

This is Not the Apocalypse:  
Dissecting the End of the World, Sincerity, and the Canadian Zeitgeist  
in Two Novels by Douglas Coupland

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses the crossroads of Douglas Coupland, apocalyptic narratives, and Canadian literature, using two novels—*Girlfriend in a Coma* and *Generation A*—as focal points. While Coupland subverts the traditional framework of end-of-the-world narratives in many ways—rewinding it entirely in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, for example. Likewise, the end of the world fails to bring catastrophic change, instead revealing catastrophic change has already taken place. This apocalyptic devastation takes the form of an absence in contemporary life, identified as a lack of sincerity in *Girlfriend in a Coma* and as a sense of storylessness in *Generation A*. The identification of this absence elevates Coupland's protagonists and identifies them as the elect; however, despite their ensured survival of the apocalypse, the traditional or implicit promise of utopia is never fulfilled. This thesis discusses how this subversion of the apocalyptic framework serves—or fails—a contemporary, postmodern, and/or Canadian audience.

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So why death? At night when I dream, the only people who have appeared in my dreams are people who are either dead or people who went crazy and I'll never see again.

*Douglas Coupland, Interview with Brenna Clarke Gray*

**INTRODUCTION:  
THE VOICE OF A GENERATION AND THE APOCALYPSE**

Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically. The cataclysm has happened, we are among the ruins, we start to build up new little habitats, to have new little hopes. It is rather hard work: there is now no smooth road into the future: but we go round, or scramble over the obstacles. We've got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen.

D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterly's Lover*

Douglas Coupland's career begins with an eclipse: in the first three pages of *Generation X*, his first novel, the protagonist flies to Manitoba to witness the shadow of the moon snuffing out the sun.

And in that field, when the appointed hour, minute, and second of the darkness came, I lay myself down on the ground surrounded by the tall pithy grain stalks and the faint sound of insects, and held my breath, there experiencing a mood that I have never really been able to shake completely—a mood of darkness and inevitability and fascination — a mood that surely must have been held by most young people since the dawn of time as they have crooked their necks, stared at the heavens, and watched their sky go out. (2-3)

This passage suspends time, place, and the concept of traditionally delineated generation; past and future blend together, and every young person becomes part of the same collective. This eclipse is chilling, unsettling, proof that even the most stable elements of the world—the sun, the sky—are subject to change, to subversion, to destruction. What other frameworks will these characters be forced to see evolve or disintegrate?

This early moment sets the tone for Coupland's corpus, establishing an apocalyptic undertone. In the 25 years since *Generation X*'s release, Coupland has developed and manipulated the ramifications of this eclipse; its unsettling undertones flourish and bloom into full-fledged apocalypses in novels such as *Girlfriend in a Coma*, *Life After God*, *Player One*, or, *What Is to Become of Us?* and *Generation A*.

So what has two-and-a-half decades of apocalypse brought to light? What does this literature have to say to the flotsam and jetsam of individuals attempting to find their way through a postmodern era, a globalised world, and a host of lingering anxieties that the frameworks provided by baby boomers are no longer functional? What does it mean that this conversation takes place in world so heavily commodified that the identity of every individual is both more unique and more mass-marketed than ever before? Why does Coupland return to an apocalyptic narrative to tell these stories and impart morals for an accelerated culture? What can we learn from his novels—not only about the end of the world, but about the beginning of a new one? What does this discussion have to say about Coupland's identity and work as a Canadian, or about Canada as a whole? Do Coupland's ideas of apocalypse and Canadian literature's fascination with apocalypse run parallel or perpendicular to one another? What can we learn about the way the present world functions, and how the nation of Canada functions within it, and how individuals function within these larger, nesting frameworks?

Some of these questions are too large to answer in a project of this size, although this thesis lays some of the groundwork for their eventual consideration. Here, I discuss these questions on a smaller scale, starting at the crossroads of three things: the work of Douglas Coupland, the apocalypse in literature (both traditional and subverted), and what these two things

say about Canada and the current era. First and foremost, this requires a simple foundation of three small, interlocking queries: why Coupland? Why now? Why apocalypse?

### **Why Coupland?**

Coupland's literature continually struggles with the future, as does his work in visual art, in nonfiction, in digital media and experimental creation. *Generation X* earned him the title of a voice for a generation, and this reputation has followed him throughout his career. This reputation—whether deserved or undeserved—makes Coupland's work worth exploring when considering contemporary issues and anxieties, particularly as they are communicated through literature.

In light of the issues at play in this thesis regarding the effects of (post- or trans-) nationalism on both literature and reader, Coupland is interesting and important to consider as a Canadian who wrote his first novel while living in California—a novel which featured Californian rather than Canadian protagonists, and a novel which was rejected by Canadian publishers and was instead published through an American company. This start to Coupland's career set the tone for the way he would be perceived; over the course of his career, he has been continually mistaken for an American author, despite the fact that his sojourn in California ended before *Generation X* even hit bookstore shelves. As someone who straddles and occasionally ignores national borders (and yet simultaneously creates extremely nationalistic and patriotic nonfiction and artistic work) Coupland can be seen not only as the voice for a generation but a voice for the amorphous, trans-national Canada of the present.

### Why now?

Coupland's use of the pastiche (of self, of identity, of history, of nostalgia) recommends him as an example of the postmodern—as does his play with irony, sincerity, and anxiety about the future. These are common themes in contemporary literature—unsurprising, since Coupland has expended a great deal of effort to keep himself contemporary to every time period he writes in. As the digital world increases in depth and data, and the world becomes increasingly transnational in nature, Coupland's work has never been more apropos—especially given the ultimately apocalyptic tone of his novels.

This issue comes to a head in an era in which national borders seem to be eroding or blending together in terms of culture, trade, and identity. Canada, after all, clawed its way out of a larger North American identity through sheer determination and an urge to be considered separate and distinct from the United States—and this is work the nation (in a very broad sense) is anxious to see upheld and continued. Since its inception, Canada has been afraid of being subsumed by its southern neighbour, and this fear is ever-present in Coupland's work, which often tracks Canada's attempts to differentiate itself culturally from the United States.

Canada's effort to distinguish itself from its southern neighbour is one of the motivators behind Coupland's more patriotic work concerning both nostalgic and contemporary Canadiana. *Souvenir of Canada* is one of the most obvious examples of this, as a codex or dictionary of distinctly Canadian words and phrases listed in alphabetical order and paired with Coupland's meandering explanations. The volume is punctuated by eleven still life images created and photographed by Coupland and intended to be understood by Canadians and Canadians alone. "Americans should look at these photos and think, 'Huh? Everything looks familiar and yet nothing is familiar,'" as Coupland writes in *Souvenir's* preface (3). The result is a series of

chaotic and nostalgic dioramas of Cadiana, crowded with objects and pop culture history and evoking nothing so much as classic *Eye Spy* puzzles. See, for instance, “Canada Picture No. 3,” a still life paired with a portrait of Queen Elizabeth overlaid on a television testing pattern in *Souvenir* (28-29):



Coupland designed these still life dioramas as a secret Canadian handshake, but many of the elements included in these still life images will be unfamiliar to Canadians outside of Coupland’s generation and still others will be familiar to residents all over the globe. The Distant Early Warning system, for instance, seen in an advertisement in the upper centre of “Canada Picture No. 3,” is no longer common outside of high school history classrooms; can it be considered part

of the Canadian visual identity? The portrait of the Queen, while common in many classrooms and public spaces, is also a common image in other commonwealth countries. Is it specific enough to speak to Canadians, and Canadians alone?

Regardless of audience, *Souvenir*'s nostalgic collages demonstrate Coupland's postmodern approach—a fragmented confusion between the familiar and the unfamiliar, a visual juxtaposition run wild. This use of pastiche is firmly a part of Coupland's approach, and his work is inextricable from its context of contemporary issues and ideas because it is a patchwork of that same cultural ephemera. Another one of his pieces—"Generation X Hornet's Nest," 2004—was chosen as the cover image for *Re: Reading the Postmodern: Canadian Literature and Criticism after Modernism*, despite never receiving any other mention in the collection. (Fittingly, the piece is a surprisingly believable simulacrum of a hornet's nest, constructed from twigs and chewed-up pieces of Coupland's first novel.) This further cements Coupland as a voice for Canada, for postmodernism and postmodernism's insistent pastiche style of creating meaning, and for postmodern Canadian literature; Coupland is consistently hailed as a voice of the zeitgeist, a figure and creator so insistently set in the exact present that his work becomes a time capsule of itself. "I like the present. I'm always interested in new ideas, and what's happening now," he explains in a *Maclean's Magazine* interview (Lunau). To consider Coupland is to consider what it means to be contemporary, and to consider what it means to feel or believe oneself contemporary.

### Why apocalypse?

Coupland continually manipulates and propagates apocalypse narratives, creating both figurative representations (such as *Generation X*'s protagonist watching the sun go out) and literal representations (such as *Life After God*'s sequence imagining the places people might find themselves at the time of an atomic strike).

Apocalypse suits this time (current) and place (Canada) in literature well, and for several reasons. Most obviously, apocalypse appeals to Canadian literature's fascination with victimhood, famously detailed by Margaret Atwood in *Survival* as "a superabundance of victims" (39). Marlene Goldman connects this sense of Leonard Cohen's "beautiful losers" to the proliferation of CanLit's apocalyptic themes in her volume *Rewriting Apocalypse in Canadian Fiction*—situating it as a version of apocalypse that focuses on the fate of those on the periphery, acknowledging and studying the ignored and the victimised. This aligns the goals of Canadian apocalypse with those of the Canadian postmodern, which Linda Hutcheon describes as emerging (and inextricable) from "a marginal or 'ex-centric' position with regard to the central or dominant culture" (3). Canadian authors and Canadian literature are fascinated by the concept of reworking apocalypse narratives to reflect the experience of apocalyptic violence's victims, and this is at least in part because Canada perceives itself as composed of the non-elect—a nation of underdogs, a place that prides itself on being a mosaic rather than a melting-pot. This is not to say that Canada does not demand a level of homogenisation from its immigrants and citizens, but rather to say that it perceives itself as an attractive and safe space where the stories of victims are both vocalised and listened to—whether or not this is, in fact, the case.

In a similar vein, the narrative framework of apocalypse finds use in a Canadian setting because it articulates settler nationalism's difficulty with and history of a colonial past;

colonisation is inherently apocalyptic in the way it requires a past to be ignored and erased in order for a future to be constructed. As a result, the use and discussion of apocalypse narratives in Canadian literature proves a valuable tool in opening a conversation about colonisation by drawing on the experience of those with “first-hand knowledge of apocalyptic disasters and the cultural and psychological devastation that attends being labelled the non-elect” (Goldman 10). Apocalyptic fiction in Canada tends to say something about the destructive nature of colonisation whether it intends to or not—highlighting the position and trauma of apocalypse’s victims and drawing parallels to the trauma of colonisation.

On a more general level, the apocalypse framework remains popular—and useful—in fiction because it works; it accurately and effectively articulates tensions between old and new, good and bad, division and wholeness. Above all else, the framework of apocalyptic narrative provides a simple and easily understandable way of making sense of the world. As Frank Kermode says, it deals directly with the sense of *Kairos*—an anxiety resulting from the overbearing incursion of the future on the present (46-8). Significantly, this type of anxiety—how to prevent it, subvert it, heal it, or live with it—is a favourite topic of Coupland’s; he continually describes a present that feels increasingly oppressed by the future. He implies the former has been subsumed by the latter, or that the two are taking place simultaneously—combining into a what he calls the superfuture in a column for *FT Magazine*. The framework of apocalypse is attractive in its simplicity and appealing in its linearity; while apocalypse cannot be divorced from the devastation it wreaks on the non-elect, this framework nonetheless provides an effective way to interpret the world. In Coupland’s hands, the apocalypse (ironically) aids his generation X-style slackers in their attempts to interpret and operate within the world, and to put words to the narrative in which they find themselves the heroes. Like all authors, Coupland

attempts to provide a roadmap to the reader—a way to understand and navigate the world. As a framework with a clear driving force and an easy-to-follow beginning, middle, and end, the apocalypse works particularly well as a narrative roadmap.

### **The crossroads: author, era, and narrative**

This thesis examines the convergence of Coupland's novels, apocalypse narratives, and what it means to live or create in contemporary (postmodern, postnational) Canada. It asks: does Coupland succeed in building an effective navigating framework for his quintessential slacker-reader, for the digital native of the postmodern world, for the contemporary Canadian? If so, how? And if not, why not? How do Coupland, Canada, and the apocalypse interact with one another—and what, exactly, rises like smoke from their point of impact? Coupland is hailed as a writer with prophetic power, a pied piper, a futurist with a finger on the deepest pulse of what he dubs the extreme present. But does he deserve this recognition or these roles? Does he truly have something important—or even useful—to say to his readership? Does he have anything to add to Canadian literature? Perhaps, in this way, we can consider his work apocalyptic in a way he did not intend—as a reinforcement of current problematic hierarchical structures?

This thesis attempts to answer or, at the very least, consider these issues through three sections. The first chapter serves as a foundational primer: in what it means (or may mean) to be immersed in Coupland's commodified culture, or in Canada's sense of nationalism, and in contemporary or traditional apocalypse. How does the landscape of postmodern capitalism affect connection or perception of nation and place? How does the framework of apocalypse operate, and how and why does it fit within the conversation of Canada's national literature? How is

apocalypse traditionally structured, and how might a postmodern and/or Canadian author and audience perceive or demand its restructuring?

The second chapter examines *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1998), and why the novel serves as an important text and a landmark in his corpus as his first example of a literal apocalypse as plot device. The novel explores and pioneers a sense of loss that Coupland returns to again and again in his work; this chapter explores the effectiveness of interpreting this as a symbol of absent cultural, national, or individual meaning. *Girlfriend in a Coma* is also a clear demonstration of Coupland's subversion of tropes common in apocalyptic literature, climaxing in an apocalypse which is ultimately rewound and its destruction redacted. Finally, the novel demands discussion of its strange and indeterminate ending and its concluding passionate but not-quite-credible call to arms; it serves as an example of Coupland's quintessential and signature mixture of optimism and pessimism towards the future, and an example of the undercurrent of unease which he both grapples with and propagates.

The third chapter dissects Coupland's *Generation A* (2009), discussing why this novel also serves as an important keystone in Coupland's journey through end-of-the-world narratives. The novel purposefully reflects and distorts the themes of *Generation X*, reopening and rewriting many of the ideas that launched Coupland to fame as the voice of a generation. *Generation A* likewise mirrors many of the same themes of loss and destruction discussed in *Girlfriend in a Coma* by again portraying a literal interpretation of the end of the world; the differences in *Generation A*'s apocalypse collectively serve as a comment on how the world has changed since Coupland originally explored the same themes a decade earlier. In this way, *Generation A* serves as a purposeful portrayal of how globalism has warped and distorted a sense of place and belonging, as well as a demonstration in the evolution of the desire and necessity to become not

an authentic self and an authentic individual, but for authentic community and authentic connection within that community. The chapter will discuss the ways in which *Generation A* continues to subvert the tropes of apocalypse, but also catalogues a much less intense subversion of tropes in this novel, and critiques a number of areas in which Coupland surrenders to the tropes of both apocalypse and Canadian fiction. Finally, this chapter discusses the novel as another example of Coupland's quintessential and signature mixture of optimism and pessimism towards the future, and begins to build a foundation on which to consider what, exactly, this mixed attitude—and continued unease—implies to its readership.

## 1.

**A PRIMER IN APOCALYPSE, (POST-)NATIONALISTIC CANADA,  
AND COUPLAND'S RECOIL FROM A COMMODIFIED GLOBE**

Postmodernism theory is ... the effort to take the temperature of the age without instruments and in a situation in which we are not even sure there is so coherent a thing as an "age" or zeitgeist or "system" or "current situation" any longer. Postmodernism theory ... has the wit to seize on that very uncertainty as its first clue and to hold its Ariadne's thread on its way through what may not turn out to be a labyrinth at all, but a gulag or perhaps a shopping mall.

Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*

Coupland's portrayal of commodified culture, and his description of capitalism as characterised by saturated consumerism is a signature feature in many of his works. Significantly, Coupland symptomizes commodified culture with a central and pervasive absence felt by the protagonists—a loss of something vital which both plagues and colours the quality and content of their lives. Coupland includes this loss as a critique of contemporary culture, an indication to reader and protagonist that something has gone horribly awry in the commodified, technologized world. The recognition of this absence—and, therefore, the recognition of a flawed cultural and/or national landscape—sets Coupland's characters apart from those around them and situates them as the chosen people who will survive the apocalypse. But what does this absence truly represent? What does it have to say about community, connection, or individual identity?

This crossroads of community connection and individual identity leads into a discussion of Canada's national and cultural frameworks, and outlines the connections between literature, culture, and national identity. How might these conceptions be linked to and affected by the proximal and possible threat of the United States? How might Canada exist both as a nation with clear borders and as a transnational entity existing as part of a global village? These tensions

result in a struggle not only for national but individual identity, and ultimately serve as one of the major factors behind the proliferation of apocalyptic narratives in contemporary fiction and to Coupland's apocalypses in particular.

Finally, this discussion of national and cultural landscape narrows into an examination of both traditional and rewritten tropes of apocalypse, positioning them in the landscape of contemporary and Canadian literature. This lays the groundwork for Coupland's use of apocalypse in fiction, specifically in *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *Generation A*, and begins to unpack the form and function of these end-of-the-world narratives as subverted or supported by Coupland.

**Coupland's recoil from a commodified globe:  
Absence, authenticity, and the symptoms and casualties of postmodern consumer culture**

Coupland's characters are famously unmotivated, uninterested in participating in the flashy consumption of "baby boomer" society. Coupland establishes this character type in *Generation X*, which clearly articulates a contemporary distaste for anything mass-produced—not only products and objects, but philosophies, ideas, and motivations. *Generation X*'s characters exemplify this worldview, purposefully abandoning the societal idea of accomplishment and leave high-paying jobs in favour of lives without typical trappings of success. They are not motivated by the same factors that drive much of surrounding society; they are not interested in the same goals, and their happiness does not come from the same factors, objects, or accomplishments.

This recoil from mass culture is phrased as an attempt to disengage from the constantly quickening speed of society in which these characters find themselves—an "accelerated culture"

explicitly named in *Generation X*'s subtitle. This acceleration is intimately related to the fragmentary existence required by both the aesthetics and economics of the postmodern world, functioning as both a symptom and a cause of fragmentation. By drawing a clearly critical portrait of consumer culture and its poisonous effects—especially in the cloying brand-name references jam-packed into *Shampoo Planet*'s prose, or *Generation A*'s scathing references to Abercrombie and Fitch's cult-like homogenisation—Coupland critiques the overarching framework of postmodernism that lurks behind consumer culture. The fragmentation of consumer culture, as Mike Featherstone notes, works in tandem with the fragmentation of postmodernism; both work to collapse the distinctions between real and fake, between high culture and low culture, and between an object and what it represents. The resulting cultural geography is kaleidoscopic, an “ever-changing landscape in which objects appear divorced from their context and subject to mysterious connections which are read on the surface of things” (23). Within this framework, lifestyles are marketed to individuals “as no longer requiring inner coherence” (26); instead, this landscape is beset by “images, signs and symbolic goods which summon up dreams, desires and fantasies which suggest romantic authenticity and emotional fulfilment”—a framework which ultimately lacks inherent authenticity or fulfilment and instead focuses on packaging and selling a *reproduction* of authenticity and fulfilment (27).

