

## TEOTWAWKI: WHETHER TO LAUGH OR DIE

We all like bad news – not if it's happening to us personally, of course, but hearing about it. The twin towers footage was rerun obsessively. Last days are a reference point of relish for some religious cults. At the other end of the scale, there's a frisson in recounting just how badly England's football team played or learning about a celebrity's latest marital disaster. The horror film industry is driven by a comparable desire to be scared – whilst feeling, of course, perfectly safe behind the pretence. And the ultimate bad news, surely, would be the end of the world: no wonder speculating on 'how' and 'when' has been such a persistent source of interest.

So what are the works which address TEOTWAWKI in this appropriately theatrical show? It's an interlinked fourfold installation.

The first thing to strike you, even before you enter, is the soundtrack that streams from **The Precipice**, a thirteen minute collage of disaster movies. They're intercut so that we never really get anywhere, but are always set to worry mode. Byrne & Lau have concentrated not on the disasters themselves, but on the characteristic means through which Hollywood transmits tension, concern and fear in the face of an impending catastrophe: cue close-up frowns; gravely authoritative TV news reporters, backed up by serious-looking graphics; threatening music; count-down sequences. Any scenario will do as the disaster: it's all the same in the build-up, at least in Hollywood's styling. 'You realise', say Byrne & Lau, 'how basic the tricks are'.

And the 21<sup>st</sup> century internet-driven world of information overload is here, too. We have too much data on which to speculate, and in contrast to the one big nuclear worry of the cold war period, there's a proliferation of world-ending scenarios to keep us in anxiety: environmental disaster, terrorism, nuclear war, a stray asteroid, global warming, the big crunch which will reverse the big bang. And while not, perhaps, foretelling the end of the world as we know it, tsunamis, earthquakes, oil leaks, ash clouds and the meltdown of the economy all add to the unease. Byrne & Lau have definitely hit on a central aspect of the zeitgeist.

There are so many ends to be afraid of, in fact, that it gets hard to take them all seriously. Just as charitable giving was said to be affected by 'disaster fatigue' in the late 90's, so we may be affected by 'potential-end fatigue' now. None has happened yet, of course, and we haven't got time to worry about them all. The responses are likely to be either to enter a panic in which the possibilities collapse into a generalized sense of impending disaster, or just dismiss them from our day-to-day thoughts. It's that edge between fear and laughing off our own alarmist tendencies which TEOTWAWKI explores.

The images in 'The Precipice' are fragmented by their projection onto what look like a set of roof beams. They're propped untidily, but not so disrupted as to be the obvious result of an explosion. Rather, they make us wonder about their origin, and constitute a device which in turn points to the devices which the films themselves trade in - while at the same time the beams splinter the footage to the point at which it is only just legible.

That effect chimes with the profusion of the media, its multiple layering of reality, and the confusions likely in the build-up to a disaster. 'The Precipice' also provides a contrast with the other three, starker, elements of the show.

But it would be a rare visitor who followed the sound to take in the films as their initial visual impression. For the space is dominated by **Impact Point (FOLD)**, in which a group of buildings lies under the threat of a boulder suspended on a rope like the Sword of Damocles. The rock is comically big compared with the buildings, and the joke in that is emphasised by a candle which stands ready to be set alight, to burn through the rope and send the rock crashing down to obliterate... what? At the centre of the model is one white building among the grey ones around it, and we're in the white cube of the gallery. It becomes clear that it's the gallery we're in which is about to be crushed. Check and, yes, the geographic orientation is correct.

That would be the end of the world as the gallery knows it, but what, one might ask, will that mean for the London art scene, let alone the world as a whole? On that scale, of course, we are all replaceable. It's hard to take that local apocalypse too seriously, then, and we can also laugh at the scenario because we know perfectly well that no such disaster is about to strike. Unless, that is, we recall such philosophical positions such as Hume's challenge to demonstrate why the world's past regularities should continue into the future. What couldn't have happened since we came in? It is absurd, but is it so far from the frequently-cited small chance of a big enough asteroid crashing fatally through the atmosphere? Yes, it's a joke, but isn't there just a momentary tremor of possibility?

