

Utopia, Apocalypse, and Queer Effacement on *The Last of Us*

Jeffrey A. Bennett

Producers of science fiction and fantasy have long employed the trope of alternative timelines to drive plots, develop characters, and maintain viewer interest. From the ancient futurism of *Battlestar Galactica* to the eerie ruination of *Planet of the Apes*, the best artistic works compel audiences to contemplate their relationship to the narrative arc and the implications of divergent temporalities. What if human abuses of the natural world lead to cataclysmic disaster? What if the technologies located primarily in our imaginations were actually developed thousands of years in the past? Perhaps most important for the purposes of this article, how does such equipment for living shape perceptions of culture, belonging, and power?¹

The Last of Us, like much postapocalyptic programming before it, invites viewers to contemplate the prospects of a future radically rewritten by disaster. Indeed, the series offers spectators the opportunity to ponder what life would have been like during the last two decades had the course of history gone in a markedly different direction. *The Last of Us* volleys between the time of a fungal outbreak that turns people into zombie-like creatures in 2003 to present-day 2023, the year the program aired. This timetable suggests that the first two decades of the new millennium have been entirely reimaged in *The Last of Us*. This includes many of the legislative and cultural accomplishments of LGBTQ

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political movements, which would no longer exist in the program's universe, such as the attainment of same-sex marriage rights in *Obergefell v. Hodges*. This becomes increasingly noticeable in the third episode of the inaugural season, which gives intense focus to a long-term same-sex relationship that culminates with a wedding. The episode is both a stark reminder of just how recent these achievements are, but also produces a queer assurance that love will prevail, even if governments fail and threats loom around every corner. This is a novel reconfiguring of the past for contemporary audiences, but the series also maintains a tradition of engaging the tropes of utopia and apocalypse, which have long structured LGBTQ movement rhetoric. As I outline in this article, the transformative space occupied by these characters, which presents in ways that mirror Foucault's understanding of heterotopias, is both suspiciously sentimental but also aspirationally satisfying. Audiences are assured that even as the world burns, love wins.

Utopia, Apocalypse, and a Long, Long Convention

"Long, Long Time," the title of the episode under consideration, feels more allegorical than most chapters in the program's first season. This mythic quality is relayed in the opening shot, which features a mountain range with a river running through it and a caption that reads: "10 Miles West of Boston." Importantly, the location is discernably not ten miles outside of Boston. As scores of social media users have observed, the terrain looks much more like the Canadian Rockies, where portions of the series were shot, rather than a locale in the Northeast United States. Although comically peculiar, the terrain immediately clues us into the fact that something is not quite right about this episode. One might wonder if the producers included this otherwise ridiculous caption to generate on-line chatter and create hype for the drama. If nothing else, the scene attests to the power of narrative to forge parasocial relationships with fans: in a series featuring plant-like zombies produced from fungus, mountains on the outskirts of Boston seem almost plausible. Regardless of producer intent or audience reception, the opening nicely captures the largely tranquil plotting of the episode. Even in the midst of a global disaster, there is peace to be found in nature. This staging is also emblematic of the fluctuating tensions between the tropes of utopian and apocalyptic discourses, which appear repeatedly in LGBTQ history.

Elsewhere, I have written about the relationship between the tropes of utopia and apocalypse in LGBTQ social movements.² These ideas surface in disparate contexts that include the ongoing urgency of the AIDS crisis, ideological

debates over same-sex marriage, fragmented media consumption, widely circulated movement symbols, and the anxiety presented by queer teenagers who are imagined as both the promising future of LGBTQ life and a threat to its communal norms. Many movements oscillate between the stylistic emphases on utopia and apocalypse, but these figurations have been especially prominent among LGBTQ publics. The legal and cultural gains made on behalf of LGBTQ folk over the last half century, as well as some significant setbacks, have sparked contentment and anxiety, a dialogical interdependence that lives on today. In 2023, for example, there were a record number of legislative attacks on LGBTQ people, even as once controversial efforts like the push for same-sex marriage enjoys more support than ever before.³ We have good reason to fly multicolored pride flags, but also justification for clinging to the lessons represented by the pink triangle.

The Last of Us continues this tradition of entangling the affective attachments of apocalypse and utopia in queer life. Even the two central characters might be interpreted as stand-ins for these competing impulses. Nick Offerman's character, Bill, is a doomsday prepper who the audience first encounters in his dimly lit underground bunker, surrounded by monitors, and surveilling the space outside of his home. His neighbors are being rounded up by military forces and many of them, including small children, would later be murdered by the government. This initial glimpse of Bill staring at a wall of screens is a familiar trope and one that has become a semiotic shorthand for discourses related to control, security, privacy, and panopticism. Productions including *Sliver*, *The Dark Knight*, and *Cabin in the Woods* are some of the many media texts that centralize this well-established staging device. Surrounded by firearms, sulfuric acid, and copies of *Guns and Ammo*, Bill mutters: "Not today, you New World Order jackboot fucks." When Bill finally emerges from his home, he storms out the front door wearing a gasmask and holding a shotgun. Bill is evasive, technologically savvy, and prepared for the worst-case scenario. Paranoia constitutes his character, but his inclinations, including his distrust of the government, often prove correct.