However, the many colourful façades of postmodern consumer culture inspire counter-reaction: characters who resist the current social framework of capitalism and fragmentation, and who attempt to rebuild meaning and identity through avenues other than consumerism. Coupland champions this attitude; rather than surrender to boomer myths—that hard work pays off, that a middle-class salary brings not only financial but emotional satisfaction, and that meaning can be accrued through consumption—these outsiders acknowledge the absence of vibrancy or meaning

at the core of boomer sensibility. Featherstone notes that “within consumer culture the tendency is to push culture towards the centre of social life, yet it is a fragmented and continually reprocessed culture which does not cohere into anything like a dominant ideology” (114). In other words, postmodern consumer culture cannibalises previous societal frameworks and reuses the resulting pieces to construct a world-wide portrait of kaleidoscopic fragmentation, but does not itself function as a replacement framework.

The characters of *Generation X* are Coupland’s pioneers in recoiling from commodification and from the fragmentation of postmodern life—a rejection of consumerism which features in *Generation X*, and continues to surface in Coupland’s subsequent works. Both *Girlfriend in a Coma* and in *Generation A* portray characters who are likewise distanced from society; whether purposeful or accidental, chosen or imposed, this disengagement from society serves as waypoint into the deeper issues at play in both works. After all, a large part of this mindful disconnect is influenced by the sense that something is missing at the core of contemporary life. In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, this absence is expressed as a lack of meaning and motivation resulting from progress and a world which prioritises speed and efficiency over significance; in *Generation A*, this absence is expressed as a sense of storylessness, or a lack of overarching life narrative. This absence is a constant referent within Coupland’s work, consistently functioning in a didactic and cautionary manner, and yet its exact nature is unclear. A definition for this absence is only vaguely outlined in *Girlfriend*—“Did you feel kinda hollow inside?” Jared asks, without ever specifying what might fill this absence (246). Similarly, *Generation A*’s assertion or discovery that individuals in society have lost their life narratives lacks depth and discussion—a cartoony way of framing it at best and cliché at worst. In both cases Coupland gestures towards a deeper absence, which seems to increase proportionately with

the growth of global consumer culture. Especially given Coupland's obsession with the ironic slacker figure, these novels—and their respective absences—communicate a message about a need for authenticity, or perhaps sincerity, in contemporary life. “Life didn't seem depressing or empty to us, but we could only discern that it was as if we were on the outside looking in,” Karen explains in *Girlfriend in a Coma* (12). Julien echoes this in *Generation A* when he describes his life as “a video game that resets to zero” every morning “and then begs for coins” (143). Both characters suggest a disconnect between individual and reality; while they engage and interact with their lives—going to work, attending parties, buying houses, and so on—some part of them is absent or disconnected from these day-to-day endeavours. Their day-to-day activities prove to be hollow façades; they go through the motions without making sincere connections to anything around them.

Christopher Palmer links this central absence—specifically in *Girlfriend in a Coma*—inextricably to the increase of commodified pop culture. Indeed, these characters are surrounded by brand names and similar trappings of consumerism. Palmer identifies the same meaninglessness that this paper seeks to grapple with, noting “beneath the Umwelt of brand names and pop culture, offered half nostalgically and half satirically, is an absence” (163-4). The novel's continual references to pop culture and consumer society seem to act as a façade—camouflaging the extent to which Coupland's characters seem to lack some central meaning at the core of their lives. In some ways, Palmer notes, these references function as a framework for the characters—something to cling to as the absence in their lives becomes more and more pronounced:

Even though some of their decisions in these years show that they want more meaning and a larger perspective, the language of the novel never gets beyond the

immediate-contemporary of consumer and pop culture; this being a point-of-view novel, this is their language, the architecture of their minds. (162)

That said, Palmer seems to stop short of describing the novel's pervasive pop culture as evil or destructive. Instead, Palmer simply notes consumerism and Coupland's description of inner absence as equally prominent features of current, contemporary culture.

Jefferson Faye, on the other hand, draws clear links between Coupland's use of pop culture references and the absence at the core of his characters. Rather than mask the meaninglessness of their lives, Faye argues, the constant presence of commercial culture serves as a clear demonstration of "the X Generation's lack of cultural, political, and spiritual centredness" (506). Faye suggests these references and consumer ephemera highlight rather than obscure the fact that something crucial is missing from these characters' current existence. After all, it is clear that "perception is dogged by what is already known in the form of cliché or familiar pop culture image," and "fakery is at the heart of pop culture" (Palmer 165). Here pop culture is granted the same illusory and destructive power as its postmodern framework—a world in which images are made to stand in for the real, and the real is obscured behind a carnival of surfaces, copies, and counterfeits. Advertisers—and consumers themselves—actively manipulate signs, resulting in a "society where sign and commodity have come together to produce the 'commodity-sign'" (Featherstone 15). Consumers buy not only an object or a product, but buy into what it represents—the ideal it gestures towards, but never was, and never will be. This "overproduction of signs and reproduction of images and simulations leads to a loss of stable meaning, and an aestheticization of reality," which serves to fascinate and captivate the consumer masses (15). In this context, is it at all surprising that Coupland's characters become

disenchanted with the world of illusive and elusive meaning, and that they recoil from the commodified world in which superficiality never gives way to significance?

Coupland's characters are not only aware of the superficiality of their postmodern landscape, but actively seek to do something about it. In *Generation X*, for example, the protagonists literally and figuratively retreat from consumer culture by relocating their lives to the desert. This is a clear and purposeful rejection of societal frameworks; these protagonists believe that changing and simplifying their physical landscape will result in a paralleled change and simplification of spirit, thought, and identity. This marks a transition from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from destruction to healing, and from commodified culture to nature. Coupland's characters feel alienated from the social structures around them; they purposefully push this alienation to its limits by removing themselves even further from these frameworks. To borrow Caren Kaplan's terminology, this search for a more authentic landscape takes place in an area of tension between exile and tourism. "Exile implies coercion; tourism celebrates choice," she writes. "Exile connotes the estrangement of the individual from an original community; tourism claims community on a global scale" (27). *Generation X*'s protagonists are both exiled individuals and tourists—alienated from society partially by force and partially by choice. They move to the desert in search of a more authentic experience, but the urge for authenticity is at least partially implanted in them by marketing schemes and advertisements hoping to draw attention to this absence only to fill it with commodified goods and services. There is something remarkable and admirable in their "steadfast rejection of their own cultural location as tradition and of cultural context as a limit to the powers of the imagination," and yet no place on earth, desert included, is free from commodification (43). The popularity of the desert as a location for growth or cleansing, as Baudrillard notes, is irrevocably linked to its cinematic representation—

its portrayal and reproduction in westerns. “It is useless to seek to strip the desert of its cinematic aspects in order to restore its original essence; those features are thoroughly superimposed upon it and will not go away,” he notes. “The cinema has absorbed everything” (69-70). In the end, the usefulness or motivation behind this self-imposed removal from society is not important; it is enough that Coupland’s characters feel the need to search for authenticity. As Kaplan notes, “both exile and tourism construct authenticities . . . the belief in a truer, more meaningful existence somewhere else is shared by exile and tourist alike” (64).

As Baudrillard asserts, transformation ultimately takes place in the self—but while landscape cannot truly *effect* change, it can reveal and facilitate change. The myth of the cleansing desert is proven false, and yet remains useful in its encouragement of self-imposed exile from society epitomised in Coupland’s characters. *Generation X*’s protagonists actively seek change by moving to the desert; the characters of *Generation A* are likewise removed from society in their search for meaning, but largely because they have no choice over it; they are plucked from their former lives by forces outside of their control, and consequently placed in a uncomplicated landscape which facilitates a search for meaning almost automatically. In contrast, *Girlfriend in a Coma* presents a more complicated and obstacle-filled quest for meaning; the characters neither remove themselves nor are removed from society, and are instead compelled to try a variety of other tactics to sort out the absence at the core of their lives. While the apocalypse eventually strips society away, their quest for meaning largely takes place pre-apocalypse. The punchline of the novel, after all, is that the apocalypse fails to reveal—and merely reinforces the ineffectuality of the protagonists’ search for meaning.

Unfortunately, their pre-apocalypse tactics to find meaning are doomed to fail almost from the start; their attempts to search out significance, after all, spring from internal(ised) ideas

and gut feelings. This proves problematic because *inner* nature or knowledge is not necessarily trustworthy; while some desires and motivations may spring from an authentic centre, others—perhaps the majority—have been installed or cultivated by society. “What if many of our deepest and most personal thoughts and desires are actually products of the latest fads and fancies purveyed by the media?” Charles Guignon asks in his discussion of the authentic (9), continuing on to note that while

the ultimate goal of life is trying to feel good through satisfying every desire, people become addicted to such activities as shopping, possessing fancy toys, fixing up their houses, looking good, and using drugs, alcohol and consumer spirituality to fill the empty place in their souls. (47)

This reinforces a key question regarding the search for meaning or authenticity, especially in relation to Coupland’s pop culture-infested portrayals of contemporary life: how effectively can one search for or cultivate meaning in an environment of constant, almost aggressive commodification? Or are the two mutually exclusive? After all, the image of the self is inarguably “culturally and linguistically conditioned” by its contemporary framework and society, to the point where it can practically be considered “a ready-made thing” (118). Likewise, Christopher Palmer suggests that the overload of pop culture references so quintessential to Coupland’s work can and should be interpreted as these characters’ language, their defining framework, “the architecture of their minds” (162). They cling to pop culture references and ephemera because pop culture is entertaining, and because it is marketed well, but also because they have nothing else. This is one of the side effects of postmodernism, of consumer culture: it practices a “cultural domination of an “individual,” whose “identity” became largely determined by consumer/popular/postmodern culture” (Grassian 12).

Coupland's characters appear to be a textbook example of this; *Generation X*, *Girlfriend in a Coma*, and *Generation A* demonstrate, as Daniel Grassian asserts, that "the overarching, almost totalizing power of popular culture has helped blanket individual identities and curtail human interaction" in a world where "[i]ndividuals often define themselves in context with media icons rather than in context with each other" (79). This is a tidy hypothesis regarding the root cause of Coupland's alienated characters and the almost violent separation of individuals which leads to the apocalypse in *Generation A*. After all,

If one believes that humans do not possess a core self or are not able to express themselves sincerely, then it becomes increasingly difficult to establish healthy, nurturing relationships with others. For if the individual is nothing more than a shifting actor, then how can we [be] sure whether another is being sincere or false, honest or dishonest? (79)

Here we can begin to trace not only the root cause of these characters' disconnection and dissatisfaction, but Coupland's prescription against it. If this absence is expressed by a lack of "core self" which prevents "healthy, nurturing relationships with others," then Coupland's fixation on community is not just a sentimental theme, but his answer to the postmodern alienation besetting his characters.

In contrast, Guignon suggests the postmodern individual must recognise "the fact that there is no 'true self' to be" and embrace the fact that "where we had formerly sought a true self, there is only an empty space, a gap or lack" (119). What makes Coupland's characters unique—and worthy of surviving the apocalypse—is that they refuse to accept this meaninglessness as irreversible. Guignon asserts that postmodernism idealises this absence, and perhaps even heroicises it: "The postmodern idea, then, is to be that lack of self with playfulness and ironic

amusement,” he notes (119). And yet this is exactly what Coupland’s characters accomplish—they are nothing if not ironic, arch, and self-deprecating—and still they find themselves longing for something else. They must transcend postmodern fragmentation and the emptiness of consumer culture to rebuild themselves into truer, or better, or more authentic selves—a goal they gesture towards even as they seem incapable of true or effective action.

**Canadian culture, literature, and identity,  
and their proximity to (and possible invasion by) the United States**

In his essay “Canada in a Coma,” Jefferson Faye reviews *Girlfriend in a Coma* at its release but discusses all of Coupland’s previous works; by tracing the novel’s lineage and ancestors, so to speak, he arrives at the claim that the obvious absence at the core of *Girlfriend*’s characters’ lives is directly related to the invasion of American culture into the Canadian sphere. This, he argues, is a continuation of themes found in Coupland’s earlier works, all of which can be viewed as part of a “systematic critique of the intrusion of ‘Americana’ into Canadian culture” (506). Faye ultimately equates the societal and cultural damage in the novel to the inherently apocalyptic violence of colonial invasion, noting that American culture not only seeps across the border, but begins to remove and destroy what came before: “Whether it is internalized or cultural, there is evidence of destruction everywhere, as if an invasion force has colonized without bothering to rebuild,” he writes (508). In Faye’s view, *Girlfriend in a Coma* portrays a world in which American culture has displaced Canadian culture but not entirely filled the absence left behind. This is the meaninglessness felt and probed by the characters of the novel: a synecdochical absence representative of its larger cultural absence. According to Faye, nation and individual alike sense a “shared condition” of lacking a “cultural center,” and “U.S. media-valorized excesses” are a likely culprit as the driving force behind it (506).

And yet this argument—while well-constructed—stands on an unstable foundation: it identifies the absence as both national and cultural in nature, when criticism has long striven to separate Canadian literature from the notion of a national mind or an overarching Canadian identity. Gone are the days of examining the Canadian psyche by examining the nation's literature; Frank Davey writes that an overabundance of thematic criticism has weakened the value and power of CanLit with assumptions that are, at best, "extra-literary; at worst, anti-literary" (3). Dissecting literature with the primary or sole objective of getting at the national mind, especially when it comes to a nation as broad and varied as Canada, Davey discovers, is an ugly way to paraphrase both its culture and literature in a way that ignores form and function. "Books which began ostensibly as attempts to illuminate separate instances of Canadian writing became messianic attempts to define a national identity or crisis," he writes (3). "Like all formulae, it is a restricting and potentially paralysing thing" (7). Perhaps it is better—and easier—to think, as Stephen Marche does, that the idea of an overarching, defining national culture has lost its power in recent decades. "The question of "national identity" is an antique one," he writes. "Literary nationalism is something your grandparents did, like macramé."

This is certainly a thought that Coupland echoes; "I feel sorry for young writers out there who think that CanLit still exists," he said in an interview with Brenna Clarke Gray published in *Studies in Canadian Literature*. "Please tell me they don't exist. Please tell me this. Because it doesn't exist" (258). After all, writing about places in Canada does not mean he has any desire to be considered a CanLit author. Coupland has made conscious choices to set many of his novels in Vancouver, but this decision stems from a desire to write naturally by leaning on a familiar landscape rather than from a need to seem more Canadian and to propagate Canadian fiction. This purposeful distancing from the old guard of CanLit is difficult to reconcile with Coupland's

decidedly nationalistic nonfiction works; *Souvenir of Canada*, especially, communicates what Coupland believes it means to be Canadian—a series of charming anecdotes and explanations that venture into cliché or nostalgia on more than one occasion. Coupland’s repeated descriptions of (dis)connection to the “blank and essentially uninhabited” (4) or “raw and cataclysmic” (48) landscape are of particular note—the barren wilderness perhaps the most durable of the Canadian literature clichés, dating back to Susanna Moodie. “You’re engaging with these institutions and pillars,” Gray insists in the *ECL* interview. “And now there seems to be a space for you.” “I mean—I guess if I wanted to, but at this point why would I want to?” Coupland responds. “The party’s over. And I’ve got my own party going now” (259).

Perhaps the best way of articulating this seeming split is to say that Coupland rejects the idea of writing Canadian literature but embraces the idea of a Canadian national identity, and does his best to celebrate and preserve it. As *Souvenir of Canada* progresses, this tone is passionate and urgent by turns—communicating both love and fear towards Canada’s fragile place in the world, both physically and culturally. For instance, he describes visiting Chile only to find that nothing in Chilean stores was produced in Chile, failing to find even post cards or kitschy souvenirs. Everything was made in America; all the businesses were American chains.

The country had been culturally gutted, and while it’s evil not to wish abundance for your fellow man, Santiago had the sci-fi texture of a land where a ghastly price had been extracted in return for effortless plenty. In the case of Chile, I think it was its sense of itself, which is just plain sad [...] there is something deeply wrong with a place where nothing for sale is *from* there. It just is, and anything that can be done to prevent this sort of corrosive colonization is not a bad thing. (78)

“Canada has avoided Chile-ization, but only just,” he adds, almost as an afterthought (78).

This is Coupland's peculiar, particular brand of nationalism, one which involves a rejection of Canadian literature as well as its academic study—Gray accurately notes that her article represents “Coupland's first academic interview in his twenty-year career” (256)—and a singular dedication to Canadian piecemeal cultural detritus, a heroicising of tiny day-to-day differences in the larger context of existing next to the United States. Here again we see the same uneasy tension between Canada and the United States described by Faye in *Canada in a Coma*. “Yes, I fear for death, and I also fear for the death of Canada. Not in a big noisy way, but in a first-get-rid-of-the-dollar-then-get-rid-of-the-border way” Coupland explains in *Souvenir of Canada*. “That would be death, even though the maps might still technically say Canada” (138). It is clear that the overarching fear of “corrosive colonization” sits at the centre of Coupland's work, and at the centre of Coupland's Canada.

This uneasy fear of “getting rid of the border” only becomes more and more pronounced in an era in which physical distances and geographic boundaries are rapidly dissolving. While Coupland views free-trade agreements and the consequent erosion of national borders suspiciously, fearing their cultural impact, Hunter and Yates note that this type of globalisation promises cross-pollination as much as it threatens homogenisation. “Thus, although goods, technologies, and symbols created within the United States certainly “carry” a great deal of cultural baggage as they cross borders, they are often, upon reception, subject to the forces of indigenization and hybridization,” they note (325). Ideas and cultural objects are more than capable of crossing borders; whether they remain the same on the other side is another story.

Yet Canada—as both nation and literature—remains cautious of the transnational, of nations that reach beyond their borders, and of being one such nation itself. In this debate, the idea of an overarching national identity, culture, and literature become appealing—what Kit

Dobson describes as a centre of national power and resistance, an alternative to the threatening undertone to the United States' transnational capitalism. Here, "the imagined community becomes one of resistance to American neo-colonization, suggesting that oppositional logic maintains an important function at the same time as the signifier of "Canadian" lacks its own specific content" (67). The specifics of the national product and mindset are less important than the fact that it is produced and maintained. This is one of the reasons Coupland sees fit to include "1971" as an entry in *Souvenir to Canada*—a time in which the Canadian government and populace alike went "nation-crazy" despite "fuzzy identity and ambiguous self-esteem" as a nation, because nationalism without aim is nationalism nonetheless (75). The framework for a transnational Canada does not have to come at the cost of American "invasion," and in fact might be the best way to avoid "invasion" entirely.

