

Javier Campos Calvo-Sotelo

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# Apocalypse as Critical Dystopia in Modern Popular Music

## ABSTRACT

The last book of the New Testament has inspired countless narratives and cultural productions. In the realm of popular music, the Apocalypse has been embraced as synonymous with imminent catastrophe, generating a dystopian discourse. As a tool for analysis, the concept of “critical dystopia” has built a useful means of connecting apocalyptic menaces, re-enchantment of the world, and social protest. At the same time, “authenticity” is a sacred dimension within rock, an antidote to commercialism and a key notion of doomsday scenarios. This article has two parts: first, a conceptual review of the state of the questions and debate involved; and second, an exposition of selected songs, followed by a summary of their main traits.

## KEYWORDS

Apocalypse, Popular Music, Critical Dystopia, Authenticity

## BIOGRAPHY

Javier Campos Calvo-Sotelo holds a double degree in History (Autónoma University of Madrid) and Music (Conservatory of Madrid). He earned his Doctorate in Musicology in 2008 (Complutense University of Madrid) and has been part of several research projects on popular music, modern forms of religion, Celtology, and revival; he has specialized also in areas of systematic musicology. His work has been presented in a number of publications and at international conferences.

## INTRODUCTION

The last book of the New Testament has inspired countless narratives and cultural productions, most of them unaware of its complex and metaphorical contents.<sup>1</sup> Apocalypse/apocalyptic has thus become a self-referential category in the collective imagination, a fascinating icon no matter its distance from the

1 I am grateful to Alejandro Campos Presas, anthropologist and a drummer in a metal band, for his valuable help in the study of heavy metal music and religious traits involved.

original. In the realm of popular music and especially after the two world wars, the Apocalypse was passionately embraced as synonymous with imminent catastrophe, generating a mainly dystopian discourse. As a tool for analysis, the concept of “critical dystopia”<sup>2</sup> has provided a useful connection between apocalyptic menaces, re-enchantment of the world, and social protest. Yet “authenticity” is a sacred dimension within rock, an antidote to commercialism and “mainstream” as musical prostitution, very much in biblical style; for this reason, authenticity constitutes a key notion for doomsday scenarios. The connection between apocalypse and authenticity is therefore immediate and natural, with the former the desired and eschatological consummation of the latter’s victory against evil or the forces of falsehood and part of both an aesthetic and a moral universe of personal engagement, highly respected by rock fans. Authenticity becomes revelation of the divine to worshippers and a cathartic projection into the future/salvation.

The volume *The Attraction of Religion*, edited by Jason Slone and James Van Slyke, is founded on the question of why so many people are attracted to religion, which seems to be an evolutionary puzzle dependent on functional adaptations.<sup>3</sup> Since the Enlightenment era, massive secularization and high technology have triggered the abandonment of conventional monotheistic religions, but the human spiritual principle probably remains in new formulas and neo-pagan tendencies to re-significate reality. Currently almost any cultural space can host spontaneous reactions that reify the inherent religious ontology of individuals. Media are constantly circulating the tropes and narratives of popular religion in ways that serve to “deepen an association rather than to comment on religion per se”.<sup>4</sup> Instead of religious language disappearing, it has been diffused, re-appropriated, and heightened through the blending and borrowing of various traditions and practices.<sup>5</sup>

Em McAvan describes the postmodern sacred as never directed toward one religious truth but instead “pasted together from the fragments of spiritual traditions that do have that ontological foundation”.<sup>6</sup> In everyday life there are transformations of a spiritual nature outside the religious sphere: “salvation, or analogues of salvation, are sought, found, or unconsciously implied in the everyday, in the vernacular”.<sup>7</sup> The suggestion that religious forms may belong to ordinary life has already been explored in terms of “implicit religion”, (E. Bailey),

2 Moylan 2000; Swanson 2016.

3 Slone/Van Slyke 2016.

4 Clark 2007, 72–73.

5 Swanson 2016. See Campos 2016.

6 McAvan 2010; emphasis original.

7 Bacon/Dossett/Knowles 2015b, 5.

“invisible religion” (T. Luckmann), “surrogate religion” (R. Robertson), “quasi-religion” (A. Griel and T. Robbins), and “hidden religiosity” (H. Kommers).

In 1516 Thomas More published in Latin his celebrated *Utopia*,<sup>8</sup> which was in fact a socio-political satire. However, the notion of a perfect society is much older, starting with the myth of Eden. In classical Greece the legend of Arcadia was broadly exploited in arts and literature, and Plato wrote the *Republic* as an expression of his social philosophy. Christian theology was extremely dualistic, separating body from soul, with a similar polarity between the human community and the City of God (Augustine of Hippo). The Latin hymn *Dies Irae*, attributed to Thomas of Celano in the thirteenth century and partially inspired by the book of Revelation, described the Last Judgment, with the trumpets summoning souls to the throne of God, where the righteous will be saved and the sinners cast into eternal flames; like many other medieval apocalyptic images, it involved the eschatology of a failed society and its annihilation. The sequels of *Dies Irae* spread over the centuries incorporated into requiem masses (by Mozart, Berlioz, or Verdi), contemporary music by composers like Wagner (*Twilight of the Gods*), Scriabin (*Mysterium*), Ligeti (*Lux Aeterna*), Messiaen (*Quartet for the End of Time*), and Penderecki (*Auschwitz Oratorio*), and other cultured works describing doomsday either in biblical terms or in worldly holocausts.

“Dystopia”, the concept coined by John Stuart Mill in 1868, is omnipresent in current media, where it has become a popular locus for varied cultural formulas and parallel academic interest. *Utopia*, *anti-utopia*, *dystopia*, *eutopia*, *critical dystopia*, and other related terms are generally associated with literature, film, TV series, science fiction, and video games, but are associated much less with music, which is surprising because there are countless musical-dystopian recreations: “[t]he sounds of the Bible are all over popular music, and its influence on that art form is inestimable.”<sup>9</sup>

The fact is that religion seems to return in our times (if it was ever absent), shrouded either in declared neo-pagan rites/beliefs or in unconscious formulas of de-secularization.

[T]he media are nowadays suffused with content that may prime (especially young) people for New Age spirituality – “glossy” spiritual magazines, shows like OPRAH or DR. PHIL, television series like the X-FILES or BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER, and films like STAR WARS, LORD OF THE RINGS and HARRY POTTER may play a major role in opening teenagers up to spirituality, preparing a first introduction to the spiritual milieu.<sup>10</sup>

TV series like DOCTOR WHO (UK 1963–) and GAME OF THRONES (US 2011–2019) somehow build modern polytheistic cosmologies that the audience demand

8 *Dē Optimo Rēpublicae Statu dēque Nova Insula Ūtopia*.

9 Gilmour 2017, 76.

10 Van Otterloo/Aupers/Houtman 2012, 253.

to cover their lack of divinities. Something similar could be said of the cinematographic sagas of THE LORD OF THE RINGS I–III (Peter Jackson, US/UK/NZ 2001–2003), STAR WARS I–VI (George Lucas, US 1977–2005), HARRY POTTER I–VIII (Various Directors, UK 2001–2011), SUPERMAN (Richard Donner, US 1978), BATMAN (Tim Burton, US 1989), and TARZAN (Kevin Lima and Chris Buck, US 1999). Comparable narratives can be found within graphic novels, computer games, and other media; the *homo religious* is still alive and very active.<sup>11</sup>

This article revolves around three key notions: critical dystopia, authenticity, and apocalypse, putting forward their significance and main content within the realm of modern popular music. Especial attention is given to “critical dystopia” because of its relevance for the research.

