

Aesthetic Investigations

Published on behalf of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics



Special Issue – Isn't all art performed?

Ethicising Catastrophe: *The Survivalist's* Case

Author

DROR PIMENTEL

Affiliation

BEZALEL ACADEMY OF ART
AND DESIGN, JERUSALEM

Abstract: The film *The Survivalist* portrays a dystopic world, wherein the most valuable asset is seeds. The 'seeds' metaphor applies not only in the context of agriculture but also in that of fecundity. The Survivalist's hostile hospitality toward a pair of nomads – a mother and her daughter – results in the pregnancy of the latter. In the last raid on his compound, the Survivalist allows the daughter to escape at the expense of his own life. This sacrifice manifests a severe critique against the preference given today to the well-being of the individual at the expense of the survival of the species.

The Survivalist (2015) is a low-budget film, dull in dialogue, actors, and scenery; on the verge of minimalism.¹ Nevertheless, it is rich in philosophical content, addressing fundamental issues of human existence in the current age. These issues are raised against the backdrop of a dystopian reality. Contrary to other dystopian films, *The Survivalist* refrains from describing the state of affairs leading up to the catastrophe that created the dystopian situation. Rather, it remains focused on the depiction of the catastrophic situation itself. Nevertheless, the reason behind the catastrophe is addressed briefly right at the start with the aid of two graphs: the first is that of fuel production; the second is that of the worldwide population. At first, the increase in fuel production matches that of population growth. However, at some point in time, with the consumption of fuel resources, the graph of fuel production plummets dramatically, and along with it, the graph of the worldwide population.

The catastrophe stemmed, therefore, from the consumption of fuel resources, which led to the collapse of life-sustaining infrastructures: industry, transport, communication, agriculture and so forth. This led in turn to a rapid decrease in world population and, consequently, to the abolition of the modern way of life, leading to a regression to a pre-industrial and pre-technological existence, which strips man of his modern habitus with all the comfort it entails.² As a result, man finds himself thrown back to primordial existence, obliging him to sustain himself with scarce resources available from his immediate surroundings. This is the situation in which the Survivalist (portrayed by Martin McCann) – whose name remains undisclosed throughout the film – finds himself.

I. NATURE AND CULTURE: BETWEEN UNIFICATION AND SEPARATION

The catastrophe engenders two opposing vectors – that of unification and that of separation. On the one hand, it leads to the renewal of the intimacy between man and nature. On the other hand, it leads to the fragmentation of society. These opposing vectors will serve as the pathways through which the discussion of the film is carried out.

The loss of industrial and technological means of production compels man to draw near to nature and cultivate it with the aid of tools that are still available to him, such as the shovel and the rake. This renewed intimacy of man with nature engenders a reciprocal relationship: man takes what he needs from nature, and at the same time gives back to nature. Man takes the yield of the crops he grows and the food he randomly gathers. This is carried out in appropriate measure, in accordance with his needs, as opposed to the unrestricted fuel consumption that had led to the consequent catastrophe. In Marxist terms, the Survivalist's agricultural and gathering practices fall under the definition of use-value, before its shift to exchange-value, typical to industrial societies, in which natural resources are turned into commodities and their production exceeds personal consumption.³ The farming-gathering Survivalist could therefore be portrayed as a post-catastrophic Robinson Crusoe, sustaining an autarkic dominion designed to satisfy his personal needs. In this autarkic dominion, the most valuable asset is seeds, as they guarantee the succession of yield. This is the reason the Survivalist guards them so passionately. To these seeds – from which salvation grows – we shall return.

As man takes, he also gives back, mainly his used-up body, which is committed to the earth, as testified to in the two burial scenes vividly depicting the corpse's sedimentation in the ground. The corpse is portrayed in the film without repugnance and repulsion as an integral part of the circle of life. From a strict ecological point of view, one can even consider death as possessing a positive value, in light of its contribution to the earth's fertilisation, which secures the growth needed to sustain life. Perhaps the film's ultimate

protagonist is the earth itself, portrayed as a reservoir into which seeds and corpses are deposited for the sake of retaining life-sustaining resources.