Veronica Hollinger specifically examines *Girlfriend in a Coma* alongside William Gibson's *Neuromancer* as examples of "Americanized" Canadian literature—since Coupland is Canadian by birth and perceived as American by choice, and Gibson is American by birth and, as a draft dodger, became Canadian by choice. But as much as these novels and authors may seem to transcend or muddle national boundaries, Hollinger concludes that both successfully portray transnationalism as a quintessentially Canadian struggle:

Rather than concluding that these novels "fail" at being adequately "Canadian," however, I want to suggest that [both novels] very successfully evoke an authentic feature of contemporary "Canadian-ness," exactly insofar as they address issues of concern to a generalized global techno-culture. They demonstrate something we tend to downplay about our culture, perhaps because it seems to us to be too "American": this being-borderless, this being-trans-national, this being-global. (55)

In other words, despite the apparent post-nationalism of Coupland's fiction, he seems to simultaneously support the idea that struggling with or against American culture can never lead to the destruction of Canadian culture, if only because the struggle itself is truly Canadian at its core. The invasion of American culture—whether perceived or real—historically and presently defines Canadian culture as much as it attempts to colonise.

I want to argue, however, that it is reductive to relate the tension between Canada and the United States to the overarching absence in the lives of Coupland's characters. Canada has long been defined, at least in part, by its proximity to the United States; a certain overlap in cultural heritage is unavoidable, and in this light it seems difficult to paint American culture as destructive or colonising. Yet this is exactly what Faye attempts to do, interpreting *Girlfriend in a Coma* as a call to arms to reject American culture in favour of supporting “an explicitly Canadian milieu” (509). The reality is that this moral is wholly unsupported by the evidence of the novel. The concluding call to arms lacks the nationalistic tone that Faye projects into it, and while this pivotal speech addresses the cancerous absence defining the characters, at no point does it label this absence as cultural. Discussing and considering Canada as a post- or trans-national state remains important and foundational to Coupland's work, but ultimately serves as a supporting framework or perspective lens rather than a source of conflict itself.

**A primer in apocalypse:  
Framework, tradition, and the Canadian take on the end of the world**

This section will analyse the bones of the apocalyptic narrative and the foundational blocks that keep it together. How has this framework changed in contemporary or Canadian narratives?

What did the formula look like before Coupland twisted it and moulded it to suit the needs of his fiction?

In an interview published in *SCL/ECL*, Brenna Clarke Gray specifically asks Coupland why the end of the world features so heavily in his work. “Your engagement with apocalypse ... [runs] throughout your career, throughout the different media you work in, and I’m wondering what you see as the role of apocalypse in your writing?” she inquires (260). At five paragraphs, his answer is one of the longest in the interview. His response touches on a variety of subjects—taxidermy, nightmares, his father’s army service, and his enduring twin obsessions with Canada and death. And yet does this truly answer the question? “We didn’t have an air raid shelter [growing up], but it was always a need to be prepared for the worst,” he explains, tangentially. “And, you know, if there’s not a belief in eschatological thinking or apocalyptic thinking, there’s certainly, if nothing else, a comfort with it” (270). This is the crux of it: as someone who grew up during the Cold War, Coupland finds himself strangely comfortable with the idea of the world ending. And yet the idea of apocalypse, to him, is also linked to myriad other topics: family, childhood, lucid dreaming. This illuminates something about Coupland, surely, but also something about the use and tradition of apocalypse as a whole. As a narrative, it pre-dates Christianity, and it remains popular because it works—as a didactic narrative of good and evil, as a sense-making structure as familiar and comforting as it is frightening. As Coupland demonstrates, apocalypse is extremely flexible, malleable, open to connections with other themes, ideas, or other cultural debris. Apocalypse, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

Elizabeth Rosen sums up the structure of apocalypse neatly by splitting it into three basic stages: judgement, catastrophe, and renewal (xxii). First, individuals are judged and sorted into categories according to who is saved and who is damned, or the elect and non-elect; second, cataclysmic damage destroys the non-elect; third, the elect form or discover a version of utopia, building a new world in the ashes of the old. In its most basic form, the framework of apocalypse

relies on the idea that catastrophe leads to meaning—that Revelation is, at its core, intended to reveal.

*The elect versus the non-elect*

The apocalypse ultimately organises the world's population into two groups: those saved from apocalyptic destruction, and those eradicated by it. Those who have acted correctly are rewarded; those who have erred are punished. Traditionally, apocalyptic narratives follow the victors—those who ascend to an enlightened state or take their rightful place in utopia. In this way, apocalypse functions as a didactic tale—a narrative to encourage good behaviour on one hand and warn against bad behaviour on the other.

Goldman clarifies and re-terms this division in terms of eschatology—the study of last things. According to Goldman, characters may also be divided by their attitude towards the apocalypse; those who aim to divert or avoid apocalypse subscribe to prophetic eschatology, and those who wish to see the apocalypse occur subscribe to apocalyptic eschatology. Subscribers to apocalyptic eschatology believe the old world must end in order for a new and better existence to be created, regardless of the violence wrought upon the non-elect in the process. In contrast, subscribers to prophetic eschatology believe something valuable may be salvaged from present existence, and that there is a divine—or at least greater—plan in the here and now; apocalypse is not needed for a greater truth to be revealed or achieved. Prophetic eschatology, importantly, “is content to wrestle with the truths found in this world rather than use violence to attain the truth in the New Jerusalem” (Goldman 49).

Both prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology rely on the drive and passion for knowledge, but are divided by their approaches to knowledge; prophetic eschatology focuses on

current knowledge and the value of knowledge found in the past, whereas apocalyptic eschatology is relentlessly forward-thinking, concerned with progress at the cost of all else. Prophetic eschatologists pursue connection with the past, while apocalyptic eschatologists seek to sever that connection. Rosen agrees with this dichotomy: “While all apocalyptists are prophets, not all prophets are apocalyptists. Apocalyptic writing is a particular offshoot of prophecy... the prophet aims to alter history, while the apocalyptist declares that history is irrevocably at an end” (66).

*Apocalypse as sense-making structure*

Apocalypse is attractive in literary narrative because it is a framework that comforts and educates the reader. Rosen, building on Frank Kermode’s *Sense of an Ending*, notes that apocalypse has potential “to make sense of history and time, even though it narrates the end of both” (145). Apocalypse functions this way (at least in part) through its relentless linearity—its definitive sense of a beginning, middle, and end—which satisfies the reader’s overarching desire for wholeness; there is something unbalanced in a beginning without an end, and apocalypse represents, quite literally, the ultimate end. Goldman suggests “novels... must have beginnings and ends even if the world has not” (47). As a result, both readers and creators are hardwired to find definitive, conclusive endings attractive. This might sound morbid or desolate, and indeed apocalypse can be quite cheerless. However, apocalypse also presents the end as comforting, implying that there is something meaningful in endings, and that destruction occurs according to some greater plan, judgement, or order. All in all, the framework of apocalypse functions with a clear linearity that real life often lacks. It is a relief to fall into this structure—whether in literature or real life—because the apocalypse’s sense of a beginning, middle, and end are clear-

cut. This linearity is especially attractive in a postmodern landscape, which, in its fragmentation and pastiche, lacks both linearity and order.

As well as reassuring its audience with the simplicity and logic of its structure, apocalypse narratives simultaneously comfort the reader—especially in times of social crisis or inequality—by insisting that evil will be overthrown and the righteous rewarded, acting as “a promise of hope held out to a troubled people” (Rosen 176). Apocalypse occurs primarily in times of decadence and self-indulgence as a way of resetting society—bringing sense and order back into a world corrupted by needless overabundance and overconsumption. Baudrillard specifically discusses the postmodern overabundance in *America*: “What do you do when everything is available—sex, flowers, the stereotypes of life and death?” he writes (30). “Transition, decadence-in-renovation, have . . . become the dominant aspects of apocalypse,” Kermode concludes (114); the postmodern apocalypse promises to wipe away the “decadence” of information and return meaning to a world overtaken by chaos.

However, while apocalypse functions well as a sense-making structure in literature, this framework becomes troublingly problematic, if not dangerous, once applied to the real world. After all, when those who perceive themselves as the elect seek to vanquish or erase those they perceive as the non-elect, the real-world result is holocaust and genocide. Theresa Heffernan summarises D.H. Lawrence’s work with apocalyptic anxiety when she frames this as a negative effect of modern nations, which are “caught up in their own stories of minorities and majorities, insiders and outsiders, as borders that are drawn and redrawn are imagined as eternal and natural,” concluding that “the dark side of the nationalist narrative expresses itself in genocide and ethnic cleansing” (13). The practical application of a perceived binary between righteous and damned, after all, is fascism; as Goldman notes, “Fascism adopted the myth of apocalypse and

applied it to the real world” (24). This is the danger of apocalyptic eschatology; actively pursuing apocalypse results in an absolute division between good and bad, light and dark. There is no room for shades of grey—let alone compassion or compromise—in the “chiaroscuro history” of apocalypse (Goldman 23). In this context, apocalypse becomes a dangerously destructive narrative to cling to and propagate; it advocates a black-and-white perspective which is no longer realistic, if even possible in the first place. Rosen describes apocalypse’s use as a sense-making structure, but warns against embracing it entirely: “Apocalypse is not only a comforting story about righteous inheritance for the dispossessed, nor a benign fairy tale of good besting evil. It is a potentially dangerous way by which to regard and act in the world” (177).

Nevertheless, Kermode concludes that the sense-making applications of apocalypse remain relevant, “even now when the history of the world has so terribly and so untidily expanded its endless successiveness. We recreate the horizons we have abolished, the structures that have collapsed, and we do so in terms of the old patterns, adapting them to our new worlds” (Kermode 58). The paradigms cannot be abandoned—only reinterpreted or forced to evolve. So how have these paradigms evolved and changed in contemporary narratives? In Canadian narratives? In postmodern narratives? Or in Coupland’s hands?

### *Contemporary apocalypse*

Traditionally, apocalypse is an event set to take place in the near future—an event which literature hopes to both warn and prepare against. However, a key shift in contemporary narratives conceives the apocalypse as something which has *already happened*. According to Kermode, apocalypse is not imminent but immanent (5); its violence and revelation are deeply and thoroughly ingrained in the contemporary. As Baudrillard puts it, mankind has evolved amongst, and consequently internalised, the tension and terror of the end of the world—much as

Coupland notes that apocalypse is a strong part of his identity because he grew up during the Cold War. “Everything has already become nuclear, faraway, vaporized. The explosion has already occurred; the bomb is only a metaphor now,” Baudrillard writes (*Anorexic Ruins* 34). Large-scale violence is no longer shocking; contemporary apocalypse is no less destructive than its forebear, but is more likely to take the form of what Brenna Clarke Gray refers to as “small personal apocalypses” (269). As a result, contemporary narratives are more likely to analyse how the apocalypse affects an individual, rather than society as a whole—or how a “world” can end and revelation can take place entirely within a single person.

Another key shift in contemporary narrative sees a shift away from obvious biblical connotations and interpretations of apocalypse; as time progresses, apocalypse is more likely to take the form of a secular narrative, lacking a divine element altogether. The traditional religious telling of apocalypse sees the elect as divinely chosen, the new world as a celestial gift, and New Jerusalem as only available to mankind through revelation. In contrast, secular apocalypse results in a man-made utopia, which is often not a place or setting at all but rather a shift in perspective. “In postmodern apocalyptic narratives, New Jerusalem is less a place than a new way of seeing: a new vision,” Rosen writes. “Characters do not inherit a new world. Often, they inherit a new way of understanding the old world” (xxiii). Revelation no longer has to be divine; it can take the form of any instance of massive or abrupt change, and can be facilitated by any number of earthly means.

And where traditional apocalypse narrative is strictly and relentlessly linear, contemporary authors seek to incorporate a cyclical structure of destruction and rebirth. In these works, neither catastrophe nor utopia is permanent; instead, narratives incorporate or evoke a cycle of conclusions and beginnings parcelled together into a continuing whole. The “end of the

old world” may simply be the end of a certain viewpoint or era; the change has less to do with structure and foundation than with perception. The end of the world can be reinterpreted to mean the end of an era, an idea, a political ideology; while destructive in its own way, the world is never actually destroyed.

Ultimately, Goldman concludes it is possible to mimic the structure of apocalyptic narratives while undermining them. In some cases, including many of Coupland’s novels and, notably, *Girlfriend in a Coma*, apocalypse becomes totally ordinary, unarresting—simply another absurdly unlikely occurrence in a long line of postmodern juxtapositions. The “jump-cut” from a pre-apocalyptic world to a post-apocalyptic world is no longer striking, or even interesting. This evolution of apocalypse can be traced back to an overwhelming sense of boredom with the framework itself. As Bruce Sterling points out in his introduction to William Gibson’s *Burning Chrome*, the apocalypse has become passé—done to death, overanalysed, overused, and paralysed by the audience’s ennui. Apocalypse is nothing more than an overused trope—easily recognised and subsequently discarded by an audience. World-ending cataclysm still sparks the same question—*what next?*—but it springs from boredom rather than existential terror.

### *The Canadian apocalypse*

Goldman notes the “apocalyptic paradigm” (3) has been a core theme in Canadian literature, culture, and history from the country’s inception: how else to describe colonisers than as purveyors of apocalypse, explorers who sought to erase an old or current world and replace it with a new, idealised version according to their own frameworks of usefulness and beauty? Goldman leans on Atwood to paint the founding of Canada as an apocalypse in and of itself—with white male colonisers cast in the role of the elect, and indigenous peoples and women cast

into the role of non-elect (84). David Robson, in Dellamora's *Postmodern Apocalypse*, similarly paints North America as a failed utopia—a thwarted attempt to build a perfect new world (62). And yet even under axe and scythe, railway construction and residential school, both the physical land of Canada and its history resisted change and erasure. Instead, Canada becomes a land of imperfect apocalypse, incomplete utopia. The old world seeps through; it is clear to settlers that their land “has not been purged and renovated; worse, it is a despoiled paradise that [they] must share with the non-elect—those deemed unworthy of ascending to paradise” (Goldman 4).

Canada's conception of literary apocalypse changed drastically after the Second World War—beginning to focus on the fragmentation of apocalypse rather than its promised utopia, and centring on the victims of apocalyptic violence rather than the victors. Goldman marks the beginning of this movement in the 1960s and 1970s, with novels (Laurence's *The Diviners* and Atwood's *Surfacing*, for example) which laid the groundwork for a more robust movement of critically apocalyptic works in the 1990s—including Gibson's *Burning Chrome*, Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, and Coupland's *Girlfriend in a Coma* (8-9). These narratives portray the extent of the destruction inherent in apocalypse's traditional elect/non-elect binary; Goldman uses the works of Timothy Findley as an example of the ways in which “post-holocaust novels repeatedly explore how educated and kind individuals are seduced by apocalypse's belief in the right of the powerful to silence and dismiss the powerless” (44). As a result, the reader is led to question whether the traditional separation of elect and non-elect can ever be clear-cut or error-free.

Contemporary CanLit's focus on the victims of apocalypse draws attention to the fact that the boundary between the elect and the non-elect is largely arbitrary; by placing non-traditional characters in the role of the elect, authors are able to destabilise the paradigm of apocalypse—and its relentlessly absolute perception of division. This apocalyptic paradigm can

be further subverted when the lines between elect and non-elect are blurred within a single character—for instance, when a villain is revealed to be a victim at heart or vice versa. It is easier to be seduced by the power of apocalypse than to resist it, and Goldman notes that “desires for radical change are not restricted to crazed, evil individuals,” since “everyone has the capacity to be lured by apocalypse’s promise of redemption through violence” (45).

Breaking down this same barrier between elect and non-elect may well prove the key to overthrowing the apocalyptic paradigm in entirety. Paired with a simultaneous move away from divine judgement, the separation between elect and non-elect becomes a matter of perspective, if not entirely arbitrary in nature. Separating those worthy of being saved from those worthy of being destroyed proves difficult and ineffectual when good and evil themselves prove difficult to separate—especially in an era in which authors and audiences alike are more likely to admit that “motives are sometimes mixed or multiple, and the effects of ideas and actions are frequently neither obvious or clear-cut” (Rosen 176). Beginning to recognise and discuss these shades of grey is the first step in defeating the black-and-white “chiaroscuro history” of apocalyptic narrative, and this is precisely what Canadian literature attempts to do—by focusing on the victims of apocalypse rather than the victors, or else by casting unlikely, non-traditional, or ordinary individuals in the role of the elect.

### *Postmodern apocalypse*

Hollinger notes the contemporary translation of apocalypse largely results in—and relies on—a certain distance between its tropes and the audience. By and large, “our investment in the scenarios of absolute endings and beginnings tends to be an ironic one” (172). This reaction—to treat something formerly terrifying or important with irony—is common in the postmodern era; Jameson sees contemporary apocalyptic narratives as littered with “extraordinary postmodern

mutations where the apocalyptic suddenly turns into the decorative (or at least diminishes abruptly into ‘something you have around the home’)” (xvii). What would have been considered earth-shattering in modern narratives become banal or ordinary in the grip of postmodernism. Here we find ourselves faced with the same declawed and toothless apocalypse that Coupland presents the reader in *Girlfriend in a Coma*; the cataclysm occurs sans terror, sans divine plan, sans righteous elect, with the lives of the survivors continuing on in approximately the same trajectory as before. This is “a very modest or mild apocalypse, the merest sea breeze” (xiv)—not a whimper *or* a bang, but hidden producers quietly rolling out a new product on supermarket shelves. This shift is more akin to a rewrite than an erasure.

Jameson sees postmodernism itself as an apocalypse—a shift in which society as a whole is able to abandon or ignore anything unlikeable or unworkable in modernism, including the natural world. According to Jameson, “Postmodernism is what you have when the modernisation process is complete and nature is gone for good” (ix); this observation introduces a foundational dichotomy between culture and nature which stands at the heart of many of Coupland’s works. His works continually feature characters obsessed with consumer culture on one hand and irresistibly drawn to nature on the other. Increasingly, contemporary culture is manufactured and artificial, placing it in direct contrast with the organic production and propagation of the natural world. And yet can we truly consider the natural world “natural” in a time and place obsessed with establishing national parks and “maintaining nature” (Baudrillard 8)?

Perhaps the most notable aspect of postmodern apocalypse is the new spin on the idea that apocalypse becomes necessary in times of decadence; the end of the world not only separates the wheat from the chaff in terms of people, but in terms of culture and information.

The apocalypse aids the postmodern elect in escaping or erasing the overwhelming amount of information available in the digital era, because, after all, the decadence of the postmodern era is not an overabundance of wealth, but an overabundance of information and cultural detritus. Jameson described the postmodern world as a “‘degraded’ landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and *Reader’s Digest* culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called paraliterature,” an era which “randomly and without principle but with gusto cannibalizes all... styles of the past and combines them in overstimulating ensembles” (2, 18-19). This postmodern obsession with indexing and reusing the past is a form of cultural hoarding, a decadence of information and overabundance of pop culture ephemera. This “aesthetic colonisation” exceeds nostalgia (19); individuals not only long for and idealise the past, but deconstruct the past in order to collage both their own identities and a new future. This glut of information and cultural debris leads to a sense that no individual piece holds particular power any longer—a sense of insignificance that simultaneously sows an overriding sense of meaninglessness in individuals, and empowers them to seek the apocalypse as a way to make sense of the world. As Hollinger notes, “The only possible redemption from absolute insignificance is through the absolute destruction of things as they are” (168).