## APOCALYPSE

*Apocalypse* means “revelation”, not destruction/devastation/catastrophe.<sup>12</sup> Despite this fact, there is no doubt about the weight of biblical-based mythology at present, visible in the “current American enthusiasm for apocalyptic literature.”<sup>13</sup> Robert Geraci puts forward a positive assumption of the apocalypse as an agent of transformation and virtual immortality; believers will expect a catharsis leading to a new and perfect existence.<sup>14</sup> The book of Revelation also involves martyrdom and salvation: “Martyrdom is a prominent feature of the Apocalypse. In fact, *Revelation* contains the earliest depiction of martyrs in a post-mortem state.”<sup>15</sup> The pain-to-glory metamorphosis could be interpreted as a liminal transition in rock musicians who sacrifice themselves (e.g., via drugs) to gain sacred status even if their life is the price, in line with the well-known motto “live fast, die young and leave a pretty corpse”.

Martyrs in Revelation “follow the Lamb wherever he goes” (14:4), and this includes his martyrological [sic] pattern of death, resurrection and glorification. ... The martyrs are also presented as faithful witnesses ... they are redeemed from the dead (14:3) and sit on Christ’s throne (3:22) to reign (20:6) and judge the nations (2:26). In other words, the martyrs do what Christ does. ... As Jesus’ death became a paradigmatic model of discipleship, those who followed his path of suffering and martyrdom came themselves to function in some way as “second Christs”.<sup>16</sup>

11 Campos 2020.

12 Chang 2011.

13 Bendle 2005.

14 Geraci 2010. See Heim 2017.

15 Middleton 2015, 113.

16 Middleton 2015, 114.

The sacrifice of one's life is an irrefutable proof of *authenticity*, as it implies the abandonment of any material power or richness. After dying in full youth under mythicized circumstances, Jimi Hendrix, Janice Joplin, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain, and Amy Winehouse became automatically heroes-saints-subjects of adoration, as the remarkable pilgrimages of followers to their graves evince.

A term related to apocalypse is *apocalypticism*: “the belief that God has revealed the imminent end of the ongoing struggle between good and evil in history”.<sup>17</sup> Sklower approaches apocalypticism as part of the counterculture and integrated by three elements, all of them present in rock music: aesthetic vanguardism, the belief in the capacity of art to change society, and a specific relationship to modern life;<sup>18</sup> the second of these features is crucial to this study. Since the 2000s so-called critical dystopia have actively renewed the production and perception of the modern apocalypse and its surrounding semiological universe.<sup>19</sup>

## CRITICAL DYSTOPIA

“Dystopia” is a two-part term, formed by *dys* (bad) and *topos* (place). Generally, it involves a society that is undesirable and/or frightening, the antonym of *Utopia* (the no-place coined by More as a too-perfect community). “Critical dystopia” is characterized by the possibility of improving the real world and avoiding a material disaster. It is opposed to “classical dystopia”, which describes and criticises – but mostly accepts – a sad fate for humanity. Andrew Feenberg studied dystopia and apocalypse in light of the emergence of “critical consciousness”, addressing “the rise of new doomsday myths inspired by the invention of the atom bomb”.<sup>20</sup> Feenberg was aware of the restrictions of conventional dystopia: “[t]he concept of dystopia implies the impossibility of escape.”<sup>21</sup> Drawing upon the work of political scientist Lyman T. Sargent, Thomas Moylan provided a definition of critical dystopia that is the foundational axis of the notion:

[A] textual mutation that self-reflexively takes on the present system and offers not only astute critiques of the order of things but also explorations of the oppositional spaces and possibilities from which the next round of political activism can derive imaginative sustenance and inspiration.<sup>22</sup>

17 Geraci 2010, 4.

18 Sklower 2014.

19 More nuances on the different dimensions and definitions of apocalypse and dystopia can be found in Ania 2007.

20 Feenberg 1995, 41.

21 Feenberg 1995, 43.

22 Moylan 2000, 15.

In challenging capitalist power and conservative rules Moylan sees hope and not resignation. Common dystopia is characterised by its creative capacity, but it renounces changing the world: “Formally and politically ... the dystopian text refuses a functionalist or reformist perspective.”<sup>23</sup> Moylan establishes a clear separation between the optimism of the 1960s and 1970s, which gave rise to a utopian wave, and the 1980s and 1990s (the Reagan Era), when globalist capitalism flooded the world with inequality and pessimism, causing the return to dystopian narratives. Lorna Jowett assumes critical dystopia as “active hope”; within her perspective the TV series *ANGEL* (US 1999–2004) was not intended “as helping the helpless but as helping the hopeless”.<sup>24</sup> Why did dystopia grow especially in the twentieth century? Two world wars, the arms race, technologies considered as alienating and threatening human freedom, and capitalist excesses had an influence. But especially in the modern apocalyptic discourse, the motive of a third world war is constant, as many protest and rock songs reflect. Hence utopias turned into dystopias, “the product of the terrors of the twentieth century”.<sup>25</sup> In fact, the concepts of utopia and dystopia are inextricably connected: “Utopia functions as *warning* to humankind ... which deliberately reminds us that what is at stake is nothing less than our future itself ... [T]here can be no deliberations on dystopia without regarding utopia”.<sup>26</sup>

Some social and intellectual reactions to the universal threats of humankind are close to critical dystopia, although they take a different perspective, encompassing interrelated meanings and formulas around the fear of massive destruction, with or without biblical reminiscences. *Alternative Salvations*, edited by Hannah Bacon, Wendy Dossett, and Steve Knowles,<sup>27</sup> deals with that trope, distinct from conventional salvation in orthodox religions; this volume stresses – in a theoretical framework of post-Christian spirituality – the opposition between *religious* and *secular* salvation, affirming that the latter is achievable independently of the former. Thomas Coleman and Robert Arrowood also advocate for a secular salvation;<sup>28</sup> their guiding principle is atheistic, relying on the well-known assertion by Paul Kurtz and Edwin Wilson in their 1973 second *Humanist Manifesto*: “no deity will save us; we must save ourselves. We are responsible for what we are and for what we will be.”<sup>29</sup> There is a tight connection between the concepts of secular salvation and critical dystopia, because both

23 Moylan 2000, xii.

24 Jowett 2007, 76.

25 Moylan 2000, xi; Bendle 2005.

26 Farca and Ladevèze 2016, 2–3. Emphasis original.

27 Bacon/Dossett/Knowles 2015a.

28 Coleman/Arrowood 2015.

29 Generic Manifesto of the American Humanist Association, 1973, <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto2/> [accessed 14 September 2019].

struggle for a better world, intending to positively renew social structures and human relationships. But the advocates of secular salvation strongly criticize Christians for their subjugation to the Almighty God, just expecting him to save them. Instead, these authors prefer to focus on the here-and-now: “Does ‘salvation’ denote something that falls into some inherently religious realm? Can it be understood apart from its traditionally theological and vertically transcendent cynosure? The answer, we argue, is: ‘absolutely’.”<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, they assess that forgetting about God would increase the implementation of real solutions to humans’ troubles and injustices; some religious frameworks, they propose, provide an excuse for not taking action to make the world a better place. Caesar Montevécchio separates “biblical apocalyptic” and “secularized apocalyptic”,<sup>31</sup> while Lyman Sargent points out with irony: “[g]iven our real world, who needs dystopias?”<sup>32</sup>. Sargent concludes that “[w]e need the dystopia to remind us that our dystopia could get worse, but we need the eutopia even more to remind us that better, while difficult, is possible”.<sup>33</sup> Modern dystopias are, therefore, revulsive catalysts for societies where protest songs became rather outdated: “the New Left was born from the mood of anti-dystopian resistance”.<sup>34</sup> If critical dystopia presupposes that people should not limit themselves to resignation but instead confront the capitalist system and its excesses, then it constitutes a call to civic activism.