If Bill parodically captures the haze of apocalyptic readiness, Murray Bartlett's Frank introduces a movement toward utopia. Bartlett is himself an openly gay actor who frequently plays queer characters on shows that include *Looking*, *Tales of the City*, and *The White Lotus*. Four years after Bill evades military capture and secures portions of his town as a makeshift compound, Frank falls into one of Bill's traps meant for the infected. Frank convinces Bill to let him stay and the two instantly fall in love. Frank draws attention to the cultural aspects of the good life in Bill's world throughout the episode. He comments on the amazing food that Bill prepares and the wine that perfectly accompanies the meal: "A man who knows to pair rabbit with a Beaujolais." Bill coyly comments that he

knows he “doesn’t seem like the type,” but Frank assures him that his persona is recognizably queer. Following this interaction, Frank moves to a sitting room with a piano and pulls out the sheet music for Linda Ronstadt’s “Long, Long Time,” which acts as a catalyst for their love affair. As the episode progresses, viewers are exposed to small changes in the house, which are visually tied to Frank. In one of the final scenes that the couple appears in together, for example, plants and paintings that were not featured in the dining room earlier in the episode are noticeably on display. Both are attributable to Frank, who is an artist attempting to maintain a degree of domestic normality in a deteriorating world. Unlike the antisocial Bill, it is Frank who demands contact with others outside of the compound, leading to their ties with Pedro Pascal’s character Joel and Anna Torv’s Tess. But perhaps most utopic is the isolated romance at the center of the narrative. Viewers watch as the pair overcome obstacles, build a life together, and ultimately choose to die in each other’s arms. Frank decides to take his own life after becoming terminally ill and Bill, unable to picture living without him, follows suit. The couple are informally married and then consume poison—Romeo style—at a meal that bookends their storyline.

This amorous narrative arc is reminiscent of tensions related to notions of utopia and apocalypse in media representations of LGBTQ relationships. Producers of queer love stories have long confronted a dilemma when strategizing how to market such texts for popular consumption. On the one hand, such narratives must capture the nuances of queer life and the specific affections, intimacies, and challenges that accompany such romances. On the other hand, these tales must have broad appeal, and not contain themselves to themes recognizable only to queer viewers, particularly if they want to reach the largest audience possible. The latter of these concerns seems especially pertinent in a media context where cisgender heterosexual women are often the largest consumers of queer content. “Long, Long Time” embodies these tensions, though the draw of the relationship seems to be of specific interest to the program’s creators. Executive producer Craig Mazin told the *Los Angeles Times*, “I’m not speaking, actually, specifically of two gay men in a committed relationship. . . . I’m speaking of two human beings who have been in a committed relationship for a really long time. That’s a different kind of love than we usually see.”⁴ For readers who have even a cursory understanding of queer history, this gesture may feel awkwardly familiar. The romantic difference displayed on screen is readily apparent but is positioned as speaking to a universalism that is meant to educate all audiences and not simply LGBTQ people.

It is interesting that Mazin presents the unique ways each of the two characters displays affection to anchor his point. He notes, “I’ve been married for over 25 years and there’s this other thing that happens, there’s a very different kind of

love. . . . I wanted to show that through the lens of Frank, who loves one way, and Bill, who loves another way. . . . I thought it was important to show how a relationship could endure, and then conclude in a natural way. Because death is a perfectly natural thing to do.”⁵ The duration of their love reflects a utopic impulse toward the universal, even if the ultimate plot telos—death—alludes to all the living viewers did not see on screen. Mazin expands on his point: “The story of Bill and Frank and the letter that Bill leaves behind [in the show] is such a huge part of why Joel decides he’s going to keep going [on this journey] with Ellie. . . . Their relationship ultimately becomes kind of the skeleton key to unlock all of this show, as far as I’m concerned.”⁶ Importantly, Ellie, played by Bella Ramsey, is portrayed as queer. However, Ellie never meets Bill or Frank in the television series. Although the queer relationship functions as an impetus for Joel’s mission, their love transcends the specifics of queer life (and, apparently the queer teenager at the series’ center) to advance the plot. Numerous authors have documented the “bury your gays” phenomenon that has been a persistent element of television programming for decades, and that pattern resurfaces, in modified form, here.⁷ Consistent with that trend, the utopian partnership the lovers build is situated as a lesson in survival for Joel, but not necessarily one in love or life for Ellie. Keeping in mind Lee Edelman’s warnings about the specter of the child in the heterosexual imaginary, I do not mean to suggest that the characters should be sacrificed in the name of the children.⁸ Rather, their generally serene life provides a familiar form of inspiration to move the plot forward, regardless of the other queer characters in their proximity who could use some hope.