Fragmentation has long been a symptom of impending apocalypse; unsurprisingly, apocalyptic narratives work well within the inherently fragmented landscape of postmodernism. Temporal unity is slippery and disjointed within the postmodern condition—making the relentless linearity of the apocalypse framework more and more attractive in the face of postmodern fragmentation. Here the function of apocalypse splits into two disparate paths: the ultimate signifier of fragmentation and chaos, and as an event promising to relieve and erase that same fragmentation and chaos. This inherent juxtaposition between destruction and relief is a

key part of apocalypse which is pronounced and magnified by a postmodern context. On one hand the violence and fragmentation of apocalypse supports the postmodern power structure and ensures individuals remain alienated and unable to challenge the system and frameworks which oppress them. On the other hand, apocalypse ultimately promises cosmic equalisation—an idealised return to order which consoles the oppressed with the belief that the righteous will be rewarded and the evil punished. Those enduring the violence of an *immanent* apocalypse are often still able and willing to believe in the hope represented by an *imminent* apocalypse—allowing the framework of apocalypse to simultaneously stand for both destruction and hope. Jameson refers to this dual purpose of postmodern fragmentation as schizophrenic—a “description rather than diagnosis”—which leaves us with “a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers” rather than coherent narratives (25).

#### *Coupland's apocalypse*

Coupland twists and reimagines a series of traditional apocalyptic tropes, pushing them to the limits of their operation or else ignoring convention entirely. Apocalypse is traditionally irreversible and stiffly linear; Coupland's apocalypse in *Girlfriend* is completely rewound and its effects totally reversed. Apocalypse traditionally must contain or catalyze some version of revelation; Coupland's “truths” remain vague, unclear, or even banal. Apocalypse traditionally leads to fragmentation of meaning and a loss of history; Coupland's characters are already in the midst of fragmented meaning when apocalypse strikes, and yet these fragments—which take the form of pop culture ephemera or digital information, often nostalgic in nature—connect his characters firmly to memory and the past. Apocalypse traditionally splits the saved from the damned, clearly identifying the righteous; Coupland's “righteous” elect have been saved for no clear reason, and his division between those saved from and those destroyed by apocalyptic

violence may very well be arbitrary. Traditional apocalypse is typically both gendered and racialized, proving especially destructive towards women and people of colour; although Coupland is willing and able to highlight white, middle-class males as victims in both novels—but this seems less a mode of resistance than a typical (gendered, racialized) urge to cast white, middle-class males as default protagonists in contemporary fiction. Coupland's apocalypse is also worth examining in terms of how it might hope to serve in the role of a traditional didactic or cautionary tale—painting a grim picture of the future in order to alert and alarm the reader to the reality of everyday life. Both *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *Generation A* warn against possible futures fueled by the widespread development of (and the unseen or ignored effects of) globalisation, pop culture, the internet, and apocalyptic thinking—and detailed discussions of these novels form the meat of the next two chapters.

## 2.

**SINCERE APOCALYPSE AND GIRLFRIEND IN A COMA**

“And here we are all these years later,” I say, “at the end of the world and at the end of time.”

“How fucking ironic,” Hamilton says.

*Girlfriend in a Coma*, 266

The plot of *Girlfriend in a Coma* is roundabout to say the least, mimicking the characters' ineffectual and equally roundabout search for meaning. The novel opens on a group of six friends at age 17: Karen, Richard, Hamilton, Linus, Pam, and Wendy. This group is rounded out by the eerie presence of a ghost: Jared, another of their friends who died of cancer while still in high school. Shortly after the novel's opening, Karen experiences visions of the future, including a sense of darkness and meaninglessness which colours their future lives—but before these visions can be interrogated, Karen falls deep into a coma where she languishes for roughly two decades—giving birth to Richard's child while she sleeps. In the meantime, the remaining characters each acknowledge and ignore a central absence at the centre of their lives, seeking and ultimately failing to find meaning. When Karen eventually wakes, she is convinced the apocalypse is imminent; sure enough, in the space of an afternoon, the world's inhabitants lie down and fall asleep, regardless of where they are or what they are doing, and subsequently die. This leaves the original six friends—plus Megan, Karen and Richard's daughter, and Jared—as the sole inhabitants of the earth. Ironically, the apocalypse fails to bring any great change to their lives. Finally, after a year of post-apocalypse living, Jared appears to them in a pseudo-celestial form to charge them with the task of finding meaning in their lives and in the lives of everyone in the world; he rewinds the apocalypse, sends Karen back into a coma as a sort of sacrifice, and

sends the rest of the group back into their pre-apocalypse lives to challenge the frameworks and societal expectations which have stunted their growth as sincere human beings for so long.

*Girlfriend in a Coma* is the first of Coupland's novels to portray a literal apocalypse, and yet the apocalypse itself is surprisingly anti-climactic. Rather than portray the explosive violence of a traditional apocalypse narrative, *Girlfriend in a Coma* depicts the end of the world as a day where the majority of the world's population suddenly has the urge to lie down and sleep—on film sets and in border line-ups, in grocery stores and hospitals, in traffic and at their dining room tables—and there, wherever they happen to nap, they die quietly in their sleep. Only seven people are spared out of Earth's 5.94 billion inhabitants, and these, of course, are Coupland's main characters. Traditionally, apocalypse serves as an event of grand or even total change; Coupland turns this assumption on its head in this novel by imagining an apocalypse in which nothing changes. This group of friends continues on as they always have—scrounging up a generator for power, foraging for food and entertainment, squabbling and bonding by turns—neither particularly redeemed nor punished by the end of the world.

Nonetheless, in line with traditional apocalypse, Coupland's end of the world ultimately serves a revelatory purpose. Rather than functioning as a moment in which everything changes, the apocalypse at the climax of *Girlfriend in a Coma* reveals that devastating loss has already occurred. Something vital in these characters is achingly absent, and this absence defines their existence. This missing aspect of their lives never clarifies into a solid idea or fact, referred to in many different ways as the novel progresses—as “meaning” or “souls” (12); as “values,” “absolutes,” “higher purpose,” or “convictions,” (258); as “inner” or “interior lives,” or “acts of kindness” (259). It presents itself in a lack of “free time,” a lingering obsession with “being all-around efficient,” and an “accelerated warping effect” brought about by “progress” (267).

The characters simultaneously acknowledge and avoid this absence, seeking to fill this inner chasm without fully admitting it exists. And yet every attempt to add meaning to their lives fails; creative acts fail to gratify, pilgrimages and other soul-searching journeys conclude fruitlessly, and even Karen's return from a 17-year-long coma fails to return significance or satisfaction to their existence. Coupland's quintessential first-world disillusionment and dissatisfaction—with consumerism, with nostalgia, with the idea of a brighter future or a happily-ever-after—has incubated in these characters, coalescing into dissatisfaction and uneasiness that can no longer be ignored. In this way the novel reacts to and builds on Coupland's previous work; Christopher Palmer writes that *Girlfriend in a Coma* describes a “contemporary condition which is seen as going beyond mediocre suburban narrowness or tacky consumer waste or slacker narcissism” (163). Here, Palmer names the themes that characters struggle with in Coupland's previous works—*Generation X*'s “mediocre suburban narrowness,” *Shampoo Planet*'s “tacky consumer waste,” and *Microserf*'s “slacker narcissism”—as building blocks which have led to *Girlfriend in a Coma*'s portrayal of apocalyptic devastation. This suggests the tone of *Girlfriend in a Coma* transcends normative consumer unrest and portrays a larger crisis—an apocalypse internal as much as it is external, with a central absence at its heart.

This absence inspires and requires a discussion of what, exactly, might be missing from these characters' lives, and what exactly may have driven meaning from their world. As the novel progresses, it becomes steadily clearer that they grope towards a lost sense of honesty, whether that takes the form of authenticity or sincerity. Their pervasive use of irony, as well as other coping techniques, must be critiqued and ultimately torn down; the apocalypse at the novel's conclusion proves that this absence cannot be fixed by abolishing external frameworks, but must be approached at a personal and individual level. These characters must prove that they

are willing to pursue change, to totally dedicate themselves to a cause despite the effects this commitment will have on the way they are perceived. The novel's concluding call to arms asks the protagonists to suspend their disbelief and trust in the redemptive power of sincerity. As they steadfastly stare down the future, the reader is asked to come to grips with the fact that this conclusion has both optimistic and uneasy elements. What is it about sincerity that makes this demand for commitment seem untrustworthy or suspicious? Is it really so unreasonable or distasteful to believe in something that is, at its heart, a corny concept?

### **Authenticity, sincerity, irony, postirony**

This section discusses four (for lack of a better categorical word) attitudes: authenticity, sincerity, irony, and postirony. All four have a place in both the postmodern world and in *Girlfriend in a Coma*. The ways in which these ways of thinking and being affect each other and usurp or subsume one another lay the groundwork for the growth experienced by Coupland's characters as they attempt to recognise and rectify the absence at the core of their lives. In brief, authenticity refers to truth directed inward; sincerity, to truth directed outward; irony, to truth directed inward but with a falsified façade directed outward; and postirony, to outward truth disguised as a false façade directed outward. Historically, or perhaps naturally, each phase gives way, more or less, to the next. *Girlfriend in a Coma* takes place in a postmodern setting, which makes it unsurprising that its dialogue and interpersonal interactions are characterised by knowing irony. The novel follows the protagonists' attempts to overcome the "poisonous" irony of the postmodern framework and to push through into something both healthier and more useful—into what Lee Konstantinou terms "postirony," and perhaps back into sincerity.

### *Authenticity*

Authenticity is typically described as an internal state, a way of being that depends on the self rather than the social relations of the self. It is the result of truth directed inward—an individual project of cultivation and creation that requires hard work and honest expression. Trilling tracks the root of the word back to the Greek, *authenteo*, which means “to have full power over; also, to commit a murder” (131). An authentic individual is “not only a master and a doer, but also a perpetrator, a murderer, even a self-murderer, a suicide” (131). This root translation continues to inform contemporary authenticity as an act that requires a certain ruthlessness, and ability and a willingness to cut away the dishonest or inauthentic parts of the self no matter how deeply rooted they may be.

In *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Lionel Trilling suggests that authenticity is a precursor to sincerity, the brand of honesty present in the self before individuals started second-guessing what it means to be honest. Where sincerity concerns performance, authenticity is simply a way of *being*. This is not to say that authenticity cannot be corrupted or faked—as Andrew Potter notes, authenticity is now more popular than ever as an advertising buzzword (103). Rather, it is simply difficult to question someone else’s authenticity because authenticity is inherently personal to each individual, and takes place on a level not obvious to the public eye.

It is possible to be authentic and sincere, or inauthentic and insincere, or any combination of the two states. Importantly, Trilling describes inauthenticity as a divisive force akin to schizophrenia; characters or individuals forced into an inauthentic framework will divorce themselves from the world around them in an effort to find a more authentic state. Inauthenticity, then, works well in tandem with irony—inspiring the purposeful disassociation that sits at irony’s core.

### *Sincerity*

Unlike authenticity, sincerity is a style of honesty or truth directed outward as well as inward; it functions as a performative, social state of being reliant on perspective. A sincere action must not only come from a place of honesty, but must be *perceived* as coming from a place of honesty. The first and most glaring issue with sincerity stems from this performative aspect; sincerity must come from the attempt to be sincere and yet must not be manufactured—lending sincerity “a schizophrenic and/or manipulative quality,” as Adam Kelly writes, because “sincerity as a concept has from the beginning been wracked by this kind of difficulty, has never, in fact, evaded its theatrical connection to a notion of performance” (135). Kelly notes sincerity requires intent, but is hamstrung by motive; ironically, sincerity makes a useful tool of manipulation, but is no longer sincere once used for a manipulative purpose.

This is the second glaring issue with sincerity, which leads to its downfall. Because it is relatively easy to fake some level of sincerity for manipulative purposes, sincerity in any form has ceased to be trustworthy. In many contemporary settings—*Girlfriend in a Coma* included—it is uncool to be sincere, because only idiots are sincere in an era where sincerity is so cheap. Trilling notes this effect as early as 1972, explaining that the word “sincerity” “has lost most of its former high dignity. When we hear it, we are conscious of the anachronism which touches it with quaintness. If we speak it, we are likely to do so with either discomfort or irony” (6).

### *Irony*

Irony serves as a way to hide an inward truth with an outward false façade—in basic terms, the act of saying or doing one thing while meaning another. At its core, irony is a disassociation of thought from action—a way to exploit “gaps between what’s said and what’s meant, between

how things try to appear and how they really are” (Wallace 182). In its first wide-spread popularity as a social, personal, and political attitude, irony functioned as a rebellion against sincerity and a way to reveal and belittle the hypocrisy lurking behind false or manufactured sincerity. This first iteration of popular irony, as David Foster Wallace describes it, “was difficult and painful, and productive—a grim diagnosis of a long-denied disease” (183). However, irony is also idealistic in its expectation that diagnosis “point[s] toward cure; that revelation of imprisonment yield[s] freedom,” when in fact irony is “singularly useless when it comes to constructing anything to replace the hypocrisies it debunks” (183). Irony is adept at pointing out hypocrisy, fakery, and other social flaws and misgivings; it fails, however, at suggesting an alternative. This is irony’s fatal flaw: as successful as it might be as a way to “strip off stuff’s mask and show the unpleasant reality behind it,” only so much *can* be stripped away, as Wallace notes in his interview with Larry McCaffery (48). Irony quickly turns on itself—a vicious circle of critique which likewise deserves critique.

In this light, it becomes important to move past irony once it has served its purpose—and yet this proves difficult. “Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what’s wrong, because they’ll look sentimental and naïve to all the weary ironists,” Wallace explains. “Irony’s gone from liberating to enslaving” (48-9). Irony is no longer useful because it has been co-opted by pop culture and marketed back to the same people who used it as a tool of rebellion against consumer culture. Irony has come to the end of its countercultural usefulness; its previous users must seek out new ways “to dismantle the power of those whose strength partly depends on [their] cynicism” (Konstantinou 288).

*Postirony*

Lee Konstantinou names “postirony” as the logical successor to irony—a performative state that tempers irony with sincerity and aims to replace it entirely. Postironic fiction focuses on the “tragic victim of postmodernity, someone who desperately seeks grounds for belief while fearing that no such grounds exist” (41). Significantly, postirony requires individuals to simultaneously pursue sincerity while acknowledging its failings. This is not a return to sincerity as much as it is sincerity reimagined—since “one cannot simply will oneself back into a preironic state of being,” and there is no point in taking “an uncritically earnest or naively nostalgic” stance (Konstantinou 8). Postirony does not require a total abandonment of irony, but rather a calculated cannibalisation of its useful parts. Irony may be retained for its use as a façade as long as sincerity lurks beneath—both a false front and a core truthfulness projected outward. Ironic sincerity may well pave the way for a resurgence of honest and widespread sincerity. David Foster Wallace describes the next generation of “rebels” as

some weird bunch of “anti-rebels,” [...] who have the childish gall actually to endorse single-entendre values. Who treat old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even started. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naïve, anachronistic. (192-3)

The postironic generation must become ironic about irony... which is to say, sincere.

*Sincerity, irony, and the world of Girlfriend in a Coma*

The absence at the core of the novel is well suited to a discussion of authenticity—the idea that these protagonists have lost sight of what it means to be their honest or true selves. Since

authenticity is inherently personal, it proves nearly impossible for this group of friends to nail down what, exactly, they might be looking for—let alone how they might go about cultivating or creating their most authentic selves. Sincerity, perhaps, is easier to lay hands on—since they have each other to lean on and provide perspective on what rings true or false. Approaching either authenticity or sincerity, however, requires an abandonment of irony—as well as any other coping techniques that the characters have adopted to help cover up the central lack of their lives.

### **The failure of the individual in the search for meaning**

About halfway through the novel, one of the protagonists—Linus, who until now has been outwardly well-adjusted and content—drops everything in his life to become a drifter in Nevada. Chronologically, Linus’s sojourn as a drifter is the first instance in which one of the characters actively acknowledges or attempts to repair the absence. The fact that he seeks a solution through *drifting* rather than *travelling* is significant; Linus is not looking for meaning so much as he is looking to become meaningful. This journey has no set goal or intended conclusion; instead, Linus is content to be led by the journey itself—a sentiment that resists the relentless linearity of apocalypse. Linus is not seeking the acquisition of something to fill the absence in his life, but rather searches out a process of *becoming*. He sends Richard a postcard from Las Vegas, explaining he has started practicing his gun skills. “There’s a target range nearby, so I’m learning to shoot,” he writes. “It sounds dumb, but it’s something to learn” (72). The emphasis here is not on the outcome, but on the process itself—an attitude which later becomes an important aspect of the novel’s conclusion. In what becomes a tragic and unsuccessful use of a tired cliché, he wanders the desert in search of meaning—because, as the trope of the desert insists, the desert is “an ecstatic critique of culture, and ecstatic form of disappearance” (Baudrillard 5). Although

Linus fails to realise it, the desert has lost any power it once had in this regard and is now just as commodified as the city he leaves behind.

While Linus's quest for meaning is unsuccessful at filling the absence in his life, his journey ultimately highlights the efficacy of a collective over individual thought and action, especially given the conclusion's emphasis on the necessity of collective action. This links back to Trilling's emphasis on sincerity as reliant on interaction with others; Linus is unable to make progress on his own precisely *because* he is on his own. The most long-lasting effects of the trip come not in the way that Linus changes or evolves, but in the way his postcard sticks in the minds of his friends back home. This postcard has an unintended butterfly effect, its contents crop up again and again in idle conversation. It surfaces two years later in a conversation between Pam and Richard, distilled into a single question. "It's like that thing you told me—the line from that post card Linus wrote you: *Why does life feel so long and so short at the same time?*" Pam says. "Why *is* that?" (79). This expression of unease is sown by Linus, but only reaches its full potential after seeping into the collective consciousness of the group.

Ultimately, Linus's journey reasserts the theme of generational restlessness from Coupland's earlier work, most notably found in *Generation X*, which manifests in Linus's dissatisfaction with the traditional, life-long career path. "I think I couldn't see me fitting into the everyday world any longer," Linus writes, explaining his motivation for suddenly abandoning his old life. "I found myself doing electrical work day in/day out and realized I would have to do this the rest of my life and it spooked me" (72). This continues Coupland's overarching theme of lingering dissatisfaction as a widespread issue; this is not something affecting just these friends, but their generation and culture as a whole. The old frameworks of traditional careers, families, and lives are no longer effective or fulfilling, and yet no solid framework has emerged to replace

them. This becomes a major underlying factor of the absence Coupland describes: a mismatch of expectation and reality, of what has come before and what is *now*. The past, as Trilling notes, “has lost its authenticating power . . . Here and now may be unpleasant, but at least they are authentic in being really *here* and *now*, and not susceptible to the explanation by some shadowy *there* and *then*” (139).