One can thus speculate that, paradoxically, man even benefits from the catastrophe, as it frees him from the alienation from nature enforced upon him by industrial society and it draws him back to the earth and the world he long ago abandoned, as if he were the prodigal son, returning to his homeland from exile in the colonies of industrialisation and technologisation.

In light of the first vector, it could therefore be argued that the catastrophe is portrayed positively, as leading to the renewal of the primal bond between man and nature. Whereas in light of the second vector, the catastrophe is portrayed negatively as leading to the disintegration of the social bond and hence to a regression back to the natural savagery before the constitution of the social contract. The event of catastrophe is thought, therefore, not only in its ecological context, but also in its sociological context, and hence, as we shall see, in its ethical context as well.

In the renowned debate between Rousseau and Hobbes, the film sides with Hobbes: the pre-cultural existence is not depicted in line with the innocent and laid-back existence of the noble savage, free from the fetters of civilisation, as Rousseau would have it.⁴ Rather, it is depicted in a Hobbesian vein as living under a constant threat, wherein ‘man is a wolf to man’ if to adduce a famous Hobbesian phrase, and where life could be taken instantly at any moment.⁵ Our protagonist – the Survivalist – is constantly armed with a shotgun, which he takes along with him the moment he steps out of his shack. He surrounds the shack with ropes on which he hangs empty tin cans, whose rattling sound warns him of unwanted intruders.

The world rendered in the film is comprised of isolated communities and companies of nomads wandering in between them. As the catastrophe renews the bond between man and nature, it distances him from his fellowmen and thus begets social atomism. It seems that law-keeping institutions are completely absent from this post-catastrophic world. All we are left with are isolated communities, scattered here and there, and wandering nomads. These isolated communities are at constant war with each other, occasionally raiding each other for the sake of attaining vital resources, especially seeds, which are the most valuable asset in this world. The Survivalist is no exception, as he too ventures on, alongside his brother, such raids now and again. In one of these raids, his brother is killed, whose burial is depicted in the opening scene. Since the death of his brother, with whom he had shared his shack, the Survivalist lives on his own, while keeping a strict daily schedule of maintaining the shack and working in the adjacent vegetable garden. The snapshots, which he keeps in an enclosed case and occasionally uses as burning material to light his oven, testify that he once had a wife, who probably did not survive the catastrophe.

II. HOSTILE HOSPITALITY

The Survivalist's solitude is interrupted by two nomads seeking shelter: a mother (Kathryn, portrayed by Olwen Fouéré) and her daughter (Milija, portrayed by Mia Goth). The initial contact between them is that of exchange: at first, in exchange for shelter, the mother offers some jewellery, which is immediately rejected since, obviously, the Survivalist has no use for it. Next to be offered is 'the real treasure,' as the mother puts it, that is, seeds, which are rejected too. As a last resort, the mother hints at possible intercourse with her daughter, to which the Survivalist answers in the affirmative. Sex is therefore treated in this post-catastrophic world as a legitimate commodity.

The Survivalist's hospitality is strictly economical, being grounded in an exchange of shelter for sex. The exchange is carried out with mutual suspicion: on his part, the Survivalist takes the nomads' presence as a redundant burden, and, as soon as the exchange is made, he asks them to leave. The nomads, for their part, scheme relentlessly to kill the Survivalist and take hold of his shack. As part of this scheming, the daughter, Milija – acting upon her mother's instructions – steals the bullets of the Survivalist's shotgun, so disarming him of his weapon. This mutual distrust brings social atomism to a peak, wherein trust and solidarity are completely absent from human relations. The film thus exemplifies hospitality in its Derridean sense – or 'hos(t)pitality' (*hos(t)pitalité*), as Derrida rephrases the term – which originates in the Levinasian notion of hospitality.⁶ Hostility is thus inscribed at the heart of hospitality: the gesture of hospitality is carried out under the shadow of a constant threat of the outburst of hostility. The host is exposed to the danger of becoming a hostage of his hostile guest.⁷



Figure 1: Hostile hospitality: the Survivalist welcomes his guests, Kathryn and Milija, with a cocked shotgun.

