CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE FALL?

Scenes on TV and film of society facing a cataclysmic event capture today's zeitgeist

MARY MCNAMARA SENIOR CULTURE CRITIC >>> Frankly, it sounded pretty stupid. For reasons unknown, electricity fails worldwide, sending humanity into a post-technological free-fall. Weeds grow in the Capitol (very "Logan's Run"), young women defend their families with bows and arrows (very "Hunger Games"), and no one seems to remember that people made ice cream and bullets long before electricity was harnessed as a personal power source.

But NBC's "Revolution" surprised everyone; not only was it good, it was a hit. Big Concept shows are always a gamble; too often creators pick the wrong big concept — dinosaurs, say, or a remake of "V." "Revolution," through insight or sheer luck, struck thematic gold, mining the vein running through our collective uncon-

MURRAY CLOSE Lionsgate

JENNIFER Lawrence is Katniss Everdeen, who competes to survive in "The Hunger Games."

GENE PAGE AMC

PEOPLE face a zombie apocalypse in "The Walking Dead," whose cast includes Steven Yeun as Glenn.

scious: Where once we feared corruption, we now fear collapse, a technological, social or political cataclysm that will Change Everything.

More important, where once we looked to the individual as the key to conflict — man versus nature, man versus man, etc. — we now worry more about society, what it will look like, how it will survive. Gazing rapt at screens that redefine the borders between home and office, work and play, isolated and social, our fingers hover over the reset button. Like good Spenglerians, we anticipate the inevitable fall — of technology, of government, of social structure, of human ascendancy. How long, really, before the grand experiment of democracy fails, before a super flu emerges or an alien race, before the melting polar ice does us in?

If the folks living by the Mayan calendar or featured on a rising number of reality shows like "Doomsday Preppers" and "Doomsday Bunkers" are to be believed, not too dang long; on the upcoming Spike TV reality series,

BROWNIE HARRIS NBC

"REVOLUTION," with Billy Burke and Tracy Spiridakos, is a science fiction drama that envisions a dystopian world thrown in chaos after it loses electricity. The NBC series has turned into a hit.

families can compete for an underground bunker.

We may laugh at those wacky survivalists (though perhaps not quite so loudly in the wake of Hurricane Sandy), but the fear, if not of the world's literal end than of the tremulous nature of everything, slips through the themes of our favorite stories these days. In "The Walking Dead" and "Downton Abbey," "Falling Skies" and even, if we stretch just a bit, shows like "Mad Men" and "Hatfields & McCoys," the floor, or our perception of it, drops out from the bottom of the world and those who do not plummet instantly scramble to adjust.

Many of these After the Fall fables question our modern level of simple competence. Sci-fi and fantasy writers have always suspected we will be outdone by technology — enslaved by the mechanically higher intelligence we created or wiped out by whatever really lives in a galaxy far, far away. Thoughts of a pre-Industrial-world, however, were more of a Hudson Valley School/Walden Pond variety.

Now, the ever-morphing digital tablet comes with a dark-mirror image of Square One. On "Falling Skies," it's the classic alien invasion; on "Revolution," a failure of basic technology; on "The Walking Dead," it's a zombie apocalypse. Looking to the cineplex, there's more of the same, whether in "The Hunger Games" (totalitarian takeover) or even "Les Miz" (rise of the singing proletariat). Watching on our flat screens and cellphones, we look at each other and wonder: How many of us can shoot a gun, much less an arrow? Or make fire from flint? Who among us could stitch a wound, identify a poisonous berry or, for that matter, carry an unconscious man through the sewers of Paris?

The real lesson of any good post-cataclysm tale is internal, not external: Always the true enemy walks among us. "We've been running from Walkers for so long we forgot what people do," says "The Walking Dead's" Maggie after she and Glenn have been savagely beaten by thugs an-

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swering to the Governor, a despotic leader of one group of survivors. On "Revolution," scrappy bands of revolutionaries fight similar fascism in the form of the Militia.

Not every apocalypse is literal. The rise of such new/old tribalism seems to reflect not just the deep political divisions that, we have been told ad nauseam, afflict our nation today but also a general anxiety over the social order. As retailers and politicians, movie studios and fundraisers set out to identify and conquer each demographic splinter, it's difficult not to feel that the general populace is in a per-

petual state of subdivision.

The white male suits of "Mad Men" and the dress-for-dinner residents of "Downton Abbey" all face the inevitable obsolescence of their class system. Though they may not need to reacquaint themselves with medieval weaponry, in each show, the characters must adapt or be left behind.

In a work of breathtaking ambition, History's miniseries "Hatfields & McCoys" managed to take on all of the above. After the Civil War, two families struggled to fit into a newly arranged social order that remained more myth than reality in their still-primitive world. Relying on Old Testament values even as the world around them embraces the New, many of them literally ran mad.

Fear has always shadowed change. From the discovery of fire to the creation of Facebook, every advance causes us to conjure a Worst Case Scenario; the reading of novels was once condemned as vociferously as any video game. As public cameras and data-mining increase, so does our anxiety over the cold vast reaches of cyberspace. The petty mischief done via text in "Gossip Girl" and "Pretty Little Liars" is about to get more serious; in two upcoming series, "The Following" and "The Cult," social media become the ultimate tools of charismatic sociopaths. Where will it all end?

Increasingly, we seek comfort or even instruction in stories from other times, be it post-apocalypse or just period. In "Mad Men," "The Hour," and "Downton Abbey" we are reminded that people once communicated with eye contact rather than emoticons, that they had productive even heroic lives without a laptop or cellphone in sight. Indeed, in these shows, new technology, be it telephone, television or Sputnik, is inevitably viewed with a certain amount of suspicion.

And why not? If the stories we now tell ourselves at night are to be believed, the new technology is just as likely to kill us as make us stronger. When the zombies rise, the government is overthrown, or the lights go out, you'd best trade your iPhone for a whetstone, pull on a pair of sensible shoes and find shelter before dark.

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