Significantly, Linus’s quest for meaning ends fruitlessly. He gives up on becoming wiser or more fulfilled and returns to his old life, continuing on more or less the same path that he abandoned four years previously. “His years away were treated as though he’d popped out to get a pack of cigarettes and returned a few minutes later,” Richard notes (77). Linus once again settles into his old life, forced to come to grips with the fact that there is no foreseeable solution to the meaninglessness he experiences. Clearly, his quest for enlightenment has come up dry, defying the trope that unstructured wandering in the desert (in the grand tradition of *On the Road*, or even *Generation X*) ought to coalesce into meaning. The reader understands that this is a necessary failure; as Neil Campbell writes in *The Rhizomatic West*, the notion of enlightenment through westward progress as “Manifest Destiny, as something ‘given,’ like a gift, contributes to this failure, for Coupland implies it led to false security and waste when, in fact, ‘Destiny is what we work toward’” (273, quoting *Girlfriend in a Coma*). It is necessary to “record this failure *and* see beyond it, to generate some redemptive possibility” (272)—and yet the protagonists of *Girlfriend in a Coma* are ultimately unable to see past Linus’ failure, blaming him for his lack of success rather than critiquing the clichéd way in which he chooses to search for meaning. Its failure is viewed as a personal failure resting entirely on Linus’s inadequacies, but it marks a more serious failure of hope and expectation for the rest of the group. For example, Richard is

more willing to believe that Linus has failed in some way than admit the cliché itself has proven to be fallible:

I was envious of Linus's venture into nothingdom, but also ticked off that he hadn't had a revelation in all of his wanderings. I still lived, as Hamilton did, with the belief that meaning could pop into my life at any moment. I was getting—we were getting—no younger, yet for some reason not particularly wiser. (78)

While Linus's foray into the desert and into the hobo lifestyle demonstrates his awareness of a lack of meaning, his return to civilisation signals a recognition that wandering in the wilderness cannot, as popular culture suggests, return significance to a life lacking meaning.

As an abandonment of home, history, and material goods, Linus's quest also implies that he seeks a monk-like purity and distance from consumerism and capitalism. Linus sacrifices his possessions, as well as the steady income guaranteed by his steady job, and yet this sacrifice of material goods and wealth fails to bring meaning to his life. This purposeful distancing from society, from capitalism, and even from the idea of "home" is unsuccessful in returning Linus to sincerity or authenticity, and in this way it mimics the apocalypse yet to come; it is not enough to strip away the frameworks governing these characters' lives, because the absence they struggle with is internal rather than external. This suggests either that this overriding meaninglessness is not caused by consumerism, or else that consumerism's meaninglessness cannot be overcome simply by its removal; further work is required by these characters to return meaning to their lives. As Linus's failed quest also proves, even the best-intentioned individual is unable to overcome this absence on his or her own. As Jared will later explain, "trying to change the world without the efforts of everybody else on Earth" proves useless, and the apocalypse itself is "evidence of six billion disasters that can only be mended by six billion people" (269).

Likewise, Pam and Wendy both serve as case studies of failed expectations—examples of characters who fulfilled professional dreams in high-paying, glamorous jobs, and yet found themselves unfulfilled by professional success. This sentiment runs parallel with Linus’s confession of being “spooked” by the idea of continuing in one career for the rest of his life (72). However, Linus’s career as an electrician is something he falls into rather than something he works *toward*; in contrast, both Pam and Wendy theoretically land the job of their dreams, and still fail to find fulfilment in their careers.

Pam provides the most striking example of this career disappointment, entering the fashion and modelling world almost immediately after graduating high school. She enjoys a slew of magazine covers and luxurious parties before suddenly disappearing from the public eye—as Hamilton accurately predicts—to check into rehab (73). This, too, is no surprise; careers in the high fashion industry are notoriously consumptive of drugs, money, and people alike. After getting clean, Pam returns to Vancouver, chewed up and spat out by the fashion industry with nothing to show for it:

You know, it was fun, Richard. I grant you that. But it’s over now. There’s only a small fraction of ‘me’ left. I used to think there was an infinite supply of ‘me’.

Wrong-o. I have to be calm now. My small seed needs to grow and become a whole person again. I blew it all—a whole decade raking in dough and not one effing penny left. (74)

Pam’s awareness of this absence was brought to the forefront by her firecracker of a career; once its brightness and speed petered out, the absence in Pam’s internal life came into stark focus. The rest of the group understands Pam spent something of herself during her high fashion career, and yet ignore the possibility that there might be something spent in their lives, too; their first instinct

is to blame her fast-paced and consuming career for a subsequent lack of meaning, rather than recognise the absence as a shared underlying condition. Pam's realisation that something essential has gone missing is a key moment of recognition—a conclusion she reaches well before most of the others.

Likewise, Wendy's career as a doctor both hides her underlying anxieties and serves as a reminder that something necessary is missing from her life: "In school and later at the hospital I looked at every corpse and I wondered the same thing: *Dead—what next?*" she tells Jared (197). Her medical career allows her to construct a façade of fulfilment and ignore the underlying hollowness of both her career and life. Considering her role as the successful and knowledgeable one of the group, Wendy ironically takes the majority of the novel to realise her career has only superficial meaning. The reader comes to this realisation long before Wendy; the novel portrays her career as exhausting and consuming, perhaps even more so than Pam's stint as a model. "God, I feel like a carton of time-expired milk all the time," she admits (65). Pam, at least, appears to enjoy her glamorous dream career—even as it consumes her.

As the novel's token successful professional, Wendy's work also allows her to continue to identify as the "the smart one" (18)—a framework of performative stereotype that helps life seem more manageable and perpetuate the idea that she is successfully playing her part. For instance, she is the first to know Karen's medical updates and the one that relays this information back to the others; she becomes the authority on wellness in terms of Richard's alcoholism; later, she is a righteous caregiver to Pam and Hamilton as they are forced to give up heroin; finally, she alone realises the sheer impossibility of Karen's recovery—knowledge that sets her apart and above the others. This knowledgeability is Wendy's coping mechanism, allowing her the pretense of fulfilment; it also serves as a way to avoid the full repercussions of Jared's death, as

the only person Wendy ever romantically loved. Fittingly, her eventual epiphany comes at the climax of the novel, when the ghost of Jared leads her safely through the catastrophic landscape of the apocalypse to the relative safety of the others: “For years, Wendy had thought the world was fine and complete—that she could make do with what she had worked for and with what life had handed her. Now she knows this has never been true” (196-7). Ghost Jared serves as a literal vision of what her life has been missing: once confronted with this image, Wendy is unable to keep up the pretense of fulfillment and satisfaction—or even knowledge—any longer.

Linus’s sojourn as a drifter and Pam and Wendy’s job dissatisfaction are representative of how the characters interact with their central meaninglessness. All three characters acknowledge their inner absence and attempt to engage with it, and do so in a way that invites the rest of the group of friends to similarly acknowledge and engage; significantly, however, the characters are uncomfortable bringing these anxieties up in open conversation—preferring to discuss this pervasive absence one-on-one rather than in a group setting. In fact, this topic is approached in group-wide conversation only once before the apocalypse occurs—a scene that occupies a pivotal position in the narrative as well as in the novel’s coalescing themes of irony and sincerity.

### **New Year’s Eve, 1992**

Fittingly, the only conversation in which all six protagonists approach the idea of absence takes place on New Year’s Eve, a holiday which encapsulates the desire to change—as well as most individuals’ inability to change, despite best intentions. Their plans are low-key, casual: an extended game of cards, a few drinks. The ensuing scene is notably the only instance in which they approach the topic of their lives’ creeping absence, and the tone of this conversation is

especially significant; this conversation can only take the form of careless banter, a side note to the concurrent card game:

Linus sipped his drink and said, “You know, from what I’ve seen, at twenty you know you’re not going to be a rock star. *Threes are wild this round.* By twenty-five, you know you’re not going to be a dentist or a professional.” Wendy pecked Linus on the cheek. “And by thirty, a darkness starts moving in—you wonder if you’re ever going to be fulfilled, let alone wealthy or successful. *Pam, are you folding? Wake up, girl.* By thirty-five, you know, basically, what you’re going to be doing the rest of your life; you become resigned to your fate. God, do I have a shitty hand. My cards, I mean.” (82)

This explanation is fitted in amongst hands of poker, with Linus simultaneously talking and dealing. The other characters never directly acknowledge Linus’s thoughts and description of “a darkness”; the conversation continues in the same thematic vein, but no one specifically references, critiques, or directly adds to Linus’s comments. It reads less like a conversation than it does six people thinking out loud in the same room. They share information without really acknowledging it—a tone or stylistic choice present throughout much of the narrative.

This is perhaps the most post-ironic moment of the novel, and is a prime example of how Coupland’s quintessential wishful-slacker character type is incapable of approaching sincerity with anything but ironic detachment. These characters are capable of being nakedly honest with each other, but only as long as they treat these interactions flippantly, or even sarcastically. The truth is present, and even acknowledged, but can never be communicated without an uncaring, dismissive façade. Linus’s conclusion to this speech is an example of how characters and reader alike are expected to read between the lines; when he says “God, do I have a shitty hand,” the

listener understands this points to a deeper frustration and dissatisfaction with his life, even as he immediately rejects this subtext with the addendum, “My cards, I mean.”

This agreement to approach sincere truth with insincere irony remains a delicate pact, and approaching the truth directly is strictly off-limits. In fact, when Linus tries to push for a direct response from Hamilton, the unspoken agreement—to talk about serious problems only in an unserious manner—disappears, leaving the discussion unmoored and aggressive.

“Hamilton, you talk funny,” barked Linus in a voice so new it startled us. “You talk in little TV bits. You’re never sincere. You’re never nice. You used to be a little bit nice once. I don’t think you’ve ever had a real conversation in your life.” We were all still: “When you were young, you were funny, but now you’re not young and you’re not even boring. You’re just kind of scary. When was the last time you had a real conversation with *anybody*?” (83-4)

It is one thing to assert that “everybody in the world is fake” and allow the accusation to inherently implicate those present (83); it is another to accuse someone specific and present of poisonous insincerity. Linus abandons not only irony, but patience; while Hamilton falls directly under fire, this denunciation indirectly targets—and consequently shocks—every member of the conversation, who are collectively described as “startled” and “still” at this sudden interrogation.

Hamilton finds himself under fire in this scene not because he is specifically more fake than the others, and not because he attempts to cover or fill the absence in his life with something else—since Wendy and Richard likewise try to fill this absence, with work and alcohol respectively—but because Hamilton’s coping technique is, itself, so fake. Here are the pop culture references that Faye and Palmer warn against at such length—a façade of “little TV bits,”

which become more pronounced when Hamilton begins to lose his composure. As Richard notes, “Hamilton was in his phase of only renting British VHS tapes, thus Anglicizing his diction,” which undermines his attempts to wiggle out from under Linus’s sudden accusations: “Cor fricking *blimey*. No one needs this,” he retorts (84). Like the others, Hamilton refuses to recognise or repair the meaninglessness of his life; unlike the others, he bandages the problem by filling the gap in his life with meaningless slang, fantastical personas, and references to obscure pop culture ephemera. This is perhaps no different than Pam’s drug addiction, or Megan’s goth style, or Richard’s alcoholism, or Wendy’s obsession with her job—but Hamilton’s method of obscuring the issue is by far the flashiest, the most blatantly inauthentic. In this scene around the card table, we see Hamilton deny both his insincerity and the larger absence it represents; as a result, he becomes both a foil and a warning to the other characters, as they slowly begin to approach and understand the meaningless at the centre of their lives. Hamilton, on the other hand, has no interest in confronting his inner absence, refusing to acknowledge it even when the apocalypse strips away the cultural frameworks he relies on to obscure it. Far from revealing the uselessness of this façade, the apocalypse only heightens Hamilton’s insistence on ignoring the problem; rather than face this inner lack, he devolves into an increasingly detailed imaginary life.

These moments bring to light the presence of the pervasive meaninglessness in these characters’ lives and the ways they interact—or refuse to interact—with it. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that this absence is both noticed and, in some cases, acknowledged by the characters. Linus recognises this absence and attempts to fill or fix it through a prototypical quest for meaning in the desert, which fails; Pam and Wendy both become victims of this meaninglessness, which springs from careers they ostensibly love; finally, over a New Year’s Eve card game, all six main characters dance around the fact that insincerity colours the majority

of their interactions and conversations. These three instances highlight the relationship the characters have with the meaninglessness that defines their lives. This absence is acknowledged, ignored, and covered up by turns; the characters, for the most part, recognise the problem but prove unable to rectify it. Linus returns to his old life after his pilgrimage proves fruitless; Pam remains hopeful that the small seed of herself will be able to regrow in time; Hamilton sidesteps the difficulty posed by finding a solution by refusing to acknowledge there is a problem. In all three cases, action proves useless; something larger will be necessary to jolt them from their lives and show them the way forward to meaning—a global apocalypse, for instance.

### **The grand finale, the grand reveal: the end of the world**

*Girlfriend in a Coma* makes no secret of its intended conclusion: the novel opens with a vision of apocalyptic devastation to warn the reader of what is to come. This window into the world's eventual post-apocalyptic landscape is courtesy of Jared, a ghost, the closest thing the novel has to an omniscient narrator or divine messenger. "Let me describe the real estate that remains one year after the world ended," he begins. "To visit Earth now you would see thousands of years of grandeur and machinery all falling asleep" (4, 5). This vision of the apocalypse is supported and expanded by the prophetic dream that sends Karen into the coma of the title. Rather than focus on the physical destruction to the landscape, as Jared does, she attempts to describe the underlying feeling or mood of the post-apocalyptic wasteland. "I could see us—we weren't being tortured or anything—we were all still alive and all ... older ... middle-aged or something, but ... 'meaning' had vanished. And yet we didn't know it. We were meaningless," Karen confesses. "Then I looked at us up close—Pam, Hamilton, you, Linus, Wendy—and you all seemed normal, but your eyes were without souls ... like a salmon lying on a dock, one eye flat on the hot wood,

the other looking straight to heaven” (12, ellipses Coupland’s own). The rest of the future—cars, hairstyles, news headlines—look fairly run-of-the-mill to Karen, but this meaninglessness creates a chilling impression of the future. These previews of the apocalypse warn the reader of both the physical and spiritual devastation which will be wrought on these characters by the end of the world—although, as we learn, the meaninglessness predicted by Karen is *revealed* rather than *caused* by the apocalypse.

True to this promised, foreshadowed apocalypse, Jared’s forewarning and Karen’s vision come to fruition on November 1, 1997 as the entire world falls asleep person by person, from checkout girl to queen, child to senior citizen. Familiar landscape suddenly becomes chaotic—people panicking, flocking to hospitals and clogging the highways out of the city, trying to stave off or escape the inevitable. This scene also presents stereotypical apocalyptic moments of terror, as ironic as they are classic, lent meaning and understanding only through a framework of pop culture and recognition through their mediated pop culture counterparts: “Crisis. A plague. People are dying. Like in the movies,” as Megan describes it (192). But even this panic is short-lived: the world quickly and quietly comes to a standstill, leaving only the six friends and Karen’s daughter (now herself pregnant) as survivors.

Here the apocalypse takes on its traditional revelatory role, uncovering something crucial in the nature of both the characters and the world itself. The absence Karen identifies in her original premonition remains a core part of their existence, and becomes obvious as something that has been with them all along. The removal of cultural, societal, and economic factors has failed to have an effect on the lack of purpose these characters discover in their lives, suggesting this meaninglessness was not caused by outside factors but rather something inherent in these individuals all along. Coupland shows that the underlying issue of absence stems directly from

the characters themselves, rather than the framework (of geography, time period, culture, or philosophy) within which they live and construct their identities. This reinforces Faye's interpretation of pop culture as a signpost rather than an instigator of the apocalyptic destruction within the novel; even with pop culture, consumerism, and media completely removed, the protagonists of *Girlfriend in a Coma* continue to experience a core absence of meaning in their lives, and to place value on superficial priorities rather than discovering some deeper or more meaningful way to live. As Linus describes it: "Our lives have remained static—even after we've lost everything in the world—shit: the world *itself*. Isn't that sick?" (258).

This concluding revelation sets the characters in place to finally recognize and combat the overriding absence at the core of their lives. This task has confronted the characters since the beginning of the novel, but only now are they equipped and prepared to tackle this pervasive meaninglessness. The apocalypse serves as a narrative device to reveal the truth, power, and ability within the characters, inviting them to accept responsibility and claim ownership of the absence—even as the solution to this meaningless remains unclear.

### **A call to arms, a return to sincerity, and the apocalypse undone**

When the apocalypse occurs at the climax of the novel, it serves the typical revelatory function of apocalypse: to illuminate a deeper truth about the world and its remaining inhabitants. In the case of *Girlfriend in a Coma*, the apocalypse reveals a flaw within the elect—this friend group—by bringing to light the absence in their lives and the fact that it cannot be overcome simply by removing societal, cultural, or economic factors.

The end of the world reveals this by presenting a surprisingly ordinary post-apocalyptic world; Coupland's characters may have survived a global catastrophe, but they remain unmoved and basically unaffected by it. After all, as Palmer points out, the apocalypse itself has likewise become cliché and ordinary, "both anticipated and déjà" (159). Their methods of passing the time are tinged with boredom and a hint of anarchy; they "set up a demolition derby in the Eaton's parking lot, ransacked the Virgin Superstore, and torched the Home Depot" to fight off monotony (Coupland 259). Megan rifles through her best friend's house and reads her diary; as a group they loot jewellery stores and safety deposit boxes, ironically hoarding useless treasure, having "money fights, lobbing and tossing Krugerrands, rubies and thousand-dollar bills at each other" (211). These prankish pastimes recall the fun they had as uninhibited teenagers, crashing parties and "hucking" a TV set over the edge of a cliff on a whim (265). They adapt quickly to a world in which anything is allowed, and their urges and whims—to do things that would never be socially appropriate or safe in a populated world—are fairly cliché urges and whims. The world around them has changed; the characters, on the other hand, continue about their lives just as they did pre-apocalypse—albeit with far more freedom than they had before. Traditionally, the elect survive because their morals and actions are ideal; they are saved from destruction because they are already the way they need to be. This is not true in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, and it quickly becomes abundantly clear that the protagonists fail to meet the standards of a traditional elect. After all, they spend their time torching big box stores and hosting demolition derbies in the ruins of the old world—scenes misaligned with the stereotypical vision of utopia. These whims seem out of place because they are the whims of ordinary people—to loot, to spy, to have money fights—and ordinary people generally perish in the apocalypse, leaving the extraordinary

elect to survive sans ordinary urges. This juxtaposition between expectation and reality is a critique of the apocalypse, both a subversion of its tropes and a way of poking fun at its expense.

This placement of ordinary people as the elect is an important choice for the novel because of its glaring disparity with typical apocalyptic narratives. However, these are characters “whose ordinariness turns out to be distinctly and even spectacularly extraordinary,” as Palmer notes (159). The point of this apocalypse is to emphasize the idea that change is necessary if individuals in the contemporary world are to survive the effects of postmodern consumption—of irony, fakery, and the decentred self—and to simultaneously imply that even the most ordinary person is capable of undertaking the task. What sets these characters apart from the rest of the world is their willingness to acknowledge and take action against their contemporary condition, even if they lack the vocabulary to describe it properly. The apocalypse reveals that simply destroying and removing outside influences is not enough; change must take place in individuals rather than in (social, economic, political, or philosophical) frameworks. This change must take place on a community level; the six main characters are able to identify issues in their lives and gesture towards change, but only barely, and ultimately ineffectually. It is futile to attempt “to change the world without the efforts of everybody else on Earth,” as Jared explains.

