

Ecocalypse

Bojan Mitrović

(introduction by Marija Bradaš)

Ecocalypse is the title of the latest work by the Trieste-based artist and historian of Serbian descent Bojan Mitrović. The term's unmistakable meaning and evocative power serve as a thematic and stylistic framework for a book that deals with the collapse of civilization that might precede our extinction. Indeed, the author's concern does not regard ecological catastrophe, at least not directly. This «dread is not about the things we are doing to our planet and not even about the things that the planet will do to us. It is about what we will do to each other once the resources start running out».

Narrated in the first person and in a language that combines a conversational tone, irony, and a rich knowledge of history, the book opens with a direct address to German Renaissance painter Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), whose Illustrated Apocalypse was an inspiration and guide for the graphics, but also a source that structured the narrative. Dürer's 15 woodcuts informed Mitrović's own 15 drawings, though they do not always explicitly resemble their source. These 15 drawings mark the divisions of the 15 chapters, framed by quotes from The Book of Revelation.

The author defines the genre as a graphic essay. However, the hybrid nature of the graphic novel and graphic essay is further emphasized by the quotations and apparently non-fictional characters of the texts, combining autobiography and history. As a historian, Mitrović has studied mostly 19th-century nationalisms and cultural history in southeastern Europe, focusing on the fall of empires and the post-imperial transition. His research interests have naturally influenced certain topics addressed in the graphic essay, leaving a unique stylistic imprint.

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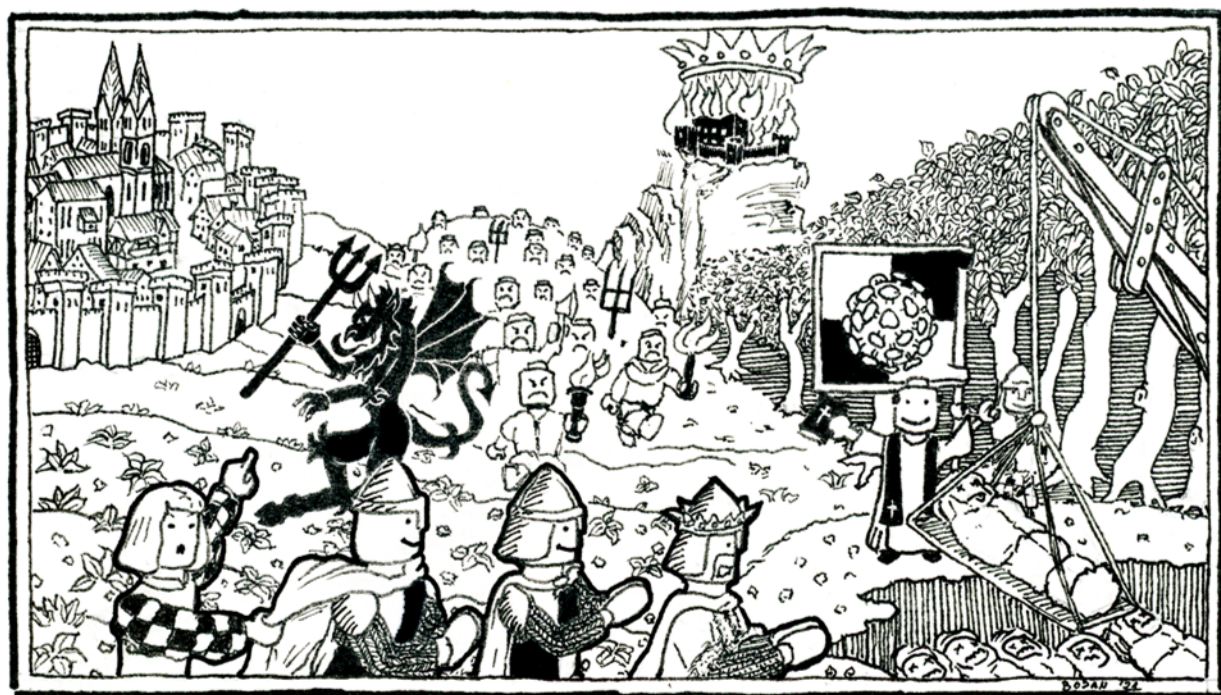
In addition to the first chapter, the narrator's direct address to Dürer repeats on several other occasions; this technique sets Mitrović's collection of fragmented autobiographical short stories within the category of epistolary graphic novel. The same strategy enhances the cohesion of the otherwise fragmented narrative containing topics of a diverse nature – holodomor in the Soviet Union, show trials in socialist Yugoslavia, anti-vaccination movement in modern-day Trieste, etc. Antisocial behavior and societal fault lines are common threads in the narration, allowing Mitrović to draw links between Cold War bomb shelters, disaster preppers, and ultimately to question the accountability of ruling élites in different historical periods.

