

## Book Summary

### ***The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs* by John Lardas**

by Karen Pressley

Apocalypsis: a way of seeing and interpreting the world

The meaning of “apocalypse” in John Lardas’ *The Bop Apocalypse* provides the setting for his exploration of the religious visions of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs. In post-World War II America, while Americans celebrated their victory over the war, they simultaneously embraced pessimism about their future. Lardas calls this pessimism a momentary eruption of America’s apocalyptic imagination. Society lived with the moral aftermath of mass devastation of lives in Hiroshima, the Nazi genocide of the Jews, an impending fear of atomic war in our homeland, and the ongoing threat of the spread of communism. The need to retreat from these realities, whether by diving into an air raid shelter or finding other means of personal or social escape, enveloped 1950s society like an apocalyptic shadow. He thus defines *apocalypsis* as a way of seeing and interpreting the world.

The burden of the Beats’ art was to create a religious world in which ordinary decisions and actions would continually broach questions of existential and cosmic meaning. True to their nature in pursuing freedom from control, Lardas said the Beats held religious views but were not held by them.

#### **Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*, and the Beats’ Apocalyptic View**

Writing in the genre of religious philosophy, Lardas’ guiding thesis contends that the cultural remnants which informed the Beats’ new vision, as well as the existence of their new vision as a religious dimension, both take on clarity when one considers the influence of the German historian Oswald Spengler upon the Beats’ lifestyle and artistic collaborations. To be an American was either to be part of God’s covenantal plan or subject to divine judgment. In the wake of Godless communism, religious affiliation became extremely important, so one would not be perceived as communistic. The Beats’ philosophical thoughts about America, their exploration of ordinary realities of daily living in the world, and the extraordinary realities they found through drug use, sexual experimentation, literary curiosity, and religious theories, were profoundly influenced by Spengler’s metahistory, *The Decline of the West* (1928). Lardas describes Spengler’s work as one of the most over-the-top works of modernist synthesis, reducing the whole of existence into the language of German romanticism. He says it puts forth the notion that the West was destined to collapse, like all previous civilizations, but that a new culture would inevitably emerge to continue the cycle of history, a phenomenon that includes every great question of being.

Given Lardas' definition of *apocalypsis*, *The Bop Apocalypse* explores how Spengler's *Decline of the West* brought an apocalyptic revelation for Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs. According to Lardas, this line from Kerouac's *On the Road*, "...The sounds you expect to hear on the last day of the world and the Second Coming..." suggests how the Beats saw themselves as both the beginning and the end of an era, with a cosmic view of history, infused with an apocalyptic sense of urgency in events of day to day living.

### **"America, When Will Your Cowboys Read Spengler?"**

As the Beats lived through their contemporary America, they experienced a crisis of cultural authority. Ginsberg felt that America's "cowboys" hadn't read Spengler, so the tradition that supported America's geopolitical and domestic agendas was sadly misconstrued. As they searched for new traditions through a Spenglerian filter, the Beats sensed the nagging falsity at the heart of everyday social reality. Lardas says that even though Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs held different spiritual foundations, Spengler's historical schema remained the Beats' basis for repossessing the founding myths of America.

First, they used a Spenglerian viewpoint to identify an essentially religious crisis: America's inability to escape the orbit of a decaying Western civilization. Second, they saw themselves as either warriors in an apocalyptic battle to defeat forces of control unleashed by the Enlightenment (Burroughs), or as defenders of the ultimate promise of America (Kerouac and Ginsberg). In selectively reading Spengler, each of these writers positioned themselves in relation to an eventual, post-apocalyptic America. Third, Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs viewed their lives as both a cultural and individual crisis. Their Spenglerian belief in a connection between internal spirituality, and the transcendent laws that governed the workings of the cosmos, added a political dimension to their individual quests for knowledge of spiritual salvation. Ideas about spiritual freedom and individualism became connected to ideas about social transformation. As the Beats looked for an authority to substantiate their insights, they found Spengler a viable means for assessing American's relationship to the essence of life. For them, Spengler's work contained an element of organicism in his discussion of protospirituality, in that all life forms spring from a primordial essence.

In Spengler's cycles of history, Kerouac found evidence of a Catholic apocalypticism. Kerouac did not perceive Spengler's organicism to be very different from a Catholic worldview, as they both assume that the world was made in the image of a divine reality. As a Catholic, he believed that he held correspondence between this world and God as its sacred counterpart.

Ginsberg's spiritual leanings went toward a mystical experience. He held ideas that the things of this world were reflections of the divine, and even served as tangible evidence of divine judgment. He wrote in "Metaphysics" (1949):

This is the one and only firmament; therefore it is the absolute world. There is no other world. The circle is complete. I am living in Eternity. The ways of this world are the ways of Heaven.”

As more a scientist of the occult, which predisposed him to Scientology (based on a mixture of occult and Buddhist teachings), Burroughs understood existence through the presence of spiritual forces. He rejected the Christian polarization and conflict of the supernatural (evil) and human (good) realms. He favored inhabiting an occult-type magical universe where the power of individual will reigned, versus a world where control over individual will is exercised by an authority outside the individual.

Spengler appealed to the Beats through his premise that those who understood the nature of the laws of history were not only privileged but capable of prophecy. Lardas describes the Beats as jeremiads, interpreting ideas and events of life in a prophetic sense, taking into account how one's actions or transgressions will ultimately result in judgment. He connected the existence of a universal spirit active in history as well as the individual Spengler's cosmological frame of reference to seeing the world as one of correspondence, a model that assumes no major break between the sacred and profane, the knower and the known.

### **“Sex, Drugs and Theology: The Spenglerian Strain of Piety”**

Chapter 2 discusses how the Beats formed the theology that became the new vision of the Beat generation. Lardas writes that Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs created a rubric of the Beats' “new vision” by collecting remnants and pieces of cultural debris from a long list of literary, social, and religious influences. These include: the writings of historian Oswald Spengler's apocalyptic *The Decline of the West*; religious teachings of Buddhism, Catholicism, Judaism, Protestantism, and Scientology; bebop musicians including Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie; the psychology of Wilhelm Reich (which they called Reichism); the semantic theories of Alfred Korzybski (from which L. Ron Hubbard plagiarized to create Scientology); literary figures including Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Twain, Blake, and Whitman; other scholarly influences including Timothy Leary and his experimentations with hallucinogenic drugs; and hipsters, hoboes and dropouts from whom the Beats derived aesthetic insight and street credibility.

Lardas calls the Beats' new vision a form of controlled subversion, with their religion being their human response to the events of their lives. He presents Burroughs, Kerouac, and Ginsberg as each possessing a constructive religious imagination, able to distill remnants from their influences and synthesize them into their new vision, coordinating experiences, ideas and gestures into a coherent perspective by which to enchant the world and live within it. Their everyday existence seemed a drama of ultimate consequences. Their actions in life—like sexual openness, drug use, criminality, traveling and even madness—were physical enactments of a religious representation of the world, and not just transgressions against moral and social codes. Lardas says they did not so much secularize the sacred as

sacralize the secular. They wove the elements of insight together into a new sensibility—a coherent, integrated and embodied set of ideas that invested their lives with an air of urgency and ultimacy.

### **“No time for Poetry but Exactly What Is”**

Chapter 3 takes the theological underpinnings of Beat religiosity and explores how their lived religion was incorporated into their writing styles. Burroughs became interested in Scientology after completing *Naked Lunch*; by late 1953 Kerouac had immersed himself in Buddhism; Ginsberg undertook what Lardas called a Burroughs-like investigation into the literary and political potential of hallucinogenic drugs.

Bonding over their mutual attraction to Spengler's work, they formed a creative nucleus by dwelling on the imperfection of the present while holding onto hope for the future. Lardas describes Burroughs as buoyed by a sage curiosity and felt the world could be rectified through an enchanted world; Kerouac, by a youthful enthusiasm to create (novels), who believed the imperfections could be rectified through a universal religious ethic; Ginsberg, by the desire to be a highly creative poet, who held the idealistic belief that the situation could be rectified through humanitarian politics. Before Scientology, Burroughs had been interested in Buddhism, which greatly influenced the Beats and became the spiritual path of Kerouac and Ginsberg; however, Burroughs was later quoted as saying that “Eastern techniques of meditation were primitive and would be superseded by scientific techniques,” and was therefore basically opposed to Ginsberg's “back to nature” trip.

The Beats wove the elements of insight together into a new sensibility, an embodied set of ideas, their religiosity that brought urgency and ultimacy to their existence. This religious sensibility became their platform through which they believed and lived, a space for living in a real world of their creation, woven alongside the world at large. It served as a filter through which they experienced the world. Thus, the content of their religion was embodied not only in their behavior but also in the images and metaphors they used to characterize reality in their artistic works including poems, novels, live recordings, Kerouac's word sketching and wild form, Ginsberg's spontaneous prose and poetry, and Burroughs' “cut-ups.”

### **Burroughs and Scientology**

Given Burroughs' fluency in Alfred Korzybski's *General Semantics*, Scientology offered him a corresponding theory of communication that confirmed the neurological effects of words and their capacity to condition the human nervous system. Scientology reinforced Burroughs' belief that language is a control system that locks people into patterns of thinking and behavior. Because Scientology had a spiritual focus and also addressed the mind, Hubbard categorized Scientology as a cross between a science and a religion (though he did so to capitalize on business benefits of being a religion (tax exemption; less regulation by the government).

Burroughs introduced Hubbard's therapies to Ginsberg in a series of letters in October 1959. In these letters, Burroughs announced to Ginsberg his discovery of both his cut-up method (explained later),

as well as the “method of directed recall” (a Scientology counseling procedure where the participant follows commands to recall incidents stored in the reactive mind viewed by the participant, and erased; this practice was lifted by Hubbard from regressive therapy practices used in psychology as well as Blavatsky’s theosophy): “Scientology differs from psychoanalysis in that it does not stress insight into the unconscious workings of the mind as an essential component of therapy.”

Scientology technology confirmed Burroughs’ belief that consciousness is akin to a tape recording of words in the memory that can be rewound, fast-forwarded or even erased. This discovery, which was formulated not by Hubbard but by Korzybski in General Semantics, gave him insight into words as a vehicle of control and power. This informed Burroughs’ writings as he sought to undo conventional authorship and words, and worked to move things around collage-style, which he eventually developed into “cut-ups,” cutting up pre-existing media and rearranging it to form something entirely new. Cut-ups establish new connections between images and expand one’s range of vision, a direction Burroughs was heading as a writer.

Like Scientology, the cut-up method was intended to alter a reader’s consciousness in a do-it-yourself manner. Lardas said that in one sense, Burroughs’ cut-up method was the evangelical counterpart of Scientology, in that it was intended to alter a reader’s consciousness, to use cut-up in order for readers to become aware of their own power to dictate reality. Because Burroughs’ work demanded interpretive effort, Lardas says readers could potentially become co-creators of meaning. For Burroughs, consciousness was the generative source of reality, possessing the capacity to resist the external controls of both the body and language. Due to the conditioning power of words, however, consciousness is prevented from wielding that potential. Cut-ups promised liberation, a way out from under the oppression of Western thought. Burroughs’ concept of naked materiality did find its way into *Naked Lunch*, a manifesto of freedom of word usage, both in grammar, syntax, and context.

Lardas wrote,

“First, they could reduce language to a state of naked materiality, which would then allow for unencumbered investigation into a nexus involving language, mind and body. Finally, they could expose the mechanisms of conditioning...Burroughs practiced cut-up in order to exorcise ‘habitual conditioned responses’ inculcated by Western Civilization, a ‘deliberate and conscious abdication of control which aims at an escape from controls—controls imposed from within or without. As the means to become clear (a Scientology state) both Scientology and the cut-up method were ways to expose word controls in order to free a subject from their determinative efforts.”

### **“Storming the Reality Studios: Beat Remythologies”**

Lardas revisits some of the major works of Burroughs, Kerouac and Ginsberg in Chapter 4, where he argues that they engaged America through the discourse of religion. He illustrates their discourse

through the individual visions of each Beat writer which, though they share a common heart, is distinctly different from each other's works. Lardas shows how each writer conveys their visions of freedom, salvation, and freedom within salvation. Kerouac's *On the Road* and *Visions of Cody* emanated from the religious world they created in the previous decade, along with Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* and Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems*. Lardas describes the "new criticism" that arose in the American scene of the 1950s and '60s and the Beats' reactions to it.

Lardas uses *On the Road* and *Visions of Cody* to illustrate how Kerouac's works pitted a newfound ideal against American myths that sanctioned the status quo. Through Ginsberg's *Howl* and Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, Lardas shows how the Beats recast America's mythic heritage in a Spenglerian light, by using their literature to question the dominant culture, through a violent and personal repossession of American history. Lardas explores how the Beats engaged postwar society through their religious imagination, particularly on the discursive terms of public religion.

### **Lardas' conclusion**

Lardas identifies the trajectories of each writer, and contends that the religious imaginations of Burroughs, Kerouac and Ginsberg remained quite active as each pursued a different path—Scientology, Buddhism, and LSD, respectively, through Spengler's America.

He reiterates his point that the religious consciousness of any individual must be taken into account by any interpreter who wants to understand the lived experiences of individuals, as well as the development of an individual's meaning-making method. The stories of Burroughs, Kerouac, and Ginsberg as they unfolded during the 1960s are significant to a historical and religious depth, in that what they accomplished, and how they accomplished it, sheds light on larger trends of American religious history and American culture in general. They made inroads into public consciousness, and their eclectic religious style became the modus operandi of a significant portion of our culture. Lardas describes their collaborations as one of the most influential literary friendships of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Why I summarized *The Bop Apocalypse***

Lardas' book, *The Bop Apocalypse*, and a few undergraduate classes I took about the Beats and Beat Aesthetics (where Lardas' book was introduced to me) both came into my life when I was seeking an understanding of the cultural context of the 1950s and '60s in which I was born and grew up, and when the Beat generation and Scientology, my former religious philosophy, emerged.

Though I was involved in Scientology from 1982 - 1998, I had never done any research about it (prior to getting involved in it) as a "Cold War" religious philosophy. I got swept up in that practice with my husband, without ensuring it was right for me. I realized that the solution it offered to achieve the goal of total spiritual freedom was unreachable through Hubbard's methods, and finally broke free of its grip on it. I left with deep regrets about the years I invested in it, as well as the loss of our marriage to it. I chose to read and summarize *The Bop Apocalypse* because when I discovered that the Kerouac, Ginsberg,

and especially Burroughs, had looked into Scientology, I wanted to find out what role Scientology and other spiritual beliefs played in the Beats' religious visions and how this may have influenced their aesthetics or affected their lives as it did mine. This book has provided explanations about my generation from a cultural and religious perspective that I have long been seeking but have never before accessed. By deepening my understanding of the Beat generation, I've gained insight into myself as well as some of the influences that shaped my parents into middle-class conformists against whom I rebelled since my teens. It has also given me insight into why I would have been attracted to a religious philosophy like Scientology, as the Beats once were.

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