The only thing that can keep the planet turning smoothly now is human free will forged into effort. Nothing else. That’s why the world has seemed so large in the past few years, and time so screwy. It’s because Earth is now totally ours. . . . Human beings and the world are now the same thing. The future and whatever happens to you after you die—it’s all melted together. Death isn’t an escape hatch the way it used to be. (269)

There is no easy way out, and in this light it makes sense that the framework of apocalypse fails to supply answers to the issues faced by Coupland's protagonists; its relentlessly black and white divisions fail to find purchase in the subtle shadings of a contemporary landscape. The apocalypse is attractive because, at its heart, it is a simple structure. When applied to a landscape that defies simplicity, or a landscape that is already fragmented, the apocalypse loses some of its power.

This turns us to Jared's strange, propaganda-like call to arms. After a year of living in a post-apocalyptic world, Jared appears to the survivors and presents them with an opportunity: time will be rewound, and they will be returned to their old pre-apocalypse lives if they commit to identifying and driving out the meaninglessness at the core of their worldview. His speech is inspirational in the way a car salesman is inspirational—to the point where it becomes frankly evangelical. In short, Jared's concluding speech is a call to arms: are they ready to do better? "There is no other meaning," Jared says. "This is it."

"In your old lives you had nothing to live for. Now you do. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Go clear the land for a new culture—bring your axes, scythes, and guns. ... If you're not spending every waking moment of your life radically rethinking the nature of the world—if you're not plotting every moment boiling the carcass of the old order—then you're wasting your day." (274)

This call to arms is the central focus of the novel's final chapters, and Jared preaches to the protagonists at length. Willingly, they assent to every scenario that Jared poses, agreeing unconditionally to do anything necessary to drive meaninglessness from their lives.

Significantly, the characters are not truly instructed on how their lives will change, only that they will; Jared recruits them to the cause without quite explaining the cause itself, other than describing it as the battle for a new and better world. His exact plan for the future lacks detail, and this, paired with the violent undertone of a call to pick up “axes, scythes, and guns,” ultimately makes his proselytizing seem suspicious, if not downright problematic—to the reader if not to the protagonists themselves. Read a certain way, Jared’s call to “dismantle and smash” and to “clear the world for a new culture” has the unmistakable ring of apocalyptic violence to it—implying the only way forward is to destroy what has come before, including the non-elect (275, 274). The only thing defining the elect in *Girlfriend in a Coma* is not an inherent goodness, or even ability—simply a willingness to take up arms. The moral of the novel, then, seems to counsel obedience without question—something that ought to ring alarm bells in the reader’s head.

But perhaps this places the emphasis on the wrong piece of the puzzle: the defining feature of the elect is not a willingness to take up *arms* but a *willingness* to take up arms. *Girlfriend in a Coma* portrays a population marinated in irony their whole lives, grappling with it and against it. Somewhere in the muddle of being sincerely ironic and ironically sincere, these protagonists have pushed through irony and re-emerged in sincerity. With this call to arms, Jared instructs them to embrace sincerity entirely, leaving behind the last trappings of postirony. The actions and tasks set before them are less important than the attitude of approach; the emphasis is not on the *arms*, but on the *willingness*. It is not obedience without question so much as it is honesty without question.

At first, this seems like a disappointing reveal or an ironic joke—that these ordinary friends are saved when the only thing redeeming them is a desire to be more sincere. Asking

characters to be more sincere to prevent the apocalypse seems suspiciously akin to asking children to be good around Christmas so Santa will come; procuring a promise under such conditions seems hollow, if not downright coercive, especially when the promise itself is amorphously open to interpretation. In a world in which irony is king, sincerity is belittled and considered naïve, childish, ridiculous—and this is the world of both the novel and the reader. It sounds corny to say redemption hinges on sincerity because, well, it *is* corny. But this is precisely the point: is it really so awful to be corny? As the title to chapter eleven suggests, “DESTINY IS CORNY” (74). Jared’s call to arms sounds suspiciously hollow because society has trained characters and readers alike to believe that sincerity is inadequate. But why does this have to be the case? *Could* sincerity be the answer? The novel’s protagonists seem duped by some great conspiracy, manipulated by the ghost of a dead friend into perpetrating apocalyptic violence on their world. But the action itself is irrelevant; the focus is the attitude with which they must approach their new lives, rethink the old world, and force its inhabitants to do the same. The best thing about sincerity, after all, is that anyone is capable of being sincere—even Hamilton. Drastic change is needed—but drastic change is possible and realistic, and no apocalypse necessary. Confronted with the issues of the postmodern, inauthentic, commodified contemporary era, power still lies in the hands of ordinary people. “Your destiny’s now big enough to meet your jaded capacity for awe,” Jared informs his old friends, before setting them back in the pre-apocalyptic world. “It’s powerful enough for you to rise to the task of being individuals” (269).

So, while shocking, it begins to make sense that Coupland snubs the traditional apocalypse’s linear format—perhaps its most basic and most central feature—to turn back the clock and return his protagonists to the pre-apocalyptic world. After all, the apocalypse serves its purpose; in this

context it is not intended to reward the righteous and punish the damned, but simply to reveal something vital to the characters. This purpose completed, the apocalypse is no longer needed—no matter how unorthodox or self-defeating or absurd it may seem to rewind its destruction as though it never happened. In the end, the global apocalypse is only useful to reveal the fact that catastrophic change has already taken place. This absence, after all, is the true apocalyptic devastation of the novel—and it ironically proves much more difficult to undo than the literal end of the world.

## 3.

**(ANTI-)APOCALYPTIC AUTHENTICITY AND GENERATION A**

Well, the media do us all such tremendous favors when they call you Generation X, right? Two clicks from the very end of the alphabet. I hereby declare you Generation A, as much at the beginning of a series of astonishing triumphs and failures as Adam and Eve were so long ago.

I apologize because of the terrible mess the planet is in. But it has always been a mess. There have never been any "Good Old Days," there have just been days. And as I say to my grandchildren, "Don't look at me. I just got here myself."

So you know what I'm going to do? I declare everybody here a member of Generation A. Tomorrow is another day for all of us.

Kurt Vonnegut Jr.,  
Speech to Class of 1994: Syracuse University Commencement

*Generation A* (2009) mimics many of the same themes of apocalypse, absence, and authenticity found in *Girlfriend in a Coma*, and its narrative arc is similar in many ways to both *Generation X* (which it pays an obvious homage to in its title) and to *Girlfriend in a Coma*; a small group of friends separates from their larger society to pursue fulfilment, subsequently avoiding—and perhaps attempting to heal—the larger issues dogging the contemporary search for knowledge, truth, and identity.

The novel opens with a series of disparate viewpoints from a series of far-flung places: we meet Sam, in New Zealand; Julien, in France; Harj, in Sri Lanka; Zack, in America; and Diana, in Canada. At first, these characters seem to have little in common, except for two things: first, that none of them have shown any interest in the wildly popular and widespread “chronosuppressant” drug Solon, which makes users happy to be solitary; second, that in a world where bees have become extinct, each character is impossibly stung by a bee. Scientists and government agents quickly descend, whisking each individual (collectively the “Wonka kids,” as

Julien sardonically dubs them) into rooms free of brand names, colour, and outside influence. They are kept in these research facilities for months while researchers poke and prod at their brains, their ideas, and their pasts—attempting to draw some correlation between the five protagonists. What drew the bees to them in the first place? What is the significance of being stung?

Once these characters are released from their comfortable antiseptic prisons, they are driven to contact and connect with one another. They are whisked away to the remote British Columbian island of Haida Gwaii, where they quickly bond into a micro-community—sharing both their pasts and a series of fictional stories with one another to pass the time. Meanwhile, the citizens of the outside world become more and more addicted to Solon, whose side effects— notably that its users feel less and less inclined to connect with one another—slowly destroy communities and relationships. By the conclusion of the novel, these two poles—collective storytelling and the alienating desire to be solitary—are thrown into high contrast with one another. It seems clear which side ought to prevail over the other, since the retreat into the Canadian wilderness promises not only a return to narrative but a return to authenticity and fulfilment. However, it quickly becomes apparent that this supposedly anti-apocalyptic collective also blends the protagonists' desires, ideas, and personalities into an ominously homogenous hive mind. Solon's effects are clearly apocalyptic, but the novel presents the formation of a consuming collective as equally destructive and worrisome in its own right. And so, as with most of Coupland's novels, *Generation A*'s quest for fulfilment has ambivalent results; the conclusion rests upon an uneasy balance between optimism and doubt.

This chapter examines *Generation A* in roughly chronological order, beginning by establishing the current world of the novel and the now-familiar implications that catastrophic

change has taken place long before the apocalypse occurs. It next discusses the roles played by Solon and by bees within the novel, as the catalysts which identify the protagonists as the elect, and then examines the subsequent movement from individuality towards community and from fakery towards authenticity. It considers the messages hidden within the narratives the characters perform for one another, further linking the issues of absence and authenticity. Finally, this chapter ends with a discussion of Coupland's indeterminate ending: is the reader to interpret it as optimistic or doubtful, happy or unhappy? What is the final message of the novel—and how is it intended to affect the reader?

### **Among the ruins**

*Generation A* echoes *Girlfriend in a Coma* in suggesting that, at the novel's opening, catastrophic change has already taken place and the protagonists stand in the wreckage; no matter how well disguised or marketed it is, Coupland's citizens continue to struggle with a sense of loss, absence, or fakery. Whereas *Girlfriend in a Coma's* absence defies description and only belatedly and obliquely comes to be understood as a need for sincerity, *Generation A* specifically describes this societal absence as related to a sense of story; the absence at the core of the novel describes an absence of narrative in its inhabitants' lives. This is not an implication, but an overt claim identified by the novel. "There's an examination of the need that one's life has to be a story: that it begins with birth, ends with death, but the story part, whatever it is, happens somewhere in the middle," Coupland explained in a promotional interview after the release of *Generation A*. "Instead of a story, maybe you have your existence on Google or Wikipedia. How do you define yourself? ... where do you find the self?" (Lunau).

Within *Generation A* itself, this message is conveyed especially well by two of the metanarratives that make up the second half of the novel. First, “The Anti-Ghosts”: a parable of separation, loss, and disembodiment. “There once was a group of people whose souls had been warped and damaged and squeezed dry by the modern world,” Sam begins. “One day, their souls rebelled altogether and fled the bodies that contained them. And once a soul leaves a body, it’s all over; there’s no going back” (203). But the bodies keep functioning as ever—uncanny, empty doppelgangers who pay their bills on time, go shopping, and complete every other task and action required by a regular person on a day-to-day basis. These disembodied souls—the anti-ghosts—are able to watch the events and actions of their previous lives as they continue, but remain “unable to be a part of change or progress” (203-4). Eventually, they learn the only way they can affect the real world is by lashing out in anger, and so they

began to jam car engines and trip alarms. They learned how to curdle milk and burn food. They crippled satellites and salted drinking water. They learned to hijack the power of electrical storms to set fire to landscapes. They learned that anger is beauty. They learned that the only way they could create was to destroy, that the only way to become real once more was to fight their way back into the world. (204)

And so the tale ends—abruptly, but not unexpectedly. The moral here seems obvious: humanity has become separated from its ability or willingness to effect action, from free will and desire, from control or interest. This directly stems from “modern life,” and while it is not clear which specific aspect of the modern world is to blame, the reader can make an educated guess; the novel may easily be read as a critique of consumerism, of the prioritization of celebrity status, money, or possessions, and of the growing lack of sincere interaction between individuals. But no matter what aspect of modern life caused this internal separation between the true self and the

performance of self, this story's instruction seems clear—to recognise that souls have become “warped and damaged and squeezed dry,” and to leverage that recognition into anger, to lash out at the world, to destroy the things that have separated individuals from their true or best selves.

This narrative sounds familiar, and so it should; this story sums up the conflict and plot arc of *Girlfriend in a Coma* in the guise of a didactic fable. Characters find themselves divorced from the world around them and unable to effect change; they rediscover sincere action and use it as a tool of seemingly apocalyptic violence. Significantly, this story ends with the conclusion that the anti-ghosts call to arms “was not the end of the world, but it was the beginning of sorrows” (204). This phrasing is lifted word for word from Matthew 24:8 in the King James Bible, a section describing not apocalypse but rather the pre-apocalypse struggle of the righteous to overcome false prophets and non-believers in the search for a better life on Earth. Using this phrase as a signpost, Coupland situates his protagonists as the elect and simultaneously implies overcoming apocalypse is a continuing process requiring both effort and dedication rather than a struggle that ends with the novel. This interpretation fits neatly with the conclusion of *Girlfriend in a Coma*, and foreshadows the events to come in *Generation A*. Significantly, this same biblical phrase also occurs earlier in the novel in a description of Diana's bee sting. “Your being stung is just one more indicator that the Last Generation is among us and we are it,” her ex-pastor informs her after her release.

Your sting was the beginning of sorrows. It is one of the events that will lead to the end of the world. ... We are like the generation before Noah built the ark. The people were caught up in the cares of their own lives and were not paying attention to Noah's warning. The same is true now.” (127)

In *Girlfriend in a Coma*, the struggle to create a new world takes place after the novel's end; in contrast, *Generation A* signals the beginning of this struggle a third of the way through the book. In a way, *Generation A* picks up where *Girlfriend* leaves off—portraying the struggle for a better world and the effects this process might have on the elect.

“The Anti-Ghosts” opens on a world in which devastating change is dealt with and reacted to; “The Man Who Lost His Story” doubles back to consider how and why this world has become warped, damaged, and squeezed dry. Craig, the main character, wakes up one day to realise that his life has lost its overarching, driving narrative. Lost and confused, he wanders into a community centre, intending to sign up for hang-gliding or rock-climbing lessons with the hope that an exhilarating activity will jump-start the return of narrative. Instead, he encounters a jaded receptionist who educates him on the finer points of his condition, which is more common than Craig originally guessed. As the receptionist explains,

our modern fame-driven culture, with its real-time 24-7 marinade of electronic information, demands a lot from modern citizens, and poses great obstacles to narrative ... To survive, people need to become self-branding charisma robots. Yet, ironically, society mocks and punishes people who aspire to that state. ... So, in a nutshell, given the current media composition of the world, you're pretty much doomed to being uninteresting and storyless. (222)

This clearly situates the search for meaning—through the search for story—as a defining feature of *Generation A*'s framework. And yet, by the time this novel opens, the majority of the population seems to have given up hope of constructing or cultivating an authentic story for themselves. Instead, the majority of the world's population seems to focus on merely *appearing* as though they have a story. As one of *Generation A*'s characters puts it, “I think most people

spend so much time trying to convince themselves that their lives are stories that the actual story-creating part of their brains hardens and dies. People forget that there are other ways of ordering the world” (169). This bait-and-switch of simulacra evokes nothing so much as Philip K. Dick’s electric sheep—a game of one-upmanship resulting in a world of cleverly constructed facades with nothing beneath. These attempts to construct a perfect image began as a temporary way to fill space until a real story appeared, and yet prevent the discovery or cultivation of actual meaning. And so, on a basic level, *Generation A* presents a world in which people themselves have become simulations—copies of things with no original version.

### **Solon and the danger posed by solitude**

SOLON CR is indicated for the short-term treatment of psychological unease grounded in obsession with thinking about the near and distant future. By severing the link between the present moment and a patient’s perceived future state, researchers have found a pronounced and significant drop in all forms of anxiety. As well, researchers have found that disengagement with “the future” has allowed many patients complaining of persistent loneliness to live active and productive single lives with no fear or anxiety.

The makers of SOLON® (dihydride spliceosomal protein snRNP-171) have been helping millions of people cope with stress in a natural and relaxed manner.

Excerpt from Solon packaging, *Generation A*

With their community-oriented mindset, the five protagonists stand in direct contrast to the majority of society—in large part because of the popularity of the new and wildly popular drug Solon. According to the package, it makes the user feel as though time is passing more quickly; while under the influence of Solon, the user experiences a constant present in which the future has no power to cause anxiety. As an added side-effect, Solon helps the user feel less alone.

While Solon users are initially portrayed as social—Harj’s cult-like Abercrombie and Fitch

friends still throw parties and find entertainment in each other's company, for instance—this side effect seems to snowball drastically. By the end of the novel, the protagonists witness the powerful and destructive alienating effects of Solon, which eliminates the bonds between the indigenous people of Haida Gwaii and effectively destroys the tribe:

[W]e sat and watched them partake, the bowl and packages of Solon moving silently, first across the elders in the front row, then going backwards, one by one. By the time the third row was taking their pills, the people up front were standing up and walking away. They walked past the five of us, and their bland facial expressions were like those of people who are headed home, wondering how many emails they have in their inbox.

Within ten minutes all the Haida had drunk the Kool-Aid, and within twenty minutes they were all gone.

(292)

The Haida specifically resist the widespread distribution and use of the drug, and so this scene of surrender serves as a moment of sobering change. In contrast to this scene of passive submission, the five protagonists witness the aftermath of a lynching and a sabotaged plane landing during their brief stay on Haida Gwaii—orchestrated acts of violence which spring from a defensive desire to prevent Solon from taking hold in the community. The Haida are willing to engage in these destructive, murderous acts because the tribe is at stake: not just its wellbeing, but its entire existence. After all, once individuals use Solon they can never again be an invested or trusted part of the community—even if they only use it once, and even if they are kept away from Solon for the rest of their lives. As Julien's handler notes, the issue "is that the rest of the tribe would never really trust them again. Would you? The tribe members would all know that the Solon

users prefer, in their hearts, to be by themselves than with the tribe” (196). While the drug itself is temporary, its alienating effects are irreversible.

By placing Solon in direct contrast to the intimate community of the Haida—and simultaneously aligning it with the prepackaged culture of the Abercrombie and Fitch employees—Coupland creates a strong and mutually exclusive dichotomy between the urge to feel connected and the urge to feel solitary. In this way, interpersonal connection is associated with health, community, and the elect—since, after all, none of the five protagonists have ever felt even slightly attracted to the idea of Solon—and interpersonal alienation resembles nothing so much as horrifying zombification. The realms of good and bad are clearly laid out.

Coupland’s description of Solon as a substance that places the user in the “constant present” is important—especially considering his theoretical work concerning what he calls the “extreme present,” or the “superfuture,” phrasing that harkens back to the subtitle of *Generation X*: “a guide to accelerated culture.” These terms describe the feeling that the present and the future have run together, like wet ink, into a single, anxiety-inducing temporal space in the contemporary brain. “[U]ntil recently, the future was always something out there up ahead of us, something to anticipate or dread, but it was always away from the present,” Coupland wrote in a *FT Magazine* column earlier this year. “But not any more. Somewhere in the past few years the present melted into the future. We’re now living inside the future 24/7 and this (weirdly electric and buzzy) sensation shows no sign of stopping—if anything, it grows ever more intense.” In this piece, Coupland specifically portrays this feeling of extreme present as a result of ever-present technology and the consuming, overwhelming nature of the digital world—so conveniently available through hand-held devices everywhere. Living in the extreme present is a project riddled with stress—unsurprisingly similar to the overriding societal anxiety described in

*Generation A*. And when Coupland's article asks the reader how we, as inhabitants of this planet, "might invent ourselves out of this mess," it seems to be a question he has already answered with the novel. "It makes me wonder if the most important thing we could invent right now would be a technology that takes away our bottomless fear of missing out, our need to read the latest news update, our latest hook-up or our latest upgrade," Coupland muses. *Generation A* presents this technology, this invention, in the form of a readily available drug—which consequently destroys humanity. "Inventing ourselves out of this mess" might result in a messier situation than before.