To be sure, that sense of hope might be reserved for the program’s queer audiences, who are witnessing a political assault on their livelihoods. The twenty years that envelope the timeline of *The Last of Us*, roughly late 2003 to 2023, contained a remarkable number of legislative victories for LGBTQ rights. Characters from the program would have seen the U.S. Supreme Court strike down sodomy laws in April 2003, but little beyond that point. Massachusetts, presumptively where this episode takes place, became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage in 2004. Four years later, President Obama signed the Matthew Shepard Hate Crimes Act into law. In 2010, the Senate officially repealed the ban on gays and lesbians serving openly in the military, and the Obama administration would follow suit with trans folks in 2016 (the latter policy was revoked by Donald Trump’s administration and then reinstituted under Joe Biden’s White House). And, of course, in 2015 the Supreme Court narrowly granted gays and lesbians the right to marry. This is to say nothing of the gradual gains made by LGBTQ people in everyday life, the hard fights won by queer activists, and the (sometimes) progressive representations that appeared across the media landscape.

A Space for Transformation

To be sure, viewers in 2023 did witness these historic events. *The Last of Us* reflects a distorted space and time, a fictionalized pre- and post-*Obergefell* world where fans can contemplate what might have been had these milestones never come to pass. In *The Last of Us* universe, there are few signs of generative political transformations for LGBTQ folks. Rather, it depicts the nurturing of a single relationship, which also carries the historical echoes of the AIDS crisis when Frank becomes sick. In many ways, the world that Bill and Frank build behind electric fences and lethal traps is captured by Michel Foucault's notion of a heterotopia. Contrary to utopias, Foucault argues that heterotopias are "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted."⁹ Foucault famously offers the mirror as an example: "The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. . . . But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction."¹⁰ I extend the example of the mirror into the realm of representation, which is both a figment of Hollywood's imagination but one with significant "real world" effects. Heterotopias are both mythic and material, spaces that cultivate bodily and communal transformation and reconstitute notions of time. Brent Saindon notes that heterotopias "are not just different spaces; they actively confirm, mutate, or resist the sensibilities of a culture."¹¹ And representations often capture such sentiments in both stark and indirect ways. Saindon reminds readers that such spaces are "neither essentially progressive nor conservative in orientation; their functions can vary widely from the hegemonic accommodation of seemingly contradictory differences to the inversion of established cultural values."¹² This is certainly true in *The Last of Us*, where the apocalyptic backdrop affirms Bill's embrace of paranoia, while also breeding an unlikely same-sex relationship that is free of persecution.

Foucault's contention that the era in which he wrote was more preoccupied with space than with time is resonant, though perhaps overstated, in the pandemic age.¹³ To be sure, the initial outbreak of any pandemic is a crisis event because of the proximity we live in relation to others.¹⁴ We quarantine, social distance, and isolate precisely because of spatial concerns. However, there is no denying that the pace with which both people and viruses (or, in this case fun-guses) can traverse spaces is equally significant. Foucault argues that "our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein."¹⁵ Those infected during a pandemic certainly draw attention to such networks—the monsters

on *The Last of Us* are literally attached through a series of sprawling roots—but the temporalities mediating those connections matter. In our actuality, we obsess over the duration of an incubation period, the length of the disease's acuteness, and the mysteries of recovery time. On the series, those suspected of being infected are killed immediately. Bill and Frank's fortified space both keeps the zombies at bay and simultaneously creates room for transformation, preservation, and longevity in a world that is deteriorating around them. Coincidentally, many of the principles and sites that Foucault outlines when musing about heterotopias are present in the series. I argue that the heterotopia in *The Last of Us* mediates utopia and apocalypse to facilitate a saccharine apologue that is perfect for primetime.

Foucault argues that heterotopias are a universal feature of culture. The late philosopher lays out two kinds of heterotopias under this initial axiom: crisis and deviation. The first of these, Foucault contends, "are privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc."¹⁶ Heterotopias of deviation, Foucault writes, have basically replaced crisis heterotopias and are "those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed. Cases of this are rest homes and psychiatric hospitals, and of course prisons. . . ."¹⁷ Bill and Frank are presented as living, at least most of the time, in a crisis heterotopia. If a "crisis" is literally the breakdown of meaning—in this case the rapid dissolution of humanity—the space that they create permits them to continue on. Whereas gay bars may have once constituted a site of crisis or deviation, in *The Last of Us* there is no mean, no indication that same-sex relationships, desires, or practices are outlawed. In fact, Ellie's queerness, both her ability to survive infection and apparent same-sex attractions, leave open questions about coercive practices that demand heterosexuality for the species to survive. The later episode titled "Lakeside Resort" indicates that sexual assault is not beyond the reach of this imaginary world and Ellie will no doubt shed more blood to stay alive. All this to say, the compound becomes an instrumental element of survival and acts as a site of transformation in a hostile environment.