The hostility reaches its peak in the subsequent rape scene: while working in the garden, the Survivalist spots a stranger's footprint on the ground. He immediately deduces that danger looms for Milija, who had gone washing in

the nearby brook. Milija is indeed abducted by the stranger, who is about to rape her. The Survivalist saves her from the stranger, killing him in a struggle during which he suffers an injury to his stomach. The mother and daughter tend to his wound and carry out an extemporary operation to remove the bullet.

These mutual acts of help lead to a gradual abandonment of the instrumental relationship between the Survivalist and his guests, opening up the possibility of solidarity, and even of love. The relationship between the Survivalist and Milija – which is no longer strictly commodified – results in Milija's pregnancy. Her attempt at carrying out a self-abortion is unsuccessful, and from then on, whether she likes it or not, she is carrying the Survivalist's child in her womb.

One should note the affinity generated in the film between life-supporting activities – first and foremost pregnancy – and nature's responsiveness to the human call for the provision of nourishment. Nature responds to the call as long as man acts in favour of life and it refrains from doing so when he acts against it. This is precisely the case of the abortion scene, which is brilliantly juxtaposed to a scene depicting a hare breaking loose from a trap laid down in the woods. The lesson is clear: abortion, as an act against life, prevents the hare from being caught and hence from providing the much-needed life-sustaining nourishment.

These initial manifestations of solidarity enable the Survivalist and his guests to survive the first raid on the shack, during which the intruders destroy the vegetable garden and steal the seed stock. The intensifying love between the Survivalist and Milija leads her to shift her loyalty from her mother to the Survivalist. She refuses to participate in her mother's attempt at poisoning the Survivalist, while poisoning her mother instead. As the mother realises her days are numbered, she asks the Survivalist to kill her and to commit her body to the earth. After the passing away of the mother, only two are left, or, more precisely, only three: the Survivalist, Milija, and the fruit of their love. The couple enjoys a brief period of happiness, during which Milija informs the Survivalist of her pregnancy, and the two enjoy a protein-rich meal of a hare that was eventually caught in the trap.

III. DYING FOR THE FUTURE

These brief moments of shared happiness are brought to a halt by a second, much more lethal raid. Playing the harmonica, the Survivalist lures the intruders in his direction and away from Milija. He shoots down one of them, before getting hit by an arrow himself. The diversive subterfuge succeeds, allowing Milija to escape the compound. The end is bitter: the shack is conquered; the miserable resources are plundered; and the Survivalist is roasted on a bonfire. This is the most violent scene in the film, where the murderous desire of the other is realised most horrifically in the absence of any law that

could have prevented it. The cannibalistic desire to eat the other is stripped off, literally, from the metaphoric coating and fleshed out in reality. The Survivalist's death is no doubt altruistic, and, as such, it expresses the depths of the love forged between himself and Milija: the Survivalist knowingly sacrifices himself to enable the survival of Milija and their yet unborn child, whom she bears in her womb. This act of self-sacrifice for the sake of the other is set against the act of eating the other. In the course of the film, we are witnessing a radical shift in the attitude toward the other: the sheer economical attitude, conceiving the other as a commodity, is turned into solidarity and ends up in self-sacrifice as the ultimate act of love.

Nevertheless, the death of the Survivalist is not the end, as Milija and her child are still alive. After enduring a voyage through the woods, Milija finds refuge in a neighbouring community. A female guard, standing on top of a watchtower, asks Milija, 'When are you due?', as she awaits the results of the assembly's vote in her regard. 'In six weeks,' answers Milija. 'Do you know what you will call it?' asks the guard. 'If it's a boy...,' answers Milija. At this point, the film ends abruptly, since the answer is clear, and hence there is no need for it to be articulated: if it is a boy, the viewers already know, the child will be called 'Augustus,' after the Survivalist's brother, whose death had never ceased to haunt him.

As we have just seen, the Survivalist did not survive. So why is the film titled as such? Who survives in the film? The Survivalist himself does not survive. Nevertheless, his semen, carried by Milija, does survive, and will eventually bring about new life. The depositing of seeds assumes a double meaning in the film: the Survivalist deposits seeds not only in the earth but also in his lover's womb. In this respect, the seed is no less important than its proprietor, both in the contexts of agriculture and fecundity. The seed is no less important since it guarantees the succession of life even after its proprietor is long gone.