### **Bees as catalyst**

While their appearance in the novel is brief, bees serve as symbols in the novel; their extinction, sudden inexplicable presence, and their inherent invocation of the natural world and of collectivity all stand as important details. Ultimately, the bees' absence gestures towards the idea that something has gone terribly wrong. After all, the pollinators have disappeared, and with them nearly all fresh flowers and produce—literally increasing the pre-packaged nature and inherent fakery of the world.

Yet five bees impossibly reappear to sting the protagonists; by re-emerging in a world they seem to have abandoned, the novel gestures towards hope and rehabilitation. As the sting sites quickly transform into tourist destinations and shrines—surrounded by "poems and letters and photos and drawings of bees" (117)—it becomes clear that the wider population as a whole is eager to interpret the bees' appearance as a symbol of hope, if not imminent change. After her release, Sam returns to her sting site and describes it as similar to "New York after 9-11, except

nobody had died—instead, some form of hope had been reborn. ... a ray of hope for a hope-starved world” (117).

It is also important to note, as Diana does, that each character is stung during “a moment when [their] relationships with the planet were in full play” (127). Zack is broadcasting a livestream of his day to a friend in Singapore while simultaneously using a satellite feed to digitally assess the state of his corn fields; Sam is completing an “earth sandwich” in New Zealand, a cross-globe art project and social statement requiring the real-time cooperation of a partner in Madrid; Julien has just been ejected from the online sphere of *World of Warcraft* and forced to engage with the physical realm for the first time in 26 hours; Diana is embroiled in an argument regarding both the physical realm and the afterlife as she defends a dog from abuse and is excommunicated for her trouble; last but not least, Harj is on the phone with a journalist in New York, pretending to be a prestigious German artist. Notably, Sam is inexplicably struck by “a generalized sense of wonder about the size of the planet” as well as her “useless little role atop it or under it” in the moment before she is stung, in a singularly unsubtle moment of foreshadowing (14).

The stings effectively bring these characters together not only physically but thematically—specifically identifying individuals who connect with community on a global level. Importantly, the bees are drawn to pre-existing qualities in these characters, confirming rather than creating their position as the elect. In direct contrast to *Girlfriend in a Coma*, the group of protagonists that Coupland chooses to save is identified as extraordinary well before the apocalypse occurs. In this way, *Generation A* is a textbook example of how the formation of the elect is traditionally and typically completed in apocalypse narratives; these characters are marked as special and righteous in a way that lifts them above the rest of the world’s inhabitants.

However, while the bee stings clearly set *Generation A*'s protagonists apart from the rest of the world, the characteristics that qualify them as the elect remain the same: these four characters are set apart by their perception of the world—a clarity of vision granted to the rest of the globe's inhabitants only through the illuminating revelation of apocalypse. The bee stings help them identify both the absence in contemporary life as well as the common characteristics between the five of them—and, importantly, their prioritisation of collective community over alienating individuality.

The bees, then, serve as small-scale, personal apocalypses—stings that reveal and amplify the important themes at play in the world of these individuals “Your old life is over,” Julien's handler tells him. “Like it or not, you've got a new life” (47). “I felt dead and then reborn, like I'd taken a drug that would forever change my brain,” Harj says, as a helicopter whisks him away from his old life and into the clean room of the research facility. “I felt like the fetus as the end of the film 2001, signifying everything and nothing, rebirth and sterility, good news and bad news, the difference between sanctuary and its opposite” (60). “I felt like I was the one who'd been taken away and at the same time like the one left behind,” Diana notes (90). In a single instant, these characters are lifted out of their own lives and placed in a new and optimistic world. They are confused, and yet hopeful; surprised, and yet relieved. Unlike the character of Craig in “The Man Who Lost His Story,” they have found or been granted a solid, overarching narrative. Their ensuing drive for community and connection might have been with them all along, but being stung brings these sentiments to the forefront and places the characters in a social framework which will allow these priorities to flourish and develop.

### **Out of individuality and towards community**

The importance of the community over the individual continues to crop up as a theme throughout the rest of the novel, serving as the didactic force behind Coupland's construction and activation of apocalypse. In *Generation A*, Coupland sets his five protagonists in a position where they are able to identify the fakery at the heart of contemporary life, linking the widespread lack of individual narrative to a similar lack of sincere person-to-person interaction. The way to fix the meaninglessness of their lives, it follows, is through connection and community.

In this light, the attitudes of the protagonists come into stark contrast with the attitudes of the world at large. One of the best illustrations of this takes place as Diana peruses the online bulletin board of a Christian dating service. She is discouraged by the tone and tenor of the unsettling belief with which her competition lead their lives: "I am totally on fire for my King!" one of the most passionate writes (20). While these women seem firm in their belief on the surface, Diana questions whether that driving faith truly extends to their core. She views these exhortations as mere façades—bright and appealing on the surface, but resting on no solid foundation: "To them, belief is like memorizing the alphabet—they're too young to ever have doubts," Diana explains (20). In contrast, Diana recognises the absence at her core, and begins to wonder how she might best manage or learn to live with it. "I had to acknowledge that there's this hole inside me—I've spent my life worrying if people can see this hole," she says. "Maybe I should own my hole and be proud of it, even if that sounds disgusting. Maybe I should walk through life slumped over, my face and body reflecting my void," she concludes (20). Significantly, Diana touches on the idea of both an outer and an inner self, suggesting that the first should reflect the second; inner authenticity should be cultivated, or, at the very least supported, by an outward sincerity. This opinion and approach directly contrasts that of the

world around her. After all, *Generation A* depicts a version of humanity which has become more and more caught up in fame and image, to the point where societal norms dictate individuals should cultivate a façade of happiness and success even if their inner life is sparse, dry, and bare.

*Generation A* pinpoints a central absence identified in *Girlfriend in a Coma*; *Generation A* pushes the description and analysis of this absence into a more direct and detailed form. In this same section, for example, Diana identifies this societal lack as a result of alienation from community, equating it with a sense of disconnect and loneliness; dealing with the absence in her life requires mapping out “an aloneness strategy” (20). Not only does she acknowledge the absence—the hole, or void, as she calls it—but sets herself the task of building coping strategies to deal with it and to manage it. She takes ownership of this absence, and resolves to stop hiding, ignoring, or covering it—to acknowledge the absence and actively work through it rather than risk “calcification” through pretending it doesn’t exist.

Diana’s bee sting seems to occur in direct response to this train of thought; after identifying the absence of sincere connection in her life, Diana is almost immediately identified as a member of an intimate collective. The same goes for the others: the five protagonists are driven to contact and connect with one another, and many of them pursue this connection immediately following their release. Not only do the Wonka kids have an overwhelming urge to be close to one another, but they instantly click. When Sam reaches out to Zack for the first time, for example, she types a mere eight words before hitting send: “Hi Zack. This is Sam(antha) in New Zealand” (114). Despite the brevity of this message, its sheer lack of detail, and the email encryption which will make it impossible for Zack to respond directly or even see where the message was sent from, Sam has no doubt that the message will have its intended effect—that Zack will read these eight words “and realize they were an authentic message” (115). Sure

enough, this is exactly how the email's reception plays out in Zack's kitchen; he is instantly and absolutely sure of the message's authenticity, and abandons his previous priorities in order to find her.

In this same vein, each protagonist finds the time between their release from the clean rooms and their connection with the others to be insufferable, hollow and alienating. Although these character have yet to meet one another, they find it impossible to get along without each other, or even effectively return to their previous lives. "I'd begun viewing my waking hours as though I was no longer myself, that I was me but not me—hard to describe," Zack notes. "But if someone asked me to pass something, instead of doing it, I'd think, Right—how would Zack pass the butter?" (107). Julien echoes this: "My life was no longer my own. I was outside myself looking in, and it was intolerable. I had to connect with Zack and Sam and Diana and Harj. That was clear to me." (120). The clean rooms detoxify the protagonists of the effects of consumer culture; during their stay in the research facilities, the five stung characters are separated from all brand-names and the society's influence of culture. As a result, returning to their own lives feels unsettling, uncanny. They become even more aware of a hollow aspect to the excesses of their lives, and have the feeling that connecting with the other sting victims will somehow help to solve this sudden, intensified sense of loss.

Zack is a good example of this; his fame leads to wealth and celebrity treatment in the form of groupies, constant entertainment, and the ability to immediately indulge any sudden whim or desire. And yet despite every stereotypical trapping of success, Zack finds himself unfulfilled in his longing for connection and is driven to contact the other four people who were stung. "I was curious to see if we had anything in common the scientists had missed, things only I (or we) could determine," he explains. "Six weeks after getting home, the need to connect with

them had grown intense and undeniable” (107, 108). After he successfully connects with one of the others, he gets the sense that things are back on track: “I looked around my kitchen ... and the annoying sensation of being outside myself and looking down was gone. Instead, it was replaced by a sense of being profoundly complete” (112). Similarly, when Julien finds himself on the way to Haida Gwaii to meet up with the other four protagonists, his vision of the future and of life begins to coalesce into something both manageable and desirable. “Finally, my life was a story,” he says. “My days would no longer feel like a video game that resets to zero every time I wake up, and then begs for coins” (143). Importantly, this conclusion situates Julien’s connection with the others as the solution to the overarching lack of narrative he experienced in his previous day-to-day life.

Once the five elect gather together, the necessity and importance of the collective becomes clear; although they meet for the first time on Haida Gwaii, the group quickly gels. They are almost immediately comfortable with each other, and just as quickly begin to resemble one another in their thoughts, ideas, and speech patterns. The collective has formed, and they feel capable of anything. This, as Harj notes, is a vast change from his previous life. “I began my trip as a lost soul. I was a bar magnet with only one pole, a number divisible by zero,” he explains. “Somehow the group of us killed Superman. We entered the Rapture” (297).

### **Metanarrative and the power of stories**

A large part of *Generation A* is a section dedicated to storytelling, which not only describes the process of the characters’ campfire tale construction, but a *Decameron*-style play-by-play devoted to relaying the characters’ short stories as a series of metanarratives. In this section,

Coupland firmly situates storytelling as an extension of community: an action which connects a group of people in a meaningful way. As a key section of the novel, these stories illuminate the underlying themes of community and the importance of narrative, as well as solidify the growing connection between characters. This section also asks the reader to consider what stories have to tell us about the real-life world. How do stories serve as a sense-making structure? How has this structure been lost or obscured with the sudden contemporary proliferation of digital information? How—and why—might Coupland situate storytelling as connected to a framework of community connection?

Jenny Kerber sees this storytelling section as a direct and didactic nod to the need for interconnected thinking in the contemporary world: “In other words, the novel rejects the notion that one is the origin of one’s own thoughts, in favour of the idea that one’s thoughts are always inspired by others’ words, and respond to those words in turn,” she notes. “The idea is not to wrack our brains trying to come up with something wholly new, but instead to dig into the vault of story forms to discern what patterns of wisdom are already contained there” (334). Storytelling, then, is not only entertainment or connection, but institutional memory for the human race—an important way to convey and absorb cultural information through the exploration of common themes. This rings especially true with this particular group of characters; as their stories pile on one another, several overarching themes become apparent through the use of common details, tropes, and plot devices.

However, this instruction to “dig into the vault” instead of “trying to come up with something wholly new” echoes the cannibalising force of the postmodern pastiche; is it really reasonable to expect sense to emerge from a limitless selection of juxtaposed images and ideas, harvested from every thinkable era and preserved forever in an immediately searchable digital

format? Kerber admits that this section of the novel is the literary equivalent of “being let loose in the potato chip aisle,” with each story taking on “a slightly different flavour of absurdity ... enjoyable to mindlessly [consume with] little thought to their deeper meaning or consequences” (325). And yet, as one might expect from a novel proclaiming to make sense out of a fragmented world, it becomes clear that there is indeed “a deeper design at work in Coupland’s recycling and juxtaposition of highly recognizable story forms” (325).

At a certain point, this is obvious even to the characters themselves; Harj notes that many of their short tales involve and discuss the roles of “royalty, cults, the way we hear words, the way we tell stories, superheroes, disaster, aliens—Channel Three News teams,” (183). It is possible to condense this list even further, to describe these stories as largely obsessed with collectivity, fame, and destruction. Significantly, many of these stories are apocalyptic, portraying the end of one world and the beginning of another: the destruction of the anti-ghosts, for example, or Diana’s tale of a cult bent on building a new world through the murder of anyone enjoying any level of celebrity. While their real-life apocalypse is somewhat slower to approach, it begins to become apparent that these characters sense and attempt to analyse the approaching destruction of the world and the non-elect. These characters use familiar tropes and plot devices to approach and rethink the way the world works—recycling ideas from their various cultural backgrounds and upbringings as well as the ideas they share with one another and consume as the storytelling process continues. The cumulative effect of these stories results in a collaborative sense-making structure—a way to understand not only their situation, but the world as a whole. Stories, as Harj notes, are “an efficient way of transmitting vital Darwinian information. Your brain needs them to make maps of the world, maps that let you know what sorts of people and situations to avoid” (219).

This helps to explain the role of storytelling in the novel on a general level, but many of the stories exchanged in this section help to flesh out Coupland's didactic agenda and the larger themes of the novel. "The Anti-Ghosts" and "The Man Who Lost His Story," examined in a previous section, both work well as building blocks in this regard. Three more metanarratives lend themselves well to the apocalyptic nature of the novel as a whole, and deserve to be examined in terms of the lessons they provide to both the characters and the reader as pieces of Coupland's larger sense-making structure.

*"The Channel Three News Team"*

In this story, main character Chloë receives news that her mother has been arrested for gunning down the entire Channel Three News team. She rushes to the hospital to confront her mother, only to learn that this attack was part of a larger plan to create a new world by destroying the rottenness at the centre of the old—a rottenness directly equated with celebrity. "The only thing our diseased culture believes in is fame," her mother confides. "No other form of eternity exists. Kill the famous and you kill the core of the diseased culture" (180). As a result, Chloë's mother—and the rest of her cult—sees no choice but to lash out at celebrity in all its forms. They see this urge as creative rather than destructive; the death of fame "will be beautiful—like modern art—and people will finally stop believing in the false future promised by celebrity" (181). This recalls the discussion of the difference between vibrant inner life and a well-coiffed outer appearance; while society has become largely content to consume nothing but surface content, the violent cult of this story instead decides to grind society down to a bare foundation to restore righteous motivations and priorities at its centre.

*“The King is Dead”*

This story from Harj opens with a king in a hot air balloon, surveying his prosperous kingdom with pride. Before long, however, the landscape changes; the king finds himself watching the total devastation of an earthquake roll over his kingdom from the air. When he lands and walks among his people, he realises his citizens have all inexplicably lost the ability to read, and that he is the only person in the country who can still understand the written word. When his people realise he is still able to make sense of letters and numbers, they rejoice: “I’m glad at least one person is still able to read,” one woman exhorts. “Otherwise, we’d never be able to rebuild from scratch everything we had before, back to shiny and brand new, as if none of this had ever happened!” (186). The irony here is palpable, and the implication is clear: these citizens have been stripped of their ability to read specifically in order to prevent the reconstruction of their modern world. Given the context of this metanarrative, those listening—and those reading—uneasily recall the shiny land of contemporary society and the implied poison of its core. Why, then, are the reader and the king the only people to recognise that this terrible sequence of events not only will but *should* have long-lasting ramifications? This uneasy and lingering doubt coalesces into an ominous—if open—conclusion: the king drags his finger through the dust on car windshield, spelling out “The King is dead,” and informing his citizens that this is a map to the post-apocalyptic world rather than telling them what it says.

So what can we glean from this parable? Harj presents not just an apocalypse, but an apocalypse in progress; the reader (and listener) watch from a distance as destruction overtakes this defenseless country. This resonates eerily with the world of the novel as this tale is told; the world endures cataclysmic destruction while a miniscule section of its population watches from the periphery. Both the king of the story and the five protagonists of *Generation A* are positioned

as the elect—both figuratively and physically placed apart from the modern and cynical population. Importantly, the elect are situated as individuals able to recognize both that the world has been destroyed and that perhaps reason or logic lies behind this destruction. The elect must be able not only to endure disaster, but to interrogate its cause. Again, we return to the idea and importance of perception; after all, the king can “see” in more than one sense; not only is he the last individual in his country able to read, but perhaps the only person to realise the future of the world will not—and perhaps *should* not—be easy to repair.

*“Bartholomew is Right There at the Dawn of Language”*

Julien likewise tackles themes of problematic development in one of the last stories told on Haida Gwaii. In this tale, the main character—a copy editor—is one of the last people on the planet to insist on proper grammar and spelling when everyone around him has adopted the slang and vernacular used widely in text messages and other digital communications. This division becomes wider and wider until Bartholomew is completely unable to understand those around him. In the grand finale—and the final separation between Bartholomew and the rest of humanity—the Rapture whisks everyone else out of existence, leaving Bartholomew to watch a strange emergency broadcast explaining what has happened:

— [...] people smartened up and began speaking the way they texted and began shrinking language back to its origins in grunts and groans, people became more primal, more elemental...

—More real.

—That’s the word I was looking for, Connie. More real. More authentic.

—and once people became more authentic and more interested in using noises and sounds instead of words to communicate with others, their interior lives changed.

The endlessly raging self-centred interior monologues came to an end. A holy peace and dignity fell over their lives. They accidentally became closer to God. (247-8)

This metanarrative seems to suggest several things. First, and perhaps foremost, this drastic and fast-paced shift in language implies that progress alienates those who resist it while elevating those who embrace it; those few who refuse to accept change will not only be left behind—literally, as the case may be—but also isolated.

Interestingly, this story casts Bartholomew in the role of the non-elect and correspondingly places the contemporary, progress-embracing individual in the role of the elect—a division which directly contrast both the overarching framework of the *Generation A* and many of the stories told thus far. As the sole member of the non-elect, Bartholomew invites the simultaneous pity and condemnation of the reader and the listeners; after all, his choice to remain a “stickler” for language and spelling was made in order to pursue what he perceived as his best and most authentic self; this choice is made especially tragic by the fact that the rest of the planet lucks into authenticity and righteousness by accident rather than design. Up to this point we have seen the dissenting figure painted in a positive light, as those who choose to step outside of society are granted perception of things as they really are. Here, however, that figure is condemned—reflecting, perhaps, Julien’s underlying anxieties that the five protagonists are not, perhaps, as removed from the world’s apocalyptic violence as they might like to believe.

### **Optimism, pessimism, and the hive mind**

The picture Coupland paints his readers is not overly optimistic since by the end of the novel only one new living beehive has been located. And yet Harj’s speculation that other small cells of surviving bees might still be scattered amidst the detritus of modernity also leaves the form of the novel stubbornly open-ended. We are not presented with a widely uplifting possibility of apian

recovery at the end of the book, but nor can we say with certainty that the bees are definitely finished. This ambivalence, I suggest, reveals something about the cultural and ecological milieu from which the text emerges and to which it responds, for even as North Americans are told that “nature” has ended, signs of its vibrancy and unpredictability are also regularly experienced...