## AUTHENTICITY

In the confusion of values of our times, “authenticity” becomes a moral mandate for many rock followers. Authenticity rests “on two key concepts: originality and trueness”, entailing a quasi-religious faith. Relying upon Walter Benjamin’s notion of “aura” in the contemporary work of art, Bernardo Attias theorizes authenticity as a “spiritual concept”, associated with “cult value”<sup>35</sup> in terms of an overall “mystique of authenticity”.<sup>36</sup> Not surprisingly we live a time with “thirst for the authentic”.<sup>37</sup> Authenticity within rock is tied to a vague, nondenominational human spirituality, not unlike the transcendent qualities

30 Coleman/Arrowood 2015, 12. Around the notion of “secular salvation” several works by Dutch historian Jan N. Bremmer are worth consulting.

31 Montevécchio 2012, 6.

32 Sargent 2013, 10.

33 Sargent 2013, 12. “Eutopia” (from the Greek *eu* [good] and *topos* [place]) means the fair, desirable, and good community, as a real aspiration (in comparison with “utopia” as an unattainable concept).

34 Feenberg 1995, 43.

35 Attias 2016, 133–134.

36 Attias 2016, 136.

37 McCoy 2013, 188.

associated with Western classical music in the nineteenth century. In militant followers it involves a holistic cosmology of life and music and a deep sense of discipline, including hypercritical issues about society as a great lie stemming from globalizing and commercial interests. For this reason, rockers look back to the past (recent as it may be) in search of “lost” authenticity. That is why authenticity is closely related to nostalgia and revival, as well as to the modern reading of the apocalypse that implies a radical metamorphosis of the mechanisms of power, institutions, collective mentality, systems of government, and the like. As stated in the call for papers for the Apocalypse and Authenticity conference held at the University of Hull in July 2017:

A number of media and film narratives propagate a sense of nostalgia and the idea that society needs to return to an (idealized) past if it wants to rediscover its authentic self and renew an authentic way of life. The popularity of such narratives seems to suggest that we long for things we experience as lost, and this experience might indeed drive apocalyptic imaginations: a desire for renewal and return to a nostalgic past that can only be achieved through an apocalyptic event and the collapse of established power structures and economic forces of oppression.<sup>38</sup>

Some celebrated rockers have empowered themselves as Messiahs by elevating their real or imagined authenticity to a transcendent dimension. That is the case for Cliff Richard,<sup>39</sup> comparable to the massive adoration spectacle around Michael Jackson,<sup>40</sup> and the promise land myth in the lyrics of Bruce Springsteen.<sup>41</sup> The Velvet Underground portrayed themselves as “the paragon of authenticity in rock music”,<sup>42</sup> and “their nihilism and despair were coupled with a moralism that sought transcendence”, as can be appreciated in the Velvets’ most controversial song, “Heroin”.<sup>43</sup> Neil Young’s “This Note’s for You” (*This Note’s for You*, 1988) is one of the most openly anti-consumer and pro-authenticity rock songs by such a celebrity, with direct critical allusions to Michael Jackson, Madonna, and several international brands. Young starts by claiming: “Ain’t singing for Pepsi / Ain’t singing for Coke... / This note’s for you”; and in the last verses states: “Don’t want no cash / Don’t need no money / ... I’ve got the real thing / I got the

38 *Apocalypse and Authenticity International Conference*. 11–13 July 2017, University of Hull. Conference of the Theology, Religion and Popular Culture Network.

39 Löbert 2012.

40 Carby 2001.

41 McCarthy 2001.

42 Attias 2016, 131. See Burns 2014.

43 Attias 2016, 142, 138. As it frequently happens, personal life was reportedly different from the public discourse; Attias 2016, 136: “The 1980s saw [Lou Reed] selling scooters for Honda while ‘Walk on the Wild Side’ played; the 1990s saw ‘Venus in Furs’ used somewhat absurdly as the soundtrack for a Dunlop tire commercial; and the 2000s saw him designing a smart-phone app (Dombal).”

real thing, baby.” Within this amalgam of critical, affective, and spiritual proclamations, fans as “believers” will develop a corresponding faith investment, depositing their spiritual disquiet on the singer-as-god that provides the “real” alternative, freeing the follower from the tyranny of consumer society. As stated above, authenticity is the cornerstone of rock culture, a sacred magnitude and the answer to the mainstream as musical corruption, very much in a biblical style.

The contemporary combination of these complex and cross-cultural categories (apocalypse; critical dystopia; authenticity) demands specific study as it has triggered important cultural productions and social resistance concerning the universal fear of a nuclear holocaust. Dystopian popular music plays a notable role in the development and spread of the corresponding narratives calling for civic rebellion, making possible by these means the articulation of a transformed protest song language and promoting a renewed engagement with the spiritual.

## DYSTOPIAN POPULAR MUSIC

Apocalypse actually fits with rock: U2, The Rolling Stones, David Bowie, Bob Dylan, Iron Maiden, REM, The Doors, and Busta Rhymes, among many others, have created relevant songs involving the apocalypse-as-dystopia rhetoric. It is definitely a creative locus for composers and a stable territory for the collective imagination of their followers. The cultural context helps, as nowadays there is a strong scepticism about dogma and priestly hierarchy and the opposite tendency for religious personal ecstasy and new spiritual cultures. Starting in the 1960s “The Beatles replaced (or at least accompanied) baptisms, confirmations and bar-mitzvahs. Discos and dancing were more enticing than devotions.”<sup>44</sup> With the arrival of rap and hip hop in the 1980s, it was clear that “the church’s exclusive rights on the rhetoric of ritual, sacred or otherwise, were over”.<sup>45</sup>

Probably the boomers’ rejection originated as a part of their generational rebellion against their parents’ inherited culture. There are many songs opposed to Christian beliefs and dogmas; others attack the church or the figure of Jesus. Trash metal members burnt churches in Norway in the 1990s. *Aqualung* (Jethro Tull, 1971) inverted the initial terms of Genesis: “In the beginning Man created God; and in the image of Man created he him”. The song “Cathedral” by Crosby, Stills and Nash (CSN, 1977) ran: “Open up the gates of the church and let me out of here / ... So many people have died in the name of Christ / That I can’t believe it all”. And so on. Lennon’s rejection of formal religion had an enormous echo; for him:

44 Marsh 2017, 234.

45 Peddie 2017, 41.

[R]eligion is part of the establishment and its abuses, and he is characteristically blunt when asserting freedom from its control, as heard on John Lennon / *Plastic Ono Band* (1970): “There ain’t no Jesus gonna come/from the sky...” (“I Found Out”); “[They] Keep you doped with religion” (“Working Class Hero”); “I don’t believe in Bible/.../I don’t believe in Jesus” (“God”).<sup>46</sup>

In some cases, the objective was to provoke the audience with irreverence, without greater depth. In others, it was part of marketing strategies, for the menace of doomsday sells well. Importantly, in dystopian rock, devastation is anticipated in present life; hence the urgency of its apocalyptic assertions, together with the countercultural pressure that the realm of rock usually conveys. The goal of demonic rockers was and is to “break on through” regardless of what exists on the other side; hence, “sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll” remains the battle cry for many rockers – from Alice Cooper to Marilyn Manson – who assault Judeo-Christian theology, value-free science, and Western institutions more for the sake of rebellion than anything else.<sup>47</sup>

However, rock has also provided quite a few pro-Christ songs and gestures with positive religious meaning, as can be seen in “Jesus” by the feared underground leader Lou Reed (*The Velvet Underground*, 1969). In the movie *EASY RIDER* (Dennis Hopper, US 1969), an icon of the hippie era, there is a scene of a mass in the commune, completely reverential despite unusual details. In 1970 Larry Norman released *Upon This Rock*, now viewed as the world’s first Christian rock album. Kris Kristofferson’s “Why Me Lord” (*Jesus Was a Capricorn*, 1972) sang: “Help me Jesus, my soul’s in your hand”. Those years also witnessed musicals like *JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR* (Norman Jewison, US 1973) and *GODSPELL* (David Greene, US 1973), which attempted to de-officialise Christianity for youth, building a bridge between the church and counterculture in the figure of a rock-adapted Jesus. “The King of Carrot Flowers Pts. Two & Three” is a love song to Jesus by Neutral Milk Hotel (*In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*, 1998). In 2001 Mick Jagger released the song of gratitude “God Gave Me Everything I Want”. The so-called *U2charist* phenomenon (a Eucharist ceremony based on the music of U2) deserves attention. On 27 August 2014, I attended a metal mass (i.e. a Lutheran mass with heavy metal arrangements) at the Temple Square Church, Helsinki. There are “more semiotically complex or directly challenging pop,” such as:

Madonna’s “Like a Prayer” (*Like a Prayer*, 1989) or Lady Gaga’s “Born This Way” (*Born This Way*, 2011), alongside sometimes darker, if equally contagious and compelling,

46 Gilmour 2017, 67. More nuances on the religious orientation of John Lennon and the countercultural era can be found in Campos 2020.

47 Dunbar 2002.

pop such as Stevie Wonder's "Superstition" (*Talking Book*, 1972), Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean" (*Thriller*, 1982), Donna Summer's "I Feel Love" (*I Remember Yesterday*, 1977) or Abba's mysterious, even melancholic, "The Day Before You Came" (*The Singles: The First Ten Years*, 1982).<sup>48</sup>

Therefore, despite oppositional stances, rock's underlying interest in religion is pervasive: "music of the last fifty or so years constantly draws on language, themes and imagery from the Christian bible".<sup>49</sup> With respect to the Apocalypse, the confluence of the sacred and the profane is captivating for the audience: "Biblical apocalypticism continued to function as an important source of inspiration for many pioneering thrash metal bands, although arguably mostly as a rhetorical device."<sup>50</sup> Marcus Moberg even describes "theatrically 'Satanic' bands such as Venom, Bathory and Mercyful Fate".<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, the wide-ranging genre of heavy metal music can be assumed to a large extent to be a culture of critical dystopia: "[T]he dystopian elements in metal music are not merely or necessarily a sonic celebration of disaster. Rather, metal music's fascination with dystopian imagery is often critical in intent."<sup>52</sup>

The combination of thrash metal and dystopia configures an educational language in its "abrasive tone and dystopian language" that "attacks norms, religion, the economic and political status quo, and social injustice".<sup>53</sup> The correlation is automatic: "heavy metal's association with religion ... has developed into a defining characteristic of the genre as a whole".<sup>54</sup> However, metal is prone to a message of hope: "what seems like rejection, alienation, or nihilism" may be more productively viewed as "an attempt to create an alternative identity".<sup>55</sup> In metal music, dystopia prevails over nihilism. In fact, nihilism is the opposite pole of critical dystopia, just as metal dismisses utopia.

## DYSTOPIAN SONGS SELECTION

This section considers a selection of 18 songs of interest for this study, which are presented in chronological order. There is a huge amount of other music that deserves attention from the perspective of popular culture and apoca-

48 Marsh 2017, 235.

49 Gilmour 2017, 67.

50 Moberg 2017, 225.

51 Moberg 2017, 226. The names of some thrash metal main bands are expressive: Anthrax, Annihilator, Artillery, Carnivore, Celtic Frost, Death, Deicide, Angel, Destruction, Exodus, Havok, Megadeth, Metal Church, Nuclear Assault, Overkill, Powermad, Savatage, Sepultura, Sodom, and Suicidal Tendencies.

52 Taylor 2006, i.

53 Buckland 2016, 145.

54 Moberg 2017, 223.

55 Walser 1993, xvii.

lypse research, but that selected conveys a special meaning or formal traits. The relevance of the artist(s) has been also taken into account, as well some equitable chronological distribution. Two broad musical-literary categories can be identified: songs that specifically mention the Apocalypse (or biblical images of destruction) and songs with no explicit religious/apocalyptic references but that depict catastrophes like a nuclear war. In the latter the religious dimension can be uncertain. With respect to critical dystopia, some songs clearly belong to the category; a few do not, which makes them of interest as contrasting repertoire. In a third group the boundaries between classical and critical dystopia are blurred, as the conceptual differences exist alongside coincidences.

Bob Dylan has been constantly attached to religious themes, particularly biblical. His conversion process, his visit to Pope John Paul II, his gospel albums, and some of his songs are undeniable proofs of a personal approach to (Christian) religion. “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” (A-1)<sup>56</sup> was published shortly before the Cuban Missile Crisis; the lyrics are concerned with the tension of those years. It is a metaphorical and poetic song, where the “rain” is an allusion to a world war. However, the meaning beyond the words has remained a hymn against injustice and war. Some verses contain accusations in typically Dylanesque language: “I saw ten thousand talkers whose tongues were all broken / I saw guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children ... / Heard one person starve, I heard many people laughin”. Other famous dystopian and authenticity-committed songs by Dylan are “All Along the Watchtower” (later covered by Jimi Hendrix), and “Masters of War”, and even more so, “The Groom’s Still Waiting at the Altar” (*Shot of Love*, 1981), perhaps the scariest of all Dylan apocalypse songs. The lyrics include: “seen the massacre of the innocent ... / They’re killing nuns and soldiers”. In *Tempest* (2012) Dylan devoted the homonymous song to the Titanic shipwreck, with notable apocalyptic connotations. Nonetheless, Dylan’s dystopia usually leaves a margin for salvation:

*Tempest* is full of violence and bloodshed but there is possibly a hint of optimism in Dylan’s *Titanic* song as well. Humanity bobs along the chaotic sea often unmindful of the prophets’ warnings but not all is lost. Revelation anticipates a time when the sea, John’s symbol of chaos, will be no more (21.1).<sup>57</sup>

“The End” (A-2) by The Doors was conceived as the farewell to a girlfriend of Jim Morrison’s, but because of its use at the beginning of the film *APOCALYPSE NOW* (Francis Ford Coppola, US 1979)<sup>58</sup> it became an icon of dystopian rock. The music is disturbing, in oriental style; just when the voice starts to sing, the screen shows a

56 Hereafter the indication (A-x) means Annex and the number of the song there, with its main data.

57 Gilmour 2017, 71.

58 Initial scene on: <https://bit.ly/2LU6fGr> [accessed 12 June 2018].

series of napalm explosions in the jungle of Vietnam. The contrast between Morrison's melancholic voice and the sudden violence of the bombs is daunting. The lyrics fit perfectly with the dystopian motifs that Coppola was looking for in his complex examination of the Vietnam War. In the scene an anguished existentialism prevails: "This is the end, beautiful friend / ... I'll never look into your eyes, again".

David Bowie has been an assiduous composer of apocalyptic-themed music like "Five Years" (*The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, 1972). "As the World Falls Down" (from the film *LABYRINTH*, Jim Henson, UK/US 1986), and the late "Black Star" (*Black Star*, 2015) are other interesting creations. "Future Legend" (*Diamond dogs*, 1974. A-3) lasts barely one minute; it begins with a distorted howl and features Bowie's spoken-word vision of a post-apocalyptic Manhattan, now renamed Hunger City, comparing the humanoid inhabitants to "packs of dogs". "Future Legend / 1984" is based on Orwell's 1984, a true paradigm of dystopian literature. The two-part song opens the album, and although lacking specifically apocalyptic content, it evinces the dystopian denunciation and positioning of Bowie. Some verses reveal a recreation of the aesthetics of horror: "And in the death, as the last few corpses lay rotting on the slimy thoroughfare... Fleas the size of rats sucked on rats the size of cats, ..." In the following "1984" Bowie sings: "Beware the savage jaw / Of 1984 ... / They'll split your pretty cranium / ... tomorrow's never there". With these early songs Bowie enlarged the list of classical dystopias, incisive in their complaints about chaos and anarchy, but rather resigned to their effects.

"London Calling" (A-4) is the opening song of the homonymous double LP released by The Clash in 1979. The list of horrors in the song is outstanding, describing awful man-made destruction and societal breakdown in marching beat: "London calling upon the zombies of death / ... A nuclear era... London is drowning". With its stomping rhythm and reiterative ostinato bassline, "London Calling" embodies the bleakest outlook upon the future. The official video clip emphasizes a dark and rainy atmosphere. Lyrics attack the Beatles popularity echoed by sound-alike bands in late 1970s ("that phoney Beatlemania") in an implicit declaration of authenticity, as the Beatles belonged to mainstream in the punk territory. Punk is dystopian and nihilistic in essence; caustic statements stem from the particular aesthetics of the genre, intended to express horror and nausea, not to change the world. As Cyrus Shahan stated in his study of this genre in Germany: "German punk positioned itself in opposition to '1968'", thus creating a "third space" in the generational struggle against the establishment. Punk's "no future" mantra, "was not about resignation but rejection, rejection of the future promised by failures of the past at the violent moment of punk's birth".<sup>59</sup> However, the "subversive, counter-discursive, and

59 Shahan 2011: 371.

anti-institutional” character of punk music knew “only one activity: the erasure of all traces of our times... calling only for destruction (including its own)”.<sup>60</sup> Hence, “London Calling” – as well as many other analogous punk songs – is a clear representative of pre-critical dystopia.

In the 1980s videos routinely showed the images and sounds of bombs and people screaming. In R. E. M.’s “It’s the End of the World as We Know It” (A-5), the band tackles typical apocalyptic imagery, with vibrating juxtaposition of the upbeat melody and Michael Stipe’s sharp irony: “It’s the end of the world... / And I feel fine”. The joyful tone of the song together with the visual narration of a devastated boy who visits the ruins of his parental home and cries as he hugs the portrait of his father completes the contrast, emotionally burdening the spectator. Irony is used effectively from the first verse: “That’s great, it starts with an earthquake”. But above all there is the warning: “Save yourself... / It’s the end of the world as we know it”.

Morrissey released “Everyday is like Sunday” (A-6) as the story of a survivor of a nuclear holocaust who even desires to have died: “How I dearly wish I was not here / In the seaside town / that they forgot to bomb / ... Come – nuclear bomb!”. The lyrics are inspired by Nevil Shute’s post-apocalyptic novel *On the Beach* (1957), which describes a group of people waiting for deadly radiation in Melbourne, Australia, in the aftermath of a nuclear war. Morrissey uses a surprisingly light-spirited orchestral arrangement, perhaps to lend a layer of causticness to the bleak scenario. Despite the apparent renunciation of living, this song – and its official video clip – is one of the first representatives of critical dystopia within popular music: the main character (a young girl) does not accept the de-humanized culture that surrounds her and sends critical explicit messages, like the ecological poster she writes: “Meat is murder”. She also attacks two old canting women. It is a militant-protest song, calling for rebellion and action, in search of a different society and future.

Very different is the case of “The Earth Died Screaming”, by Tom Waits (A-7). The official video clip was shot in black-and-white, perhaps to stress the two opposite-colour extremes as symbols of life and death, of good and evil. The refrain is also based in the opposition of destruction and love, in a combination comparable to the final scene of 1964 Kubrick’s film *DR. STRANGELOVE* (UK/US), one of the greatest icons of dystopian films;<sup>61</sup> “Well, the earth died screaming / While I lay dreaming / Dreaming of you”. However, the outstanding feature of Waits’ performance is his guttural and deep voice tone, violently distorted, accompanied by mechanical and disquieting percussion. From a formal point of view, this is one of the songs that pays more attention to the sound parameters of the apocalypse, at least as a musician may imagine them.

60 Shahan 2011: 374–375. See Frith 1995.

61 Another dystopian film directed by Kubrick, *A CLOCKWORK ORANGE* (UK/US 1971), after Anthony Burgess’ 1962 novel of the same title, is a foremost representative of dystopian cinema. Its soundtrack, by Wendy Carlos, includes striking electronic arrangements of classical pieces.

Despite the end of the Cold War with the meaningful demolition of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the 1990s witnessed an increase of the “millennial effect”, which triggered a renewal in the audio-visual language of dystopian cultures.<sup>62</sup> 1998 disaster movies *ARMAGEDDON* (Michael Bay, US) and *DEEP IMPACT* (Mimi Leder, US) had an influence on the audience. Heavy metal participation on this topic became assiduous, with interesting creations and a controversial presence in certain narratives and actions. Trash metal, black metal, dead metal, and other heavy genres challenged modern societies and ways of life, devoting significant attention to apocalyptic matters in their oppositional and unromantic style, focusing on imminent nuclear war and human extermination. Authenticity was by far their most worshipped dogma. The Finnish band *Apocalyptica*, created in 1992, is an interesting example. It consists of four cellists with solid classical formation, a striking ensemble for a metal band. In their record *Inquisition Symphony* (1998), the first track, entitled “Harmageddon” (A–8), describes the battle of the end of history. Because the music is purely instrumental, the piece is full of contrasts and sonic effects, keeping the listener constantly alert; the timbral resources of such a low-pitched instrument as the cello is particularly hypnotic. In the official video, a gigantic pendulum together with the image of the four performers at different ages recall periodically the inexorable passage of time.

Busta Rhymes has performed lively fast-rapping that is fixated on the apocalypse. The front cover of his album *Extinction Level Event: The Final World Front* (1998) shows New York City in flames, the impact of an asteroid. However, its main song is “Extinction Level Event (The Song of Salvation)” (A–9), whose refrain repeats: “Bomb threat to the whole world... / Check it out yo... / I be the closest thing to the next / Like the pain and sufferin’ of about a million deaths”. War is the real threat and the song a means of warning people when there is still time to join forces. The second title is meaningful: “song of salvation”, an argument that the singer repeats as a call to action, to override the “extinction level event”. The most hopeful and unifying verses are at the end, very much in critical-dystopia style: “now sing the song of salvation... / the dawn of global emergency... / the moment where we all come together as one unison... / and completely dominate all global events”. For these reasons, this “song of salvation” is one of the most outstanding creations within the category of popular music critical dystopia. It was enthusiastically received by Rhymes’ followers. As is usual in rap music, all the weight of the song relies upon the lyrics, as the musical structure is straightforward.

The third song selected from the dystopian year of 1998 is “Millennium” (A–10), by Robbie Williams, which tackles the expected end of the world at the turn of the millennium. The cover of the album is similar to that of Busta Rhymes dis-

62 Berger 2000; Knickerbocker 2010.

cussed above; in this case Williams is surrounded by flames as he flees the bomb blast terrified. Without any doubt the new millennium was a good pretext for apocalyptic discourse. Williams sings of a superficial society that “lives for liposuction” and will “overdose for Christmas” but “give it up for Lent”, warning of our demise due to moral collapse. However, he lampoons the lux culture that some have proposed helped make him into an international music star. So, he might fall within what he attacks, evidence of the opportunistic dimension of dystopian producers. The song is a well-constructed piece from mainstream pop-rock, with a catchy refrain and Williams himself playing the character of a wealthy banal womaniser.

After the September 11 attacks in 2001, social fears expanded on renewed grounds, frequently turning back to the desolation of the Cold War years. Blackalicious’ rap duet “Sky is Falling” (A-11) took the emblematic title of three films (two of them released in 2000), several novels and two music albums. It is a dystopian rap, with some racial allusions, lamenting the state of a world morally corrupt from top to bottom. The song unambiguously invokes the book of Revelation, but above all warns of a pervasive ethical breakdown that is preparing the way for worse times to come. The refrain sounds cheerful and almost naive while the lyrics are gloomy, in a typical contrast of the biblical-dystopian genre. Some verses run: “The sky is falling, life is appalling / And death is lurking, niggaz killing each other”. “Stay strong” is the final verse and contains the only support given to the listener. The recommended video clip (see A-11) fuses uninterruptedly natural and human violence, suggesting a full chaos. It is not an official Blackalicious release, but a montage by the YouTuber SilentRockProduction (in 2010), which I have chosen because it reveals the tensions and fears experienced by the audience in their assumption and re-elaboration of dystopian songs.

Mr. Lif’s “Earthcrusher” (A-12) was released both in *I Phantom* (Definitive Jux, 2002) and as a live version in *Live at the Middle East* (Ozone music, same year). It is a bitterly mocking song: “At last / the day of the blast / disaster / welcome to the hereafter”, as if the destruction of the world was a festive event. Mr. Lif tackles humans’ headlong demise within a political context, lamenting nuclear proliferation. After 3’15” (studio recording) we hear people crying, bombs and shots, and a devastated female voice crying, “Oh my God”. This song is another hypercritical prophecy possibly influenced by the 2001 terrorist attacks; the message conveyed becomes highly pessimistic and it has an emphasis on determined sound effects but, for the same reasons, is destined to trigger social reactions.

One year later, the rock band Muse published “Apocalypse Please” (A-13), which included grim registers of an organ, a symbol of the final judgment. As in previous songs cited in this list, some elements were ironical and therefore provocative, like the title itself. Frontman Matthew Bellamy announced, “this is

the end of the world”, surrounded by powerful low-pitched drums, piano, and guitars/bass. The sonority is dramatic, in F sharp minor, with intense dynamics, an anguished character, and sounding as a farewell. At the beginning of the third millennium, popular music performers were singing the final destruction of the world more than ever, almost demanding it. In “Apocalypse Please” the lyrics are expressive and crystal clear, with a desolated refrain: “Declare this an emergency / Come on and spread a sense of urgency / And pull us through / ... / This is the end / Of the world”.

U2 were able to bring some light to this overwhelmed scenario.<sup>63</sup> “Yahweh” (A–14) is the last song of *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb* (2004). It constitutes an open call to Jews, Arabs and Christians to build dialogue in peace, to look for solutions, and to love each other in evangelical terms; it must be located within the specific context of those years. The refrain directly addresses God, with the Hebrew – Old Testament – name (universal for several religions): “Yahweh, Yahweh / Always pain before a child is born / ... Still, I’m waiting for the dawn”. Thus, there is faith in God and hope, although the song wonders why suffering is an unavoidable stage before salvation. The response involves the fact that humans cannot just wait and hope; action is demanded: “Take these hands / Teach them what to carry / Take these hands / Don’t make a fist” (similar lyrics for “mouth” and “soul”). Importantly, the song completes an album that belongs in essence to critical dystopia. U2 had composed a number of apocalyptic songs (end-of-the-world focused) over three decades, like “Until the End of the World” (*Achtung Baby*, 1991), “The Wanderer” (*Zooropa*, 1993), and “Last Night on Earth” (*Pop*, 1997). However, *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb* (2004) and *No Line on the Horizon* (2009) evinced a turn towards the here-and-now, challenging the audience to fight for a better world.

Iron Maiden included “Brighter than a Thousand Suns” in the meaningful album *A Matter of Life and Death* (2006. A–15). As is typical of metal, the lyrics are both explicit and full of tragic resonances: “Minute warning of the missile fall / Take a look at your last day”. The contradiction that Michael Gilmour locates in this song evinces the crossroads of critical values and religious tensions that many people experience in extreme rock: Iron Maiden’s “Brighter than a Thousand Suns” ... opens with a first-person plural confession (“We are not the sons of God”) and closes with the sinners’ prayer (“Holy Father we have sinned”).<sup>64</sup>

The song is also relevant because of its treatment of the apocalyptic ethos, showing how heavy rock tends to adopt biblical motifs, but gravitated towards a present reality. Human nuclear war more than any divine punishment hangs

63 The religious path of U2 cannot be summarized here, despite its importance. About their deeply religious contents see Calhoun (2018) and Roberts (2018). E. g., such a popular song as “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” (1987) is a true Christian anthem.

64 Gilmour 2017, 74.

like the sword of Damocles over humanity. Thus, the need to react becomes imperative, besides all biblical connotations:

We also find in “Brighter than a Thousand Suns” a possible connection between the image of nations rising (Jesus) and the powers of darkness described in Revelation when the songwriters introduce the terms “hate”, “fury” and “Satan”. The latter (Rev. 12.9) comes to the earth full of rage. ... It also comes as no surprise to those reading Revelation (or listening to Maiden’s “Number of the Beast”, for that matter) that the Devil’s “time is short” (Rev. 12.12), so once again we find the songwriters aligning present-day enemies.<sup>65</sup>

By these means, heavy music may be aligned, surprisingly, with conventional morality and point toward positive solutions:

[E]ven with its carnivalesque reversal of values, heavy metal is often a conservative art form, relying on a clear demarcation of good and evil, God and the Devil. ... the stress on dark elements in biblical apocalyptic contribute to a forceful and emotively charged call for peace.<sup>66</sup>

One of the most purely classical-apocalyptic songs ever composed is “My Apocalypse” (Metallica, 2008. A–16). Metallica musically recreates the aesthetics of destruction and horror, with violent drums and guitars, crushing beat, and an aggressive voice singing: “Hard explosive / ... Feel thy name extermination / Desecrating, hail of fire”. Once more an unofficial video clip is recommended as a visual reference for the song (elaborated by Jankler TV in 2014) as it shows the iconography and fears that the audience were associating with dystopian music. It consists of brutal sequences from the Second World War. In general, music in the years after the terrorist attacks in 2001 evinces a strong concern, e.g., Jay Sean’s “2012 (It Ain’t The End)” (*So High*, Japan Edition, 2012) displayed a resigned desolation and hopelessness with no option for escape, advocating for a hedonistic night before the disaster. This music was to some extent a regression to older stages of dystopia, warning the audience of a nuclear end but seemingly impotent, unable to impede it. Quite possibly the economic decline of the Great Recession, in the late 2000s and onwards, also exerted an influence in this relapse into pessimism: “The economic downturn commencing in late 2008 generated predictions that ranged from the apocalyptic to the sanguine, across all sectors”.<sup>67</sup>

“Apocalypse Dreams” by Tame Impala (2012. A–17) somehow re-categorised dystopia in critical-constructive terms, fostering a sense of shared group mem-

65 Gilmour 2017, 75.

66 Gilmour 2017, 75.

67 Felton et al 2010, 619.

bership and identity. The Australian psychedelic rock band straightforwardly appealed to the audience's capacity to react, encouraging a collective response: "Are you too terrified to try your best? ... / Do you really live without the fear? ... / On and on we all go / Into another morning". The message of hopefulness is clear in the initial words: "This could be the day that we push through / It could be the day that all our dreams come true", like daydreams that are more real than real life, very much in the style of a psychedelic song.

This selection ends with "Sky's Grey" (A-18), from 2017, by the Canadian band Destroyer. It proves that the apocalyptic narrative is still very present in Western culture. Lyrics are both accusing and warning but, interestingly, they address the self – and by extension the listener – more than abstract social systems and established orders: "Bombs in the city, plays in the sticks / Should've seen it coming / Should've taken care / Should've tried pretending that anything was there". The voice is a disturbing whisper, bass frequencies prevail, and a dark acoustic atmosphere pervades the whole performance. The return to acoustic instruments, following a simple harmonic cycle in D major (I-VI-IV), is interesting.

Many other songs could increase the list, including several by The Rolling Stones:

The Stones, with raucous voice and syncopated beats, employed Dionysian shock to expose the dark side of nearly everything. They pronounced the inevitability of nuclear destruction in "Gimme Shelter" and the pleasure and power of drug addiction in "Sister Morphine." They solicited unbounded hedonism in "Some Girls," conveyed the inevitability of alienation in human relations ("Angie"), pronounced the impossibility of cosmic identity ("2,000 Light Years from Home"), vindicated Lucifer ("Sympathy for the Devil"), and promoted violent revolution ("Street Fighting Man").<sup>68</sup>

"Bad Moon Rising" (Creedence Clearwater Revival, 1969) embodied the principle of contrast between happy music and pessimistic lyrics. The verse "I hope you're quite prepared to die" revealed the acceptance of the outcome. However, it was also a call to reaction, as in classical dystopia the appeal to fight is always present. Peter Gabriel's "Here Comes the Flood" (*Peter Gabriel*, 1977) lamented the end of days: "Drink up, dreamers, you're running dry / ... We'll say goodbye to flesh and blood". Prince ("1999", 1982); Johnny Cash ("The Man Comes Around", 2002); and Alice Cooper ("The Last Man on Earth", 2011) also composed dystopian music. Critical dystopia is visible in songs like "Microphones in the Trees" by Silver Mt. Zion (*Pretty Little Lightning Paw*, 2004), which begins by poetically detailing the oppressive regimes of surveillance to which we are subjected, before opening up into a refrain of utopian hope that, when

68 Dunbar 2002.

played live, precedes an ecstatic instrumental climax: “Don’t! Give! Up! / Don’t! Give! In! / Our time will come / ’cause we are the flood”. The song is in E-Flat minor, following a well-known harmonic ostinato led by the violin. Its sound atmosphere is oppressive. Non-anglophone countries also participate in the production of dystopian music. For example, Spanish heavy metal bands have contributed doomsday songs and records, as in the case of Obús’ “Va a estallar el obús” (The obus is going to explode. *Prepárate*, 1981), Omission’s “Eve of an end” (*The Unholiest of Them*, 2016), and El Mago de Oz’s album *Ira Dei* (2019).

Currently, dystopia still works and sells within the music industry. To cite but a few more examples, St Vincent’s “The Apocalypse Song” (*Marry Me*, 2007) sings, “All your praying moments amount to just one breath”, in a direct biblical reference to the brevity of life in the grand scheme. The song “Radioactive” by Imagine Dragons (*Night Visions*, 2012) is completely apocalyptic. American progressive metal band Dream Theatre released *The Astonishing* in 2016, focusing explicitly on dystopia; it consists of a science-fiction narration structured as a “rock opera”.

## TRAITS OF DYSTOPIAN SONGS

There are certain features that arise repeatedly in either the verbal or the formal narratives of the songs analysed. Most of them can be categorised within the broad concept of “dystopia”, while some belong specifically to the realm of “critical dystopia”.

Contextual oscillations are frequent, as in the case of “millennialism”: there is a concentration of apocalyptic songs in the last years of the twentieth century, when the millennium effect became fascinating. Another watershed was provided by the 2001 attacks in New York City, indirectly echoed in popular music; as a consequence, critical dystopia might have lost strength with the sense of universal vulnerability. A third negative wave stems from the recent Great Recession, which has had a deep economic and sociological impact worldwide. In all cases it is an *urban* apocalypse, or an apocalypse in the city: in dystopian rock the city is the epicentre of disaster, and sometimes salvation consists of sheltering in nature, in a well-known exercise of contemporary pastoralism. And it takes place in the present, it is an apocalypse now, which stresses the urgency of the call: in rock culture, devastation happens in this life; most songs warn of *immediate* disaster (or disaster already accomplished).

The accompanying iconography is expressive, visible on album images and video clips, as with the example of Busta Rhymes’ cover of his 1998 release *Extinction Level Event*, and Robbie Williams’ cover of *Millennium* the same year. The film-making quality in the videos is uneven, with some of them consisting of a simple and uncritical accumulation of disaster images, while others constitute a well-assembled short that develops an interesting plot in worthwhile

audio-visual combinations. These videos become powerful educational resources because of their popularity and dissemination capacity. Often aesthetic vanguardism focuses on eschatology/devastation, recreating (fascinated by?) terror/sinister images (for example, David Bowie, in the gloomy video composition, music, and lyrics of “Future Legend”). A key visual-literary element that permeates all this music is darkness, normally preceded by the blinding light of missiles (like in Iron Maiden’s “Brighter than a Thousand Suns”). Afterwards, darkness and silence dominate the scenario, sealing the triumph of death. Darkness is comparable to a visual silence, implying the end of colours, music, and life; it is described in the book of Revelation as a powerful weapon that releases the forces of evil.

Contrast is one of the main narrative resources within dystopia. In some songs, horror, death, hatred, devastation, bombs, and screaming are combined with love/nostalgic evocations of life, as happens in Tom Waits’ refrain from “The Earth Died Screaming”. Sometimes contrast turns into bitter irony, like in REM’s “This Is the End of the World”, where a happy melody sings, “And I feel fine”. Or even mockery: “welcome to the hereafter” (Mr. Lif, “Earthcrusher”) and the album *Smile, It’s the End of the World*, by Hawk Nelson (2006). An extreme case is the celebration of war, as in Morrissey’s refrain “Come—nuclear bomb!”. Irony becomes provocation, to galvanize the listener’s conscience and incite action, very much in the spirit of critical dystopia.

Striking titles are used to attract attention: “1984”, “Sky is Falling”, and “Earthcrusher” are clear examples (see Annex). Some words recur in titles and lyrics of apocalyptic orientation, for example, “End”, “Sky”, “Doom”, and “Apocalypse”; but surprisingly the most common is “World”, involving the destruction of the whole earth in the catastrophe. This obsession may reveal in addition a call for universal twinning, which is logical because the life of everyone is at stake. The outcome is somehow an ideological unison regardless of the musical genre (punk, rap, pop, rock, heavy metal, and psychedelia) and associated aesthetics, as a fundamental agreement about peace prevails. Another key locution is “The end”, which becomes an absolute in itself, entailing the annihilation of the world. “Authenticity” is a moral imperative but rarely uttered; the mere fact a menace such as the end of the world is addressed elevates the singer and the song to a committed dimension, above normal music. Moreover, the ordinary treatment of the notion focuses to a larger extent on criticising “inauthenticity”, understood as a sacrilege due to spurious grounds and leading to a fatal destiny.

Some verses are especially sharp/accusing, like those by Bob Dylan in “A Hard Rain’s A-gonna Fall”: “the executioner’s face is always well hidden”. An imperative tone is another common feature, with many direct orders to the listener that are reminiscent of military discipline: “do”, “go”, “hide”, “beware”, “stay

strong”, “check it out”, and others. The sense of alarm is overwhelming, transmitting fear, anxiety, and horror (in lyrics, sounds, and images), aiming by these means to trigger a critical reaction from the listeners.

Interestingly, it is rare to hear mention of an afterlife; affection and religious/hopeful emotions disappear in this music. The promise of redemption (liberation from slavery) is, nonetheless, implicit within critical dystopia as the last stage, after action. In dystopian music God is barely mentioned; “religious” rock is rare. Rock takes the semiology from the apocalypse but discards spiritual and theological dogmas. Within neo-apocalyptic cultures there is no resident theology that might challenge others as contradictory or false, and they lack a corpus of doctrinal contents, rites, and obligations.

The musical parameters of many of the songs commented upon above have parallels with standard rock songs, emphasizing lyrics via diverse resources. Broadly speaking the acoustic effects available for dystopian songs are similar to those used in terror and war movie soundtracks: voices screaming, the thunder of bombs, and sudden outbreaks. Other recurring means are minor and diminished seventh chords and also gloomy melodies. The leading voice may whisper or roar, transmitting a specific emotion. Dissonances appear occasionally, shocking the listener, generally in combination with visual effects in the video. Powerful low-pitched sounds dominate, in an interesting association between this sound parameter and devastation. Perhaps this is why it is difficult to find apocalyptic music in female voices. A clear example is the Finnish band Apocalyptica, which we met above; it is integrated by four violoncellos, without a single violin or any other lighter instrument.

Most of these traits stem from the apocalyptic narrative that spread massively throughout the Cold War, but they come also from rock music’s need to reinvent itself periodically and find new aesthetic channels of expression that maintain or increase its social impact. The coalescence of both causal scenarios has resulted in a fertile production, as we have seen in this study.

## CONCLUSIONS

Critical dystopia in music is a catalyst for social awareness and cohesive progress in the face of a worrying future. It endorses activist citizenship and political resistance against destruction-apocalypse, in place of passive capitulation. Its foothold is collective fear, which is re-negotiated as a social force that then counters passive dystopia.

The conventional opposition between classical and critical dystopia has been called into question because almost all dystopias can be assumed to be critical dystopias, as they encompass strong allegations about the potential dangers of war/abuses of human rights. The formulation alone can call for a reaction by

the audience, no matter the resignation that the message may convey. However, critical dystopia, as analysed in this article, goes a step further by emphasising the need for active rebellion and faith in a better future (salvation). An additional hypothesis of this article is that *critical dystopia* in popular music may have taken over from *protest song*, a genre that had decayed considerably after the countercultural era. The educational slant of dystopian songs must be emphasised, intended to alert their audience and make people “learn” what they should think and how they should act, including even who to vote for. They form pedagogical narrations shrouded by the attractive language of popular music.

Dystopian rock is neither a religion nor the result of a formal theological system. It lacks a corpus of unified dogmas and objectives. The apocalypse in rock is the fear of a nuclear war (or comparable environmental disaster), but not of a fatal destiny executed by God. However, from a religious perspective, rock music plays a key sociological function in this contemporary dialectic, re-enchanting and de-secularising the world by means of the semiological recreation of Apocalypse and other fantastic realms. In this interpretive context devastation acts as a metaphor for punishment for social sins, generating a cultural destiny. Apocalypse also involves revelation-as-salvation, the final struggle between good and evil, the end of history, and the last rite of passage of humanity.

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- THE LORD OF THE RINGS I–III (Peter Jackson, US/UK/NZ 2001–2003).
- X-FILES (Created by: Chris Carter, Fox, US 1993–2018).

# ANNEX

Ref.	Title	Performer(s)	Album	Record label	Year	Video website
A-1	A hard rain's a-gonna fall	Bob Dylan	The Freewheelin'	Columbia (CL 1986)	1963	<a href="https://bit.ly/2CGmsox">https://bit.ly/2CGmsox</a>
A-2	The end	The Doors	The Doors	Elektra (EKS-74007)	1967	<a href="https://bit.ly/2n4Rlir">https://bit.ly/2n4Rlir</a>
A-3	Future legend/1984	David Bowie	Diamond Dogs	RCA (APL1-0576)	1974	<a href="https://bit.ly/22VYfo1">https://bit.ly/22VYfo1</a>
A-4	London calling	The Clash	London Calling	CBS (CBS 88478)	1979	<a href="https://bit.ly/1kFur7I">https://bit.ly/1kFur7I</a>
A-5	It's the end of the world as we know it	REM	Document	I.R.S. Records (IRS-42059)	1987	<a href="https://bit.ly/2k8AqaG">https://bit.ly/2k8AqaG</a>
A-6	Everyday is like Sunday	Morrissey	Viva Hate	His Master's Voice (CSD 3787)	1988	<a href="https://bit.ly/Y0PagI">https://bit.ly/Y0PagI</a>
A-7	The earth died screaming	Tom Waits	Bone Machine	Island Records (314-512 580-2)	1992	<a href="https://bit.ly/2v9SfOz">https://bit.ly/2v9SfOz</a>
A-8	Harmageddon	Apocalyptica	Inquisition Symphony	Mercury (558 300-2)	1998	<a href="https://bit.ly/1UDbzX">https://bit.ly/1UDbzX</a>
A-9	The song of salvation	Busta Rhymes	Extinction Level Event	Elektra (62211-2)	1998	<a href="https://bit.ly/2LUvPui">https://bit.ly/2LUvPui</a>
A-10	Millennium	Robbie Williams	I've Been Expecting You	Chrysalis (497 8372)	1998	<a href="https://bit.ly/1nLHnIQ">https://bit.ly/1nLHnIQ</a>
A-11	Sky is falling	Blackalicious	Blazing Arrow	MCA Records (088 112 806-2)	2002	<a href="https://bit.ly/2KkrQ5a">https://bit.ly/2KkrQ5a</a>
A-12	Earthcrusher	Mr. Lif	I Phantom	Definitive Jux (DUX37)	2002	<a href="https://bit.ly/2OzAHU9">https://bit.ly/2OzAHU9</a>
A-13	Apocalypse please	Muse	Absolution	EastWest (5050466-8587-2-6)	2003	<a href="https://bit.ly/1A9V4h1">https://bit.ly/1A9V4h1</a>
A-14	Yahweh	U2	How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb	Island Records (9867829)	2004	<a href="https://bit.ly/2LSXkvy">https://bit.ly/2LSXkvy</a>
A-15	Brighter than a thousand suns	Iron Maiden	A Matter of Life and Death	EMI (0946 372321 2 5)	2006	<a href="https://bit.ly/28TCTvY">https://bit.ly/28TCTvY</a>
A-16	My apocalypse	Metallica	Death Magnetic	Warner Bros (508732-2)	2008	<a href="https://bit.ly/2M6M47k">https://bit.ly/2M6M47k</a>
A-17	Apocalypse dreams	Tame Impala	Lonerism	Modular Recordings (MODCD157)	2012	<a href="https://bit.ly/1voKqeS">https://bit.ly/1voKqeS</a>
A-18	Sky's grey	Destroyer	Ken	Merge Records (MRG599-DLX)	2017	<a href="https://bit.ly/2LWuDX1">https://bit.ly/2LWuDX1</a>

Fig. 1: Dystopian Songs Selection