Dürer's Illustrated Apocalypse is brought into conversation with the current and future consequences of climate change in a natural exposition of historical knowledge that defies strict genre classification. Here, we present two excerpts from the book in the making that illustrate its eclectic medium and core topic.

We thank the author for the permission to reproduce an excerpt of his book.

THE PANDEMIC

has plagued our land. In the background we see the Devil leading a jacquerie, and on the Page noticed it. The King & all his men are still happily intent on burping the dead. The drawing recalls a page of an old manuscript, evoking the return to the Dark Ages. The faces of all the human characters are inspired by Lego figurines suggesting the shallowness & plastic fakeness of all the actors involved.



You are here.

I, however, live in Trieste, Italy, a city that became the informal European capital of the anti-vaccination movement. Since the time I was an angry teenager, I cannot remember any other social problem that cut through all the previous divisions of political and religious orientation, profession, class, education or ethnicity, making it virtually impossible to tell beforehand who is on what side. Friendships collapsed and family relations got tense because pretty much everybody had a strong opinion on the matter and was shocked to find out that the people closest to them held opposing views.

Philosophers generally tend to have heated debates, and one of the hot topics recently in philosophy of law is that of intergenerational justice. In other words, the people who work on this topic are trying to answer the question of whether the future, unborn generations have any rights, and if so, whether we, the living, have some sort of duty to protect these rights (to survival, health and subsistence, for example). The answer is generally yes, but unlike the people working on this issue, I am not fully convinced that this sort of approach can mobilize grassroots support for policies contrasting climate change. The whole story of the pandemic seems to teach us a different lesson, and the pro-vax/anti-vax divide is not really as unpredictable as it might seem. In the US, it does largely follow the main political (Republican-Democrat) divide, but in the rest of the world it is rarely the case. But what is striking is that most anti-vaxxers belong to my own 30-50 age group, although in some countries they are even younger. And like myself, they are mostly the “losers” of these generations: single and low-income, although interestingly, the level of education doesn’t seem to play a major role in choosing sides. We are highly likely to become anti-vaxxers if we lost our job or have suffered major economic or financial damage during the pandemic, and especially if, due to our personality traits, we are less agreeable and conscientious than our peers. But being polemic and irresponsible are traits closely associated with narcissism. And some ten years before Covid, social psychologists sounded the alarm about the epidemic of narcissism spreading through the world. Since the 1950’s, the self-centeredness of every passing generation seems to have increased, both in medical terms and in terms of narcissistic traits being considered as normal by society at large. As the search for a meaningful life and interest in collective action has waned, each new generation has developed ever increasing personal expectations and lofty dreams of financial success.

I guess that if the Covid virus could speak, what it would actually say is “OK Boomer”, a catchphrase that gained its enormous popularity just a few months before the pandemic broke out. The dismissive tone of the phrase is perfectly suited to the narcissistic emphasis on both self-expression and self-righteousness as any opinion contrary to our own is dismissed as being either irrelevant or wrong. With Covid, the Boomers not only had a terrible day, but a few years of direct death threat reduced only to the degree to which they, alongside the rest of us, managed to take the vaccine. And before the pandemic, they, the Boomers, seemingly had it all: economic development fueled by debt and gasoline (both of which we have to pay for), security, jobs and retirement programs we can only dream of.