Jenny Kerber, “You Are Turning into a Hive Mind”

Jenny Kerber has published one of the few academic articles discussing *Generation A*; she places at the novel within an ecological framework to examine what, exactly, this literature might suggest about the real-world crisis of colony collapse disorder devastating bee populations around the world. She, too, examines a certain inescapable apocalyptic tone within the novel, and, because she specifically ties her dissection of the book to an issue which deeply affects the real world, she hopes her work with the text may illuminate a certain optimism towards the future. In the end, however, her examination turns up nothing so much as ambivalence: while there seems to be evidence the world comes to an end by the conclusion of the novel, there is also evidence that the world is healing, becoming better, thriving, rebuilding. Either direction is equally possible; the book both opens and closes at a crossroads, leaving the emotional and didactic direction of the novel largely in the reader’s hands.

As we have seen, *Girlfriend in a Coma* likewise leaves the reader in a state of ambivalence; while the novel’s protagonists are given a new purpose and sent back out into the world, their exact mission—and its questionable motivation—remains unclear. *Generation A*’s conclusion mimics this paradoxical mix of optimism and pessimism: while the protagonists have avoided or transcended the apocalyptic violence overtaking the rest of the world, the novel closes with their personalities melding together into a single, homogenised hive mind—a scene of devastation in its own right. But this, they assert, is the way to harmony: “We all become each other, one big superentity,” Harj explains, speaking for the collective in the last pages of the

novel. “Miss America wishes for world peace and so do we, except with us it might come true” (295). The collective is praised as a power for peace, but has an undeniably ominous—and apocalyptic—undertone, as the original characteristics of these characters’ lives and personalities are wiped clean and replaced. While Kerber believes that “the evolution of a hive mind . . . does not necessarily have to come at the expense of the individual,” the novel’s uneasy conclusion relies on an uncanny, *Stepford Wives*-esque element to discredit the optimism of the protagonists’ new collective personality.

Part of this confusion—does the collective elevate or erase its integrated personalities?—comes from the fact that Coupland’s attempt at disparate voices is never wildly successful. The individuating features of their speech patterns—Harj’s avoidance of contractions, Julien’s French interjections, Diana’s episodes of Tourette’s—are surface decorations rather than foundational differences. By the time these speech tics disappear, and the collective takes hold at the novel’s conclusion, we are reminded of nothing so much as the voice of Coupland’s eternal, quintessential slacker. Is the homogeneity of *Generation A*’s characters indicative of an inability to reach outside of the style that brought Coupland to fame? Or is it a comment on the ability of globalisation to wipe away the differentiating features of any culture or individual it embraces? The final section of the novel is narrated by Harj, but the voice, while not bland, is certainly not unique. This last chapter could really belong to any of the protagonists—as stripped of differentiating patterns and details as the culture-less clean rooms they find themselves trapped in after being stung.

The chilling aspect of this conclusion is that these protagonists appear to survive the apocalypse—and yet the cure may prove to be worse than the disease. Coupland, after all, has presented two opposing ends of the same scale: global society destroyed through mass alienation,

and yet redeemed through an example of total collectivity. These two evolutions are completely opposite each other, and yet their effects appear to be the same: Solon separates individuals completely, resulting in their destruction—and yet also their happiness—whereas the hive mind blends individuals completely, resulting in their destruction—and yet also their happiness. Perhaps the lesson is that neither individuality nor collectivity, after all, is truly desirable—or that both are. The conclusion is more doubtful than it is optimistic; as Coupland told a *Maclean's* interviewer shortly after *Generation A's* release, “Usually people are like, ‘Oooh, bummer!’” in reaction to the novel’s conclusion (Lunau).

Perhaps the most accurate description of the book’s conclusion comes from the back cover of the book itself, which accurately promises a novel which “occupies the perplexing hinterland between optimism about the future and everyday apocalyptic paranoia”—although it would seem that Coupland explores not the empty space or uncharted land between the two, but the precise and muddled place where optimism and apocalypse run over and into each other.

And yet *Generation A's* concluding message is fitting; the novel presents both the hive mind and the world’s Solon addicts as groups who profess to embrace progress but, in the end, fail to solve any of their underlying problems. Is it too tongue-in-cheek to suggest that Coupland finds himself in a similar bind, as a zeitgeist cartographer who gestures towards the future but instead remains hobbled by the problems of the past? Coupland, after all, is a professed prophet of the extreme present—and yet his portrayal of the present proves narrow rather than extreme, focused precisely on his own, *personal* present. He remains obsessed with the same problems which have plagued him since his very first novel and yet proves unable to provide a way out of what is by now a too-familiar labyrinth. In this light, does *Generation A* accomplish anything

progressive? Or does the novel simply reinforce the problems in contemporary, Canadian, and apocalyptic fiction?

## CONCLUSION:

### THE FAILURE OF A POPULAR PROPHET

Look man, we'd probably most of us agree that these are dark times, and stupid ones, but do we need fiction that does nothing but dramatize how dark and stupid everything is?

David Foster Wallace, interviewed by Larry McCaffery

After the critical success of his *Generation X*, and the subsequent popularisation of the term “Generation X,” Coupland explained that the X generation is defined and delineated by a certain way of seeing things and of perceiving the world, rather than by age group. Given Coupland’s continuing work with the themes and anxieties of that first novel, it seems true that age and era have ceased to operate in the same generational way that they once did. At the same time, however, this reads as a cop-out: what better way to ensure currency in a changing world than to insist that “Generation X” is a state of mind, one that endures despite the rise and fall of new generations?

And while the title of *Generation A* seems to concede a new generational force and perspective may be taking hold in the world, this is really a game of smoke and mirrors. Coupland gleaned the title from a speech given by Kurt Vonnegut in 1994; Kurt Vonnegut invented “Generation A” as a more optimistic term for “Generation X,” but reacting to the phrase “Generation X” only because it had become such a common phrase used by the media at that time; “Generation X” had become a common phrase because *Coupland popularised it with the publication of his first novel*. By naming the novel after Vonnegut’s comment, Coupland pays homage to himself; *Generation A* does not signal the era of a new generation so much as it signals the resurgence of an old one. This circular progression is hidden under a façade of new growth; it is hidden so well, in fact, that no scholar or critic seems to have uncovered it. This

logic is a prime example of Coupland's issues with circularity—indicative of his professed perspective of the future that somehow emerges oddly backwards.

In a way, Coupland exemplifies a sort of *anti-progress*; consider, for example, his interaction with Canadian literature and / or Canadiana, their longstanding tropes, and their contemporary evolutions. It seems ridiculous to suggest that Coupland—famous for *Souvenir of Canada*, biographies of Marshall McLuhan and Terry Fox, and digital reinterpretations of Group of Seven works intended as “a form of secret handshake among Canadians” (Sayej)—fails to add anything of substance or use to Canada's national literature and culture. And yet myriad problems present themselves in his work and exemplify an out-dated way of thinking about both the world and Canadian literature. Where are the characters who would give a sense of ethnic or cultural diversity to the picture of a postnational, globalised world portrayed in Coupland's texts? Coupland famously writes from Vancouver, and has made a conscious effort to set his works in or around the city—a city whose population is 40 per cent immigrants, according to Canada's 2011 federal government census. So why is it that his novels are so largely peopled with white, middle-class males? Or are we supposed to accept the fact that this may not be a question worth asking of an authorial figure who is likewise white, and middle-class, and male?

In some ways, Coupland's quintessential *Canadianness* presents itself in his love of the land itself; his version of Vancouver is the epitome of peace, a quiet harmony inherent in any description of the neighbourhood where he grew up or his current Vancouver home. At first glance, this attachment and reverence for nature seems quintessentially Canadian; as a nation, Canada values its natural resources and the natural landscape, if only for the tourists it draws every year. However, Coupland falls into the mistake of portraying Canada as an empty land—cities backing onto pure and pristine nature, never before touched or inhabited. In Vancouver

especially, this is simply untrue. Where are the indigenous people? The Squamish? The Stó:lō? The Coast Salish Nations?

In *Generation A* this becomes especially problematic, as Coupland portrays the Haida tribe as completely devastated by progress. When his protagonists literally retreat to the land to rediscover meaning in their lives, they supplant the indigenous people, taking their place as the only group able to sustain a viable community. The reader's wince is twofold—both at Coupland's portrayal of what is effectively a form of colonialization, and at his use of the trope of the noble, vanished Indian. We can assume that these tropes have been carelessly, unintentionally used because Coupland is famous for a nudge-nudge-wink-wink style, for broadcasting his intentions and critiques in mile-high letters to ensure the reader is along for the ride. These are not ironic clichés, but simply clichés—used thoughtlessly, incognizant of their ramifications and the outdated CanLit tropes they support.

And what happens when we consider Coupland as an apocalyptic Canadian? What is the purpose of Coupland's apocalypse—a fixation with cataclysm which sees the end of the world recur methodically throughout his corpus. Coupland's continual return to apocalyptic themes is—or should be—unsurprising, given the fast-paced evolution of technology and ideas, the constantly accelerating nature of contemporary life. Coupland has long professed that great changes have occurred, and that we should become aware of them—something epitomised by his use of literal and figurative apocalypse. Yet he seems unaware of the ways in which his works nonetheless perpetuate outdated modes of thought and themes in Canadian fiction—an ironic indication that perhaps the world has not, in fact, changed as much as his fictions would have us think.

Coupland's choice of survivors is also revealing. In both *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *Generation A*, we see what Will McIntosh calls the soft apocalypse, and what Elizabeth Rosen categorises within the broader term of neapocalypse—an apocalypse where there is no new world after the dust settles. While Coupland provides a form of “elect,” they hardly seem deserving of the designation. Here, as ever, Coupland has chosen to highlight the figure of the slacker—an ordinary person in extraordinary circumstances who reacts with a certain unknowing helplessness rather than with courage or ability or valour. Coupland's slacker characters are more than willing to take up arms, to attempt to change the world—but this becomes a ridiculous or even laughable prospect when they have no idea what they fight for or hope to accomplish. Coupland insists that Gen X is more than a generation of clueless and directionless slackers, and yet his works continually suggest otherwise: he places these characters in extraordinary circumstances and allows them to survive the end of the world, and yet they refuse to be changed by the process. They remain ordinary.

I have argued that the survivors in both *Generation A* and *Girlfriend in a Coma* are, in fact, extraordinary—rendered elect by their perception of things as they really are. And yet, outside of the novel, can we truly consider this perception to be extraordinary, when Coupland's foundational philosophy relies on the idea that all members of Generation X (which, after all, is a state of perspective rather than a generational framework) have this same perceptive ability? This fallacy grows even more pronounced when we consider the fact that Coupland's popularity depends on the implication that the reader shares this perceptive ability. This stark and unlikely contrast between savvy protagonist and the oblivious wider world is exemplified by the characters' pervasive, underlying sense of unease towards contemporary life—a ubiquitous discomfort with consumerism and other inherited baby boomer frameworks. This precocious

suspicion—that contemporary life is missing something important, be it community, sincerity, or authenticity—almost always boils down to Coupland’s characters making a choice between the real and the fake. Somehow, both protagonists and readers are able to discern the difference between the two—even as the vast majority of society remains clueless.

This is the issue at the heart of middlebrow literature—fiction that takes a middle place between “elite works” and “mass-market fiction” (Driscoll 5), between “serious reading” and what “most librarians would say . . . is of a very poor kind” (Hoggart 17). This fits Coupland almost exactly—work that doesn’t quite make it to the top of literature’s hierarchy to be considered “literary fiction,” but certainly not a trashy or “lowbrow” narrative. The issue with middlebrow fiction is that it poses as therapeutic work (and, in some cases, successfully functions therapeutically) by encouraging the reader to feel as though they have worked through real-world issues, either personal or global in nature. The issue, of course, rests in the fact that the issues struggled with and “solved” in therapeutic literature—in this case, Coupland’s uneasy enthusiasm for consumerism, globalism, and progress—are never actually solved outside of the novel. Defenders of middlebrow literature insist on the ridiculousness of expecting readers to subsist entirely “on a diet of literary foie gras, staving off cravings for the occasional newspaper-wrapped fish’n’chips or a comforting, nourishing stew” (Jaffe); yet, middlebrow fiction is ultimately concerned with reassuring its audience rather than challenging it. The result is a type of literature which appears critical, but assuages social fears even as it points them out. Its function has always been “providing real satisfaction for readers,” a way to “position books as tools to transform the lives of readers, with the implicit promise that this will lead to social change” (Driscoll 4, 66). This implicit promise, of course, is never fulfilled; the novel simultaneously leaves real-life social change in the reader’s hands, and leaves the reader feeling

as though the novel itself is change enough. Writing about Oprah's Book Club picks, specifically, Kathleen Rooney writes that middlebrow fiction offers readers "a kind of cannibalistic pleasure in consuming the suffering of others, coercively feeding us the feeling that because we've *seen* an instance of struggling humanity, we've somehow *dealt* with it, when in reality we've done nothing of the sort; we've simply sat for an extended period" (137-8). And yet middlebrow contemporary fiction maintains the image of helping, "in therapeutic fashion, to clarify, alleviate, or manage" the myriad "desires, anxieties, frustrations, and needs" faced by the contemporary reader (Aubry 38).

In particular, Coupland's apocalyptic works imply the reader is welcomed into the ranks of the privileged elect; the apocalypse criticises social frameworks but reassures the reader that they are among the chosen few not deceived or manipulated by these frameworks. This is problematic pandering; the forced catharsis of the novel pushes the characters into sincerity and into authenticity while simultaneously reassuring the reader that they, since they are able to spot the hollowness of contemporary life without moving to the desert or surviving the apocalypse, have no such insincerity or inauthenticity in their lives. Coupland's books are popular because it makes the reader feel wise to the fact that consumerism and postmodernism and nationalism are destructive and consumptive. While this reveal is a literal revelation to the societies of Coupland's novels, the reader is situated to be smugly satisfied that they were in on the big secret from the beginning. How can this idea of *perception*, then, truly place these characters as the elect—when this perception is or should be fairly widespread in the first place?

Here we see an issue at the core of Coupland's fiction—of all fiction, really, that seeks to convey a sincere message; purposefully attempting to produce or manufacture sincerity *by definition* keeps an author from being sincere. As Adam Kelly asks, "Is there not a schizophrenic

and/or manipulative quality at work here that counteracts the good intentions of the artist as communicator of truth?” (135). It proves difficult to cultivate and stay true to a thoroughly critical vision in fiction, because, as David Foster Wallace describes so passionately, there is always a lingering urge to comfort the reader:

But if you're going to try not just to depict the way a culture's bound and defined by mediated gratification and image, but somehow redeem it, or at least fight a rearguard against it, then what you're going to be doing is paradoxical. You're at once allowing the reader to sort of escape self by achieving some sort of identification with another human psyche—the writer's, or some character's, etc.—and you're also trying to antagonize the reader's intuition that she is a self, that she is alone and going to die alone.” (McCaffery 32)

Approaching both sides of the conversation—asking the reader to identify with critical works and yet allowing the reader to distance themselves from the problems described—proves a futile or self-defeating task. And yet it proves difficult, too, to point a critical finger at the world of the reader, to make the reader uncomfortable, and to deny them redemption or catharsis. This is a task Coupland attempts in some ways and falls short of in others—part of the reason, perhaps, that his conclusions are so intensely and strangely ambivalent.

There is something ironic, too, about the fact that Coupland so doggedly critiques the commodified world—and yet does so in a commodified manner and through a commodified avenue. “We cut away the bits of ourselves that had become cartoons,” Harj concludes in *Generation A*. “And we turned the world back into a book” (297). This transformation from cartoon to literature seems noble on the surface, but the result is still a reimagining of the world as a mediated, commodified object. It is certainly possible that Coupland uses this conclusion to

poke fun at the ineffectiveness of therapeutic fiction, and to leave the reader with a sense of unease. This returns us to the fact that Coupland's endings, both in these novels and his others, impart a sense of urgency upon the reader while remaining stoically ambivalent themselves.

And perhaps this ambivalence may be traced back to the sense of absence featuring heavily in both *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *Generation A*—a feature which remains prominent, and yet vague. Coupland presents both reader and character with a problem and yet notably backs away from describing its true nature, let alone suggesting a solution to the issue. I have tentatively used a framework of authenticity, sincerity, irony, and post-irony to discuss and critique this absence in *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *Generation A*, and this framework has both successes and failures. In *Girlfriend*, particularly, it seems to succeed; the characters return to a sense of urgency and motivation, if not necessarily clarity. As I argue in the second chapter, this attitudinal shift points to the importance of dedication rather than specific purpose; Jared's call to arms may be interpreted as a call to sincerity (or at least some form of neo-sincerity) and an abandonment of irony precisely because it counsels a change of attitude rather than concrete change itself. Sincerity has no concrete goal or end point—simply a better way of being, acting, and living—and this is echoed in Jared's push for action, since it, too, lacks a clear objective. The emphasis is not on what these characters ought to do, but how they ought to *be*. The novel implies this trueness—this sincerity—will lead to better lives and better selves, and to a sense of authenticity.

However, this framework also falters—or, at least, proves self-critical—in both novels. The final scenes in both novels portray the characters in a new state of being; their extraordinary perspective has elevated them to a better, and purer, form of existence. This new existence, however, is characterised by a sense of uneasiness; in *Girlfriend in a Coma* this takes the form of underlying violence of Jared's instructions, which emphasize the usefulness of “axes,” “scythes,”

and “explosives” (274); in *Generation A*, this takes the form of an uncanny hive mind, which promises peace and sincerity at the cost of the protagonists’ individuating features, preferences, and characteristics. In both cases, this final state of being is presented as ideal—an almost prototypical example of righteousness and certainty associated with the elect. The reader, however, remains separate from this righteousness; the audience is invited to believe they share the characters’ extraordinary perspective, but ultimately still able to remain critical of the supposed utopia at the novels’ conclusions. Coupland uses these novels to advocate the need for a better, more sincere life and yet shows the impossibility and flaws within sincerity of belief. These characters demonstrate the poisonous, fake, and destructive nature of irony, and yet Coupland seems to imply the alternative of sincerity may be no healthier; likewise, the novels encourage collective action and yet warn against it. The result is an overarching sense of ambivalence, and one of the strongest lasting impressions left by both *Girlfriend in a Coma* and *Generation A*.

So perhaps Coupland’s ambivalence and inability to suggest solutions (to postmodern fragmentation, to contemporary or generational dissatisfaction, to individual loss of meaning or life narrative) does not, in fact, signify the failure of these novels. Instead, these novels seem to signal an acknowledgement of the inescapable frameworks and modes of thoughts that govern the worlds of these characters, the author, and the reader. Some frameworks and tropes—those of apocalyptic narrative, for instance—are susceptible to subversion, deconstruction, and reinterpretation. Others are not so easily overturned; as these two novels prove, Coupland is able to rewind the apocalypse, or, at the very least, reimagine the defining parameters of the elect and non-elect. These novels may fail to enact or even suggest social change, but then again, to some extent or another, all “middlebrow” fiction does.

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