“Silence in the Media Storm of Apocalypse”

Hannah Goodwin

While it may be read primarily as a written text now, Saint John’s apocalyptic Book of Revelation, with its rich iconography of whores, dragons, angels, many-eyed animals, and natural disasters of every kind, has been read aloud in ceremony and illustrated in manifold books and cathedral walls, lending it a multimedia quality not unlike the apocalyptic cinema of today. The apocalypse has long been mediated through sound and image. Revelation is an especially noisy text, so filled with blaring trumpets, wailing crowds, singing choruses, and thundering bursts of violence that one might not notice the expanses of time that go by between these fits of action. When I asked the students in my course on “Envisioning Apocalypse” last fall to draw a timeline of the apocalypse in this text, we collectively realized that most of the line was blank: the majority of apocalyptic time is a time of quiet waiting. The most strikingly peculiar moment in the text is also one that resonates the most with the experience of life under quarantine. After the seals of six prophetic scrolls have been broken, releasing plagues, famines, wars, volcanoes, and other disasters, the seventh seal brings “utter silence in Heaven for what seemed to be about half an hour.” In the midst of so much noise, this moment captures the uncertain temporality of waiting that is intrinsic to apocalypse.

Does this not resonate with our experience of media in the time of pandemic? Rather than throngs of angels, Covid-19 brought a cacophony of fragmentary media blasting information and misinformation in a storm around us, with soundbits of Trump, Fauci, and Cuomo leading the way. And Netflix and other streaming services, along with a slew of new podcasts and audiovisual content from every possible arts organization, have promised to keep our homes abuzz with noise. And Zoom, its very name offering a sense of bustling motion, manifests the voices and spirits of others in the midst of gloomy isolation. And yet all of this noise is mere ornament on a profound silence of uncertain waiting. We wait for an episode to
load, the local Internet infrastructure so overtaxed it can't keep up. We wait for our Zoom host to resolve whatever technical problems they're having to let us into another conversation about our static lives, or we wait for our friend’s face to unfreeze from an awkward configuration of blurred pixels.³ We wait for something to arrive in the mail, and then wait some interval—a day, or three?—to bring that mail into our homes. We scroll, waiting for the most up-to-the-second news. We wait to be able to focus on anything again, to restore our conversational lives and the unmediated background noise of proximate strangers. No matter how loud the voices and media that infiltrate our consciousnesses, this has also been a time of eerie silence as we have waited, from seconds of lag to months of isolation. But then: a video of eight tortured minutes circulates around the web, and the voices of raging protesters pierce through this silence, refusing to wait any longer.


3 See Kate Murphy, “Why Zoom is Terrible,” New York Times (29 April 2020).