The ties that have bound us, among individuals and from one generation to the other, are being broken.

We are, at the opening of the first four seals.

ECOLOGICAL APOCALYPSE 4



And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and see.

And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.

And when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say, Come and see.

And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword.

And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand.

And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine.

And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see.

And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.

ESTABLISHED



The captain of a sinking ship holds fast
Of all the men to leave, he will be the last
The rats all flee, as quickly as they dare
Abandoning their crew without a care
But if a rat's the captain - who can say?
Will he still man his post - or run away?

THE RAT

One thing we do know for sure is that, on the evening of August 30th 1948, they were all drunk. They were a group of friends, former members of the Yugoslav resistance movement during the recently ended Second World War. The eldest member of the group, Vitomil Zupan, was a jack-of-all-trades. As a Slovene in fascist Italy, he was interned in a concentration camp from which he managed to escape and join the partisans in 1942. The youngest, Dušan Pirjevec, was actually one of the organizers of the resistance movement in Slovenia (which was part of Yugoslavia from 1918 to 1991, and is now an independent country). The other two were Jože Brejc-Javoršek, and a certain S.D., known only by his initials, from which one might conclude that he was either a minor or a police informant. All three were published authors and were to become leading intellectual figures in the post-war period; Zupan and Brejc-Javoršek were writers and poets, whereas Pirjevec became a literary historian and a university professor.

Being both fighters and men of letters, the four were getting increasingly disillusioned with the new regime they had helped to establish. The new leaders of Yugoslavia had quickly abandoned those ideals of freedom and equality they had fought for in their youth, and had favored a rigid Soviet-like system that had emerged after the war. Furthermore, by 1948, for Yugoslavia (the country that Slovenia was a part of), the international situation had worsened. It was, in fact, the first communist country to split with Stalin, and its leadership was expelled from the Moscow-led international organization of communist parties. The USA and the West remained distrustful of the Yugoslavs, fearing that the split might be some kind of internal maneuver within the communist bloc. For their part, the Yugoslavs tried to prove that they were more communist than Stalin himself, staging show trials and establishing prison camps. As humanists, both the professor and the poets had developed a profound disgust for all the options available and so quite reasonably, got drunk. The solution they devised, however, was not quite so reasonable, and the plan was probably hatched under the influence of the few extra glasses of alcohol.

But here, as befits a drunken night, the various versions diverge. There must have been at least one phone call the four friends made to at least one high-up Slovene communist official, but the trial proceedings tell us there were many more. However, since it was a period of mock trials, the validity of the justice system should not be taken for granted. Yet whatever the circumstance of the calls, content of the call, in all the versions, was always the same: "Haven't you heard? The Soviet tanks are rolling into the country as we speak!" And so on the night of August 30th 1948, Ljubljana was hit by a wave of panic. The communist leaders started packing their bags, gathering up their families and fleeing, either to the Italian border or to the local airport where, according to one of the versions, the four friends were sitting at the bar, drunk as lords, laughing their heads off.

By the following morning, they had all been arrested: the friends, of course, not the fleeing leaders. But the trial itself was curious. They were convicted of spreading fake news, but the authorities seemed somewhat embarrassed about accusing them of a mere phone-prank, so other crimes were added which the four had little or no involvement in. The accused got jail sentences ranging from six months (Pirjevec) to twelve years (Zupan). And publicly, of course, the whole story did not emerge until the late 1990s, after the downfall of socialist Yugoslavia. The fish rots from the head down, they say, and Yugoslavia met its violent end spiraling into a decade of war, but as far as leadership is concerned, are we sure we're doing any better?