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Awakening from the Sleep-walking Society: Crisis, Detachment and the Real in Prepper Awakening Narratives

Thoroughly saturated by ordinary crisis, routinized emergency and the normalisation of apocalypticism, late-modern society is nevertheless depicted as sleep-walking into crisis; a further, overlapping 'crisis of the real.' This paper explores the potential of prepper awakening narratives – the moment preppers awake to the reality of crisis - to contribute to explorations of detachment and denial in the Anthropocene. These narratives, part of the wider repertoire of prepper story-crafting, provide justification for the prepper's transition to an anticipatory subjectivity, emotionally and sensually attuned to crisis and defined by preparedness agency. Extending existing conceptualisations of 'awakening', I argue that prepper awakenings are defined by the uncanny realisation of distance from an ideal state of security. To illustrate, I consider narratives of bodily vulnerability, insecurity at home and exposure in public places, which express shock at the failure of relationality implicit to the safety fictions of these spaces. In this confrontation with the detached modern self, the agential and aware prepper emerges, but this does not in itself lead to a renewed moment of politics or production of revolutionary consciousness. Instead, the 'horrifying Real' is recrafted as a vital space of self-reliance and resourcefulness, a place to reflect on endurance beyond this world-ending.

> *Awakenings begin in periods of cultural distortion and grave personal stress, when we lose faith in the legitimacy of our norms, the viability of our institutions, and the authority of our leaders (McLoughlin, 1978,2).*

1. AWAKENING TO CRISIS AS CONTEXT

Crisis of the Real

Life in late modernity is thoroughly crisis-saturated. Crisis defines the contemporary moment coupled with a future predictable only in its unpredictability (Southwood 2011). As Wakefield (2014, 451) asserts: 'the crisis is the age.' We can distinguish and categorise the multiple forms this takes into three key areas of academic work that trace, firstly, the expansion and generalisation of insecurity and precarity through the 'slow emergency' (Anderson et al. 2020) or ***'ordinary crisis'*** (Berlant 2011) of austerity, where precarity becomes a normal, endemic and structural condition embedded within the onslaught of everyday life. Anderson et al. (2020) draw on the language of 'turbulence' to depict a multitude of actual or anticipated crises as the context and expression of life, the 'generalized condition of the affective present' (Richardson 2018,6) in contemporary liberal democracies of Western Europe and North America.

Secondly, 'background hum' of crisis in everyday life (Richardson 2018) is so routinely and regularly punctuated by emergency that these exceptional events become, rather than shatter, the normal (Vigh 2008). Kaufman (2016) points to the shift from modernism to postmodernism as the point when the 'emergency' became an immanent crisis, no longer

external to the societal system – an event to be stopped through prediction and planning – but reconceptualized as endemic to society. Shapiro and Bird-David (2016) writing in the context of the Israel militarised state, discuss how through the ***routinization of emergency*** citizens are urged to make peace with emergency, enveloping constant threat into the everyday. Extending beyond military conflict zones to diverse geo- and bio-political contexts, routinized emergency describes the ever-present securitisation against terrorism, or the regular punctuation of lives by pandemics or extreme weather events. These emergencies come to express 'the *normality* of a generalized crisis environment [all] encompassing in its *endemic* threat-form (Massumi 2015,22).

Thirdly, there has been a ***normalisation of apocalypticism****,* as visions of existential threats saturate the public sphere. As the meme goes, picturing a poster in the window of a bookshop: 'In light of recent events, the post-apocalyptic fiction has been moved to current affairs.' Increasingly, we've turned to apocalyptic fiction to navigate and interpret, or relish, the ongoing catastrophe of the present (Sample 2020). While Swyngedouw (2011) puts forward apocalypticism's depoliticising effects, Ginn (2015) challenges this narrative, arguing that apocalypse provides openings to consider alternative futures.

Taken together, in our crisis-infused present, the drudgery of ordinary crisis shares rhetorical space with the spectre of apocalyptic futures; the present is defined by instability and the future by uncertainty (Anderson 2014). These crisis conditions are mutually compounding, as Vign (2008, 11) writes: 'in a moment of crisis, I experience my precarity.' They are also increasingly blurred. As the structural conditions of precarity are masked through its narration as exceptional crisis, and existential threats are normalised as the patterning of the ordinary, the political potential of both is negated (Anderson 2014). To reconcile this duality of ordinary and extraordinary, immanent and imminent crisis within the context of the climate emergency, Horn (2014) proposes we are living through a 'catastrophe without an event.'

Yet, populations in contemporary liberal democracies suffer widespread and structurally produced 'cognitive disassociation' from crisis realities (Head 2016; Norgaard 2011). Baraister (2017,161), referring to the disaster immanent in capitalism as the 'horrifying real,' considers how it functions as a signifier hidden in full view, something we know about but simultaneously disavow. This is captured in common expressions such as '*sleep-walking* into crisis' or being '*lulled* into a false sense of security.' This, I suggest, points to a further overlapping crisis, a contemporary ***crisis of the real****.* It draws comparisons with 'urban modernity disorientation' (Simmel 1903), the cognitive overload, unreality and insubstantiality of the world suffered by early twentieth century urban inhabitants processing

the 'intensity of the new infrastructure of the everyday' (Berlant 2011,68-69). Crisis so infuses the present that it lays claim to being the bedrock of life, yet it has become the condition of the real to which we are asleep.

While the discredited 'information-deficit' model framed cognition as central to explaining denial and inaction in the face of environmental crisis, recent academic work has widened attention to the significance of affects and emotions that involve displacement and detachment, muting, suppression, or a side-step from 'reality.' This includes grief (Butler, 2004; Head, 2016), sorrow (Yusoff 2012), optimism (Berlant 2011), hope (Anderson 2014; Head 2016), detachment (Ginn 2014), derangement (Ghosh 2016) and loss (Whale and Ginn 2017; Wylie 2009). Emotions are understood to operate as forms of affective labour that perpetuate a widespread appearance of unresponsiveness, indifference and inaction against crisis presents (Head 2016). Bissell (2022), in a summary of work on 'anaesthesia', names this a crisis in perception, where bodies are in the world but incapable of being sufficiently affected by it. On the one hand, Head (2016) attends to disabling anxiety or grief, exploring how they are tied to forms of collective denial, or compartmentalised in order to maintain efficacy (e.g as climate scientists). On the other, Berlant (2011) explores the way optimism affectively masks - or makes bearable - the retraction of the promise of the good life, leaving the fantasy of upward mobility, job security, equality and intimacy intact as affective realism. Crucially, Wilson and Anderson (2020,596) urge that we "approach disaffections … as collective (national) affects that envelope and condition, rather than reducing disaffection to a matter of different individual attunements." This continues Norgaard's (2011) seminal work on the culturally-constituted barriers to making climate change real and visible in everyday life, which, entangled with forms of socially-produced ignorance, form *structured* emotional denial.

Prepping for Crisis

> [I]t is time to wake up from the dream of safety those in power want us to dream (Selco, 2019).

In this paper, I contribute to work on disaffection, truncated agency and denial as forms of emotional survival (Lasch 1987) akin to being 'asleep' to crisis realities, by considering the 'awakenings' of preppers as anticipatory and agential, crisis-ready subjects. 'Prepper' is a contested term for someone who uses scenario-thinking to focus and justify their often hidden preparations to survive crisis. Material practices invested with this crisis-imagination may

include gathering, preserving and managing stores of food, medicine and equipment to 'bug in' at home, packing a range of mobile carries to 'bug out', developing survival and self-sufficiency skills to adapt to a post-collapse environment (Barker, 2020; Bounds, 2020; Campbell et al. 2019; Kabel and Chmidling 2014; Kerrane et al. 2021; Mills 2019). Preppers may operate individually or form mutual assistance groups, learning and sharing in social media groups and connecting in person at regular camps.

There has been an upswell of academic research and media interest in prepping in recent years, with increasingly nuanced and context-sensitive accounts repositioning prepping not as a maverick, fringe activity, but as a social identity expressed across socio-economic and political spectrums. Prepping takes on different inflections from the mainstream political right (Mills 2019) to left, from high net worth individuals to 'ordinary' preppers (Bounds 2020; Kerrane et al.2021), from majority white suburban and rural prepping groups to black urban communities (Bounds 2020); and across national contexts and differing crisis-issue complexes (Barker 2020; Kerrane et al.2021). The personal awakening stories narrated in this paper correspond to this reframing. They are taken from an ongoing research project exploring prepping in everyday life in the UK (Barker 2020). This has included eighteen in-depth semi-structured interviews with UK preppers online and in their homes; observant participation and further 'campfire interviews' at over a dozen prepping-related meets and survival training weekends; social media analysis of five online prepping groups in 2018-2022 and fifteen prepper-related YouTube video channels, blogs, individually-hosted Facebook pages and Instagram accounts.

As I began this research, I was struck by the significance of prepper awakening stories, a term derived from my interviewees to name the moment of epiphany that explains their reasons for beginning prepping. I listened for these stories, a key vein within the wider cultural repertoire of prepper story-crafting (Mitchell 2002; Mills and Fleetwood 2020), as I moved between online and offline prepping community spaces. Campbell et al.(2019,7) describe them as:

> [n]arratives of generalised precarity … intertwined with major life events to document both the prepper's origin story and the transition from being underprepared to a prepared individual. Such origin stories are often narrated as a 'road to Damascus' moment where the function of 'the Event' is to demonstrate how they were blind, working under false illusions ... when something happens to expose the chasm that exists under this illusory veil.

In a study of peak-oil preppers, Schneider-Mayerson (2015,17) also draws on religious metaphors to illustrate this sudden moment of awareness:

> [B]elievers described their awareness of … environmental crisis in terms that were strikingly similar to those used to describe a religious conversion. They recalled the exact moment it occurred, their emotional response, the dramatic change in thinking, and the reordering of their personal cosmology. Long-term normative assumptions… were questioned and often swept aside.

The 'awakening' to prepping may be precipitated by a crisis event (a shared disaster or a private crisis), a moment of unexpected vulnerability, or experience in the military seeing 'the other side' of security at home. It may be prompted by an intensely vivid dream, a staged scenario event, or reaction to an article, news-report or film that provokes a profound and dislocating sense of the real, as if suddenly awakened, having your eyes opened or a veil removed