"Long, Long Time" reflects the defining features of heterotopias in its representation of space and time and these elements are tied to notions of utopia and apocalypse. There is little room here to expand on each of Foucault's principles, so I glance at the theory more than I gaze at it. Foucault charts several characteristics that are worth mentioning when crafting a critical heuristic for assessing this episode. For example, Bill and Frank's compound juxtaposes in a single space, "several sites that are in themselves incompatible."¹⁸ At the conclusion of

the episode, after Frank has made the decision to die, he informs Bill that he is going to the boutique he created to find something to wear for their nuptials. In what is otherwise a military fortress, he is going to select dress clothes. Foucault's primary example of this feature is a garden, which he observes, "is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world."¹⁹ Likewise, one of the most tender scenes in the episode involves Frank surprising Bill with strawberries grown in a garden on the lot. The scene also captures the nuances of heterotopias in the ways the land reconfigures notions of time—what Foucault describes as "heterochronies."²⁰ Museums represent such a space because they are accumulating artifacts indefinitely, in much the same ways Bill and Frank collect relics of the world that has crumbled around them. The rituals that shape their love function to bring order from chaos.

Finally, Foucault contends that as societies change, heterotopias inevitably take on different functions.²¹ His foremost illustration is that of the cemetery, whose role in culture has changed substantially over the centuries. Such spaces, he observes, used to reside in the center of town. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the rise of individualism and the fear of death acting with the force of contagion, these spaces were moved to the outskirts of cities. They were places one had to purposefully locate, rather than simply stumble upon. We might again invoke the image of Boston here, where anyone can regularly find centuries-old graves in the middle of town. *The Last of Us* presents an inversion of this logic. The two men die in their home, in the same bed, and their rest is not disturbed. Their death is an extension of their utopic life—an end that marks a new beginning. To achieve that feat, they required a space rife with the possibility of transformation, free of the outside world, or its devastating implications. If only the audience could be so lucky.

Love Will Abide

The tropes of utopia and apocalypse have a long-standing presence in LGBTQ rhetorics. *The Last of Us* reinforces this reliance by outlining the journey Bill and Frank share. Of course, in some religious traditions the arrival of apocalypse signals the beginning of utopia. Although the storyline of "Long, Long Time" is not free of violence, suffering, and pain, the utopic impulses are strong. We are sure to see such figurations continue to materialize in our on-going post-pandemic world where LGBTQ folks are again being targeted by the Christian-right. Indeed, just months after this episode aired, bluegrass and folk singer Tyler Childers released a video for the song, "In Your Love." The lyrics of the song don't suggest anything about queer people, but the video was purposefully

made to feature a gay couple who confront the pleasures and pains of being coal miners in 1950s Appalachia. As with Bill and Frank, the men are white, they fall in love quickly, confront violence, and live a life together (in a house that is reminiscent of the one in *The Last of Us*), until one of them ultimately dies. It should not be surprising that such utopian visions are being forwarded during a time of cultural turmoil for queer folk. But such depictions also compel us to contemplate how audiences are primed to see the interrelationship between governments, collective rights, and individual freedoms.

The producer's contention that Bill and Frank are key to the remainder of the season might give us pause about the narrative function of these characters. Productions that feature queer characters have often used them as a crux for educating heterosexuals, nurturing straight romances, and making nonqueer audiences comfortable. The "bury your gays" trope may ultimately guide the way viewers read this show in the future, but the jury is decidedly out in the present day. As Christobel Hastings wrote in *Pink News*, the showrunners purposefully departed from the video game's source material, in which Frank gets infected and kills himself to save Bill. Hastings observes, "there is no suffering, and no struggle. They do not succumb to infection, nor are they executed. They depart the world together, in love, and on their own terms."²² Other critics were less forgiving, arguing that the trope held.²³ Despite its limitations, I tend to side with the reparative reading of this episode, if for no other reason than it reinforced a tender narrative at a time when the world is systematically attempting to destroy LGBTQ lives with book bans, tired groomer accusations, and life-destroying legislation.

The series might also help us to rethink the enduring figurations of utopia and apocalypse, as well as heterotopias. Foucault's musings were intended to assess the world as he saw it unfolding, but his political landscape was different than the situation we confront today. In a postpandemic world, where the visibility and vibrancy of LGBTQ lives is as ubiquitous as ever, we may need to reconsider how we imagine these concepts, which facilitate hope, warning, and transformation.

Notes

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