'Impact Point (FOLD)', aside from its minimalist take on architecture, also references the established artistic strategy of seeking to create out of destruction, and within that to attack the substance of the gallery itself. The motivations for that may range from institutional critique, to parallels with intellectual deconstruction, to making clear the action behind a result, or just exploiting the exhibition space as a good sculptural material. All may be relevant here, but Byrne & Lau don't pussyfoot around digging holes in the floor, rearranging the interior or smashing the frontage as Urs Fischer, Jorge Peris or Callum Morton have done. They propose to go one further through complete obliteration of the FOLD Gallery, and perhaps by implication of all art institutions, or even of art as a whole.

Five **Propaganda War Posters** are arranged around the walls: each presents slogans against a monochrome field referencing the USA's threat based colour coded system. The words are from war posters, with the images removed to concentrate on what can without them seem rather baffling or even self-defeating worries. If 'Patriotism Means No Questions', what sort of freedom are we fighting for? And what pictures, we might ask, would match the peculiar statement-rather-than-question 'Is This Tomorrow' or the injunction 'Don't Do It Mother'? The effect is to emphasise the absent pictures and reveal the inter-dependency between word and image in such material, as well as building up the background atmosphere of threat. 'All these things seem to go back to America', observe Byrne & Lau, 'they seem to be an anxious people'.

The final component of the show doesn't fit so obviously. While the imageless, monochrome posters and the blocked-in absence of detail in the buildings modeled in Impact Point (FOLD) may gesture at minimalism but have evident end of world content, **Overpressure Key** has a fully minimalist look – as if Carl Andre had presented materials for what they were, and arranged them in the format of a target. In fact, it represents the pattern of destruction which would follow a nuclear explosion. The four radii are indicators of structural damage to buildings. They're regular because they are, in the chillingly contradictory term, 'idealized' – no account is taken of terrain, urban density, ground type, weather conditions, and so on. Reading across from the looming boulder puts us at the centre, a ground zero at which stone is pulverized to dust. Two miles out, chunks of stone remain. Four miles out, the buildings still stand but the windows have shattered.

While the blatant representation of impending doom in 'Impact Point (FOLD)' makes it hard to take seriously, 'Overpressure Key' looks like innocuous geometry but hides a lot of genuine menace. That menace is intensified by its concern only with the infrastructure, not with the impact on 'liveware', as people might be called in this context. It's a target, and we're at the middle of it. 'We're trying to represent how you can measure destruction and order it', say Byrne & Lau. In that sense, this is organized chaos, but does it really make any sense? To what extent can you deal with enormity by analyzing it?

Like the fractured cacophony of 'The Precipice', then, the minimalism and destruction in the other three works is not just an aesthetic choice: it's a potential consequence of what the works are warning us of, the movement from a world with too much in it to one with not much in it at all.

So our question is, perhaps, how seriously to take all this – whether to laugh or die. We are on the edge of the paradoxical. Baudrillard suggested that the invasive presence of media images in modern life is such that we can no longer experience things independently of their representation. The end of the world is in a peculiar category in that regard: we can *only* perceive it through its representations – and they probably won't prove to tell us much about the end of the world, though they may tell us something about how we live now. The actual end of the world is not an event that could ever be reported on. It's an event which will always be a forecast. So there's a sense in which it wouldn't be news at all – and even if it were, might not be bad. As Wittgenstein famously emphasised, 'death is not an event in life'. If the whole world imploded instantly tomorrow, no-one would suffer and no loved ones would be left behind to do without us. What would the problem actually be?

This is Byrne & Lau's first collaborative exhibition, and those who have seen their work before would be hard-pressed, I think, to spot much continuity from their individual practices. Lau is mainly a photographer, Byrne is wide-ranging but has most often produced analytical text-based works. And that combination of separate practices to make a different third practice turns out to be appropriate from a personal perspective, too. In real life, Byrne & Lau are about to get married – so it's a new world for them, which they

are celebrating, a little perversely perhaps, with this show. *Ladies and gentlemen – be upstanding please for the end of the world as we know it...*

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