The term 'survival' should thus be thought of not only in the context of the short term, but also in the context of the long run: survival is not only about ensuring the survival of the current generation, but also, and even more so, it is about ensuring the survival of the next generation. In this respect, the Survivalist's vision did bear fruit. Although he himself did not survive, his child did. This argument sheds light on the 'seed' metaphor: man should not only foster his own existence, but also the continuation of human existence in the future, even in the event he himself is no longer among the living.

The 'seed' metaphor leads us directly to the renowned Aristotelian distinction between potentiality and actuality.⁸ Existence should not be thought of only in terms of actuality; that is, what is in the present, but also in terms of potentiality (what will be in the future). Ensuring potential existence, which takes place in the future, is no less important than ensuring actual existence that's taking place in the present.

In this respect, the post-industrial existence of the Survivalist stands in

stark contrast to that of industrial society, which consecrates the actual existence in the present while ignoring potential existence in the future. This is precisely the source of the inevitable catastrophe that has befallen it: the consumption of fuel is a direct outcome of consecrating the present at the expense of the future. Industrial society sacrifices the future for the sake of the present, whereas the Survivalist sacrifices the present, that is, his own existence, for the sake of the future, that is, for the existence of his yet-to-be-born child.

This also shows a shift of balance between the individual and the species: industrial society consumes resources for the sake of the evergrowing happiness of the individual at the expense of care for the future existence of the species as a whole. Whereas the Survivalist prefers the care of the species as a whole at the expense of the care for the individual, as his self-sacrifice ensures the continuation of the existence of the species.

One could therefore interpret the Survivalist's self-sacrifice as manifesting an ethical stance amid a post-catastrophic world. *The Survivalist* presents a critique of industrial society, whose sole concern for its present existence engenders its failure to envision its future, bringing our species to the verge of extinction. The preference of the present over the future thus goes hand in hand with the preference of the existence of individuals over the existence of our species.

This critique suits the current global state of affairs; that is, the fostering of hedonistic lifestyles amid capitalist societies with evergrowing energy consumptions while ignoring their inevitable ecological consequences. A lack of pollution regulations is accompanied by the continued clearing of rainforests, unregulated fishing industries motivated by sheer lust for profit and Trump's abandonment of the Paris Climate Agreement. Even worse, governments are increasingly denying climate change, which is unfolding nowadays right in front of our eyes. All these are manifestations of forms of existence whose present obsessions ignore our future, thus leading to an inevitable catastrophe that this film aims to warn us about and hopefully prevent.

drorpim@zahav.net.il

NOTES

¹*The Survivalist*, directed by Stephen Fingleton, starring Martin McCann, Mia Goth and Olwen Fouéré.

²It is important to note that the usage of the term 'man' here follows its original Biblical sense as referring to both sexes, female and male alike. See, e.g., 'So God created man in his *own* image, in the im-

age of God created he him; male and female created he them' (King James Version, Genesis 2: 27)

³Marx 1867, 125-163.

⁴Rousseau 1762, 117-118.

⁵Hobbes 1651, 24.

⁶Levinas 1961, 156, 172, 254, 299, 300.

⁷Derrida and Dufourmantelle 1998, 19.

⁸Aristotle 1998, 272-277.

REFERENCES

- Aristotle. 1998. *Metaphysics*. London: Penguin Books. translated by Hugh Lawson-Tancred.
- Derrida, Jacques, and Anne Dufourmantelle. 2000 (1998). *Of Hospitality*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. translated by Rachel Bowlby.
- Hobbes, Thomas. 1983 (1651). *De Cive: The English Version*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. 1969 (1961). *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Dordrecht, NL: Kluwer Academic Publishing. translated by Alphonso Lingis.
- Marx, Karl. 1990 (1867). *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Volume Vol.1. London: Penguin Books. translated by Ben Fowkes.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1979 (1762). *Emile, or On Education*. New York: Basic Books. translated by Allan Bloom.

COPYRIGHT:

© 2021 Dror Pimentel

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Aesthetic Investigations is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Dutch Association of Aesthetics.