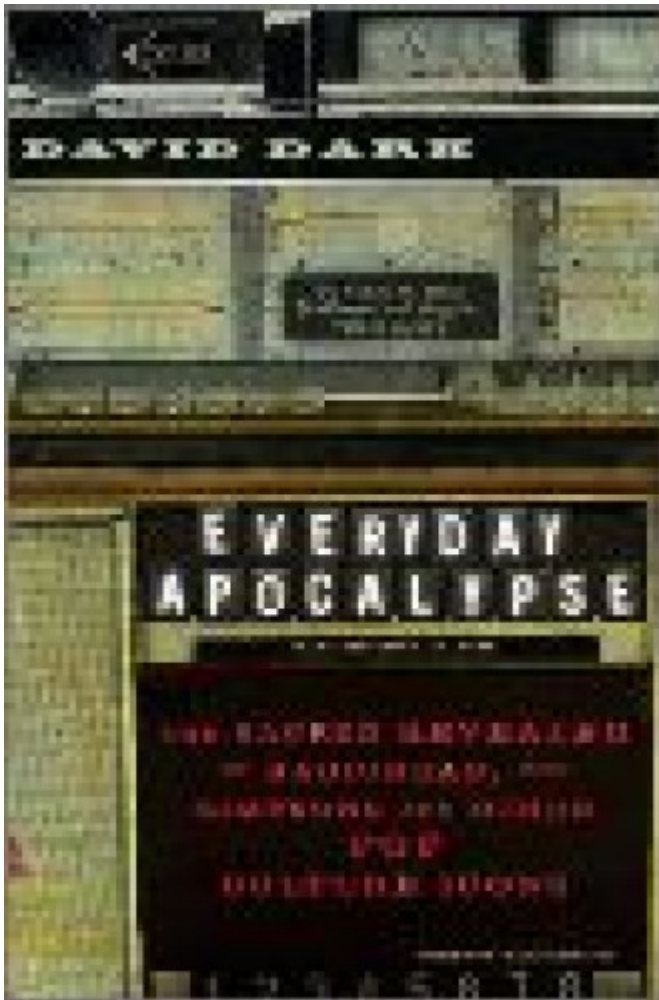


Everyday Apocalypse: The Sacred Revealed in Radiohead, the Simpsons, and Other Pop Culture Icons

reviewed by [Melissa Jenks](#) in the [January 13, 2004](#) issue

In Review



Everyday Apocalypse: The Sacred Revealed in Radiohead, the Simpsons, and Other Pop Culture Icons

David Dark

Brazos

David Dark searches for God in popular culture, considering film, television and rock music in his quest for what he calls apocalyptic, or revelatory, art. He claims that some pop culture, including films like *The Matrix*, functions as apocalyptic literature (which he defines as N. T. Wright does: “a way of investing space-time events with their theological significance”). Such art possesses many of the essential qualities of biblical parables: clarity of sight into the darkness of our world, a radical glimpse of the light beyond that darkness, and a call for revolutionary change. Dark points out that the early church was made up of revolutionaries, people who had rejected the existing political-economic order. The contemporary artists he considers do the same, giving hope to a generation of Christians frustrated with the status quo.

Flannery O'Connor is the only artist Dark discusses who is considered part of the literary canon, but she epitomizes apocalyptic literature. Her characters are haunted by the glory of God, “the bleeding stinking mad shadow of Jesus,” and thus lead bloody, horrible lives and, like Jesus, die grotesque deaths. Their lives recall Jonah's, who ran from God at his own peril. O'Connor's vision of faith, according to Dark, is much more in keeping with the apocalyptic faith of scripture than is the sentimentalized spirituality heard on Christian radio. Salvation is terrifying precisely because it is apocalyptic—it radically changes our lives, prevents us from living comfortably, and opens our eyes to transcendent reality. O'Connor's stories portray a world where grace is terrible, mercy comes unbidden and the fear of God is real and warranted.

Joel and Ethan Coen, who have produced such films as *Fargo* and *The Big Lebowski*, follow closely in O'Connor's footsteps. Their morbidly funny films are marked by despair and violence, allowing only the faintest glimmer of hope. Dark sees them as moral fables that follow the machinations of capitalism at its most extreme. The small-town gangster of *Fargo* (played by Steve Buscemi) is quite literally “put through the machinery,” a metaphor for the dehumanization that “late capitalism run mad” visits on us. By protesting the systemic evil of our culture, these films succeed. But grace is found in characters like the pregnant cop, Marge Gunderson, who are, Dark says, “somehow on the side of the sages because at their mysterious

best, they aren't trying to make things happen."

The rock band Radiohead shares the Coen brothers' obsession with the machinery of capitalism. Dark quotes Thom Yorke, Radiohead's lead singer: "This is somehow God's will? . . . It's God's will that millions of people are gonna die this year because of some outmoded economic policies? . . . It's like some deranged sacrificial altar, the high priests of the global economy holding up these millions of children each year, like, 'We wish to please you! Oh gods of free trade!'" This view is most clearly articulated in the Radiohead song "Dollars and Cents," in which money talks, telling us it will "crack [our] little souls." Radiohead's consistent message is that mechanization has robbed us of our souls. But the band's album ends with the line "immerse your soul in love."

Beck, another popular rock musician, is descended from one of the original "garbage artists" who collected trash and turned it into collage. Beck does the same in his medium, collecting every conceivable musical style, from '70s disco-funk to country to hip-hop, and turning it into word pictures. Dark compares Beck's poetic juxtapositions to the conceits of metaphysical poet John Donne. Both also satirize aspects of the sexuality of their day. In the album *Midnite Vultures* Beck explores "libido dominandi," the worldview in which carnality reigns. In this modern wasteland sex is devoid of pleasure or love, perfumed men are concubines, the genders are indistinguishable and girls with cellophane chests "get real paid." Beck exposes the corruption and decadence of the age.

Dark also regards the satire exemplified by *The Simpsons* as apocalyptic. The Simpsons' hometown is hopelessly corrupt and polluted, its citizens stranded in soul-numbing jobs. As satire in the tradition of Swift, *The Simpsons* succeeds. But Dark sees beyond the satire to how its characters—bumbling, yellow and doughy—epitomize human flaws yet still treat each other with generosity of spirit. The show refuses to "reduce the paradoxical state of the human condition." It is folk humor as explained by Bakhtin: "directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect. . . . It is gay, triumphant and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives." This apocalyptic humor destroys our misconceptions about ourselves and replaces them with carnival laughter.

The Matrix has often been seen as a Christian parable. In the film, apocalypse has literally occurred, and humans are trapped in an electronic matrix that makes them

believe in a false reality. Though he seems to be living in a nameless 20th-century city, working at a job that has become meaningless to him, Keanu Reeves's Neo actually is trapped in an underground fetal pod, his body used as energy by the machines that have enslaved humanity. Dark argues that the film is a potent metaphor for our time. We, too, are distanced from reality. The prophetic figure Morpheus offers Neo the choice between a red and a blue pill. If he takes the blue pill he will live and die inside the matrix, never realizing that life is anything other than what he perceives. If he takes the red, he will be torn from his protective cocoon, finally able to see the truth. He takes the red and is, in a sense, born again. The red pill acts as a metaphor for apocalyptic literature—it tears us from our insulated existence and enables us to see the truth that sets us free. The film itself can act as a red pill, forcing us to evaluate the corporations that control our perceptions, and leading us to investigate what it really means to be alive.

Dark is at his best when he, too, is apocalyptic, poking holes in our conception of what constitutes “religious” art. He’s convinced that the million-dollar industry labeled “Christian” art will “be viewed, historically, with at least as much embarrassment as, say, the medieval sale of indulgences.” Coming from an imprint that might be implicated in such profit-driven sentimentality—Baker, which owns Brazos, also owns Bethany House, which publishes much Christian romantic fiction—his book is surprising.

Everyday Apocalypse forces us to reevaluate popular culture, to find value in what we may have dismissed. “Daylight is a dream if you’ve lived with your eyes closed,” says a character in *Barton Fink*, a Coen brothers film. The apocalyptic artists Dark discusses shock us awake to the truth around us—both the darkness and the light that lies beyond it, shinning in the ethereal final notes of Radiohead’s songs, the last scene of *Fargo*, or the moment when Neo takes his first mouthful of unadulterated air.