

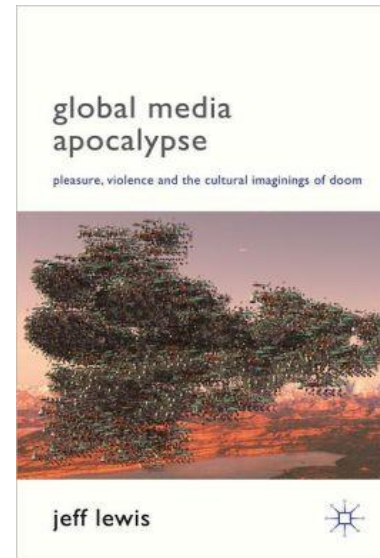
Jeff Lewis, **Global Media Apocalypse: Pleasure, Violence and the Cultural Imaginings of Doom**, New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012, 228 pp. \$90.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

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For many of us who research media, for some reason, it is inevitable to research and analyze the prosthetic and disembodied ways in which we interact with each other without eventually having to address that area of human interaction we broadly refer to as “violence.” The normal approach to these lines of thought is to root our understanding of media in how it influences the body and how we come to view bodies—our own and those of others—as a result of that exposure. The question of effect or, in some cases, result, is one that leads us toward the idea of contact or of friction. The movement of that understanding of space, of time, and of our relationship with the life world, as well as the importance or unimportance of physical properties, is a crucial concern for media theorists. The analysis of the personal naturally leads us to wonder what those personal responses do to our interaction with each other and how we act on the rest of the world.



It is not a small area of thinking. The scope of many of these arguments is immense and it will invariably seem as though the job taken on was too big from the start. In line with this, Jeff Lewis sets a significant challenge for himself in **Global Media Apocalypse**. He writes that the goal is to demonstrate that a fundamental apocalyptic sensibility is integral to contemporary human organization and that this quality is amplified via contemporary media technologies. It is a massive undertaking. In his own words, “The interflow of global-local political agonism and violence is thus an endogen of other modernizing and globalizing processes—trade, human mobility, cultural exchange, media, financial movement, knowledge transfer and so on” (p. 3). One might be forgiven for thinking that, given the title of this text, the stated line of inquiry drifts away from media analysis. Even media theory would localize its area of inquiry in media before stretching out, but it appears that Lewis is attempting to depict media as a type of sinew that links all of these other elements of contemporary human existence together. To try and pack all of this into a single text is indeed admirable, and though it sounds as if the focus of the approach might allow it to work, it does not in the end.

The fundamental argument of the book, according to Lewis, is that the properties that contribute to conflict, that cause the type of friction we’ve come to take for granted between individuals and different communities in the course of human interaction are the very same properties that have contributed to human development and progress (p. 7). Subsequently, he argues that developments in technology have allowed for a process of “inclusion and exclusion” (p. 9) and that the subsequent violence that has

resulted from this process has increased as a result. The evidence of this is all around us: The Arab Spring is, according to the mindset of the West, the result of the ever-expanding “western cosmological and political imaginary” (p. 4) mobile communications devices are as critical to fomenting violence and oppression as they are to creating pleasure and liberation” (pp. 65–66); “in the death-row inmates of Bali’s Kerobokan Prison or the corpses of overdosed addicts, the supplemental self meets its dangerous other on the other side of pleasure” (p. 108); “the violence perpetrated by Islamists or Christian fundamentalists like Anders Breivik belongs to a much broader and more inclusive cultural genealogy—a genealogy that legitimates violence as a valid social and organizational technology” (p. 152); and so on.

It is necessary, however, to point out that there are times when it seems that too much is being worked into the argument. There is a substantial amount of research to convey here and a significant technical and theoretical knowledge that is leveraged into the analysis. The result, however, is that the text, at times, seems rudderless. The reader gets the feeling that too much is being argued, and not enough time is really being spent on a stable line of inquiry. The sheer breadth of the aforementioned examples laid out should indicate the ambition of this project. The result, however, is that the reader is left thinking of other texts that have covered the same subject areas one at a time and in greater depth. Stephen Graham (2011) and Judith Butler (2010), for example, have recent publications that would fit into this category. Lewis appears to be trying to tie a great deal of work together here, but the sliding from one example to the next results in the overall proof—that this fundamental apocalyptic sensibility is amplified or augmented via contemporary media formats—getting lost in the mix.

Other passages in the text maintain a stable critical focus. They criticize the behavior of the West along tested and familiar grounds: “[T]he differences that are highlighted by the western mediasphere are framed by the west’s own cultural ecology of violence that mobilizes desire within the convocation of pleasure and displeasure” (p. 157). This collision between high and low points of experience is crucial to the overall text. That this seems obvious is partly framed by the wealth of similar claims in current academic analysis but can also be attributed to the breadth and the quality of Lewis’ argument. There is good work being done here, but between the recurrent sense of *déjà vu* relative to the lines of inquiry and the breadth of the examples provided by Lewis to prove his points, the result is a bit muddling. It is, in short, at times difficult to see the forest for the trees.

There is a line of thinking under the heading “The Euro clone” (p. 168) that is a bit bewildering, given the supposed subject of the text. The word “media” is reiterated here to draw out current debates about the current state of neoliberal governments. The use of media as the glue that will hold all of this together is occasionally a bit problematic, as the causal or active element of media in the phenomena is not clearly expressed. To be clear, I do not think that Lewis is trying to get away with something here. The problem is that the system by which media is created, perpetuated, and injected into the dominant culture and, indeed, into our lives is worked too closely into the experience of that media. The suggestion here is that, because the global capitalist economy is effectively ubiquitous, the ways in which our individual and social bodies react to these forms of media are directly linked to global capitalism—circular reasoning in its purest sense.

There are a few points here where the examples used to serve his argument are a bit baffling. A narrative on the lead film character from *The Hurt Locker* is worked in, as is a long meditation on the television drama *True Blood*. References to the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* first-person shooter video game franchise are mentioned in the analysis of Anders Breivik but do not take a prominent position in the argument as one would expect in a text devoted, at least in part, to media culture. Mentions of the Occupy protesters are framed around a sort of instant hindsight critique of the fallibility of dominant institutions and "their imaginings of infinite bliss with infinite doom" (p. 205). The text closes with an overture toward ideas of, "completeness without the imaginings of a divine authority, gods who must ultimately condemn us to violence and infinite doom" (p. 206). This is a position to which I admit an enthusiasm, but much like the rest of the text, it bears only a passing semblance with the overall whole; it is very, very hard to find the lynchpin of the overall argument.

There is a significant vibe in this book of putting the cart in front of the horse. My overwhelming feeling here is that Lewis sees the use of electronic communications and the use of media as facilitating the conduct of violence and therefore determines that it is responsible for that violence. Statements like "[t]he mediasphere thus amplifies the geopolitical conditions of crisis through the hierarchical organization of desires and a cultural ecology of violence" (p. 202) have a certain ring of truth to them, but the suggestion that the mediasphere is the primary driving force seems to afford it a degree of autonomy that is not fully explained here. Undeniably, there is a cultural element to violence. The use of, and the subsequent expression of that cultural element via the media mechanisms that are available is a matter of historical record. It has been covered in different texts in different ways by different authors. What Lewis is trying to add to the debate helps to revitalize the existing theory, but that unifying element that would bring the entire argument together as a whole is unfortunately absent.

### References

Butler, J. (2010). *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* London, UK: Verso.

Graham, S. (2011). *Cities under siege: The new military urbanism*. London, UK: Verso.

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