time to put on the brakes, as you say the speed of the march is too fast and to think of stopping history and all its inertias is a chimera. Even the COVID-19 confinement was not a real stoppage. The bodies were in the houses, but the economy continued to function. Disruption, on the other hand, can be thought of in many ways. From the mental interruption, that „click“ that triggers other forms of consciousness and thought, to the vital „click“ or the collective and political „click“. The irreversibility that dominates our lives today is an effect of complexity, not a necessary law. Perhaps, therefore, what we need is simplification, and disruption is one way of doing this in many areas of personal and collective, everyday and institutional life. Modernity understood itself as a break with the past (the ancients) and as a march towards the future. Today, the future has invaded the present. What was meant to happen in a few years is already here, and it is not the future

of progress we had promised ourselves. Dystopia is our everyday life. To stop is to be able to ask ourselves: How did we get here? Who is responsible for what seems to have been imposed as an unstoppable destiny? And how can we stop being victims or beneficiaries of its effects? Who are or can be our accomplices?

When you talked about „livable time“ as something we ought to look out for and create (instead of our obsession with death and the end), in what political and social projects do you find them today? And in what theoretical projects?

I think that the most powerful movements of our time are those that act from the awareness that living is not survival, but that life brings into play a common sense of dignity: I see it in the various expressions of feminism, which put forward the need to go beyond formal demands for equality to also conquer other senses of body, affection, care and identity. I see it in the environmental movements, which go beyond classical conservationism and propose diverse ways of recreating the environments of life, community and knowledge. I see it in the movements of refusal to work, which make resignation or desertion a form of denunciation and sabotage. I also see it in the movements around housing and the reconceptualisation of cities. And in so many things that I don't know or see because fortunately the world, although it seems to be narrowing, is enormous and much more unknown than we often think. What worries me most, at the moment, is the lack of comprehensive and effective responses to two related elements: the impact of digital technologies, their privatisation and their effects of control (intimate, economic and political) and the impact of repression towards any dissent, both locally and globally.

In a recent piece you emphasize the importance of „critical imagination“ as „a sensitive mental process that actively relates us with the limits of what we see, know, and think“. Why is imagination so crucial in our apocalyptic times?

Imagination is the faculty we have to relate to what is not there, to make the absent present through images. Imagination links us to the past and to the future, but also to that which overflows or belies our present. Imagination is also the capacity to feel the link with others, through empathy or the ethical link and it is, finally, the possibility of creating strangeness, that is to say, those forms of life that are not yet catalogued or recognised. For all these reasons, I believe that imagination is not fanciful or escapist, but a critical faculty, capable of revealing to us the limits of our worlds and, at the same time, of being able to displace or overflow them. The call to imagination is dangerous, it was already made by the

movements of the 1960s and was captured by cognitive capitalism through innovation and creativity. The danger is to turn imagination into a productive force, guided by criteria of profitability, and into the engine of solutionist ideology, guided by criteria of effectiveness. Against these two dangers, I think that we should not be purists or idealists, but work concretely. Any form of criticism today involves thinking about the limits of reality, about what prevents us from thinking about it in any other way or only at the risk of its destruction. To use the imagination in a transformative way is to situate our concepts, analyses and experiences in what opens (and not in what closes) at these limits.

Marina Garcés

Marina Garcés (*1973) ist Philosophin und Professorin an der Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, wo sie den Master of Philosophy for Contemporary Challenges leitet. Sie ist Autorin zahlreicher Bücher, darunter die auf Deutsch erhältlichen Bücher „Neue radikale Aufklärung“ und „Schule der Lernenden“.

Christine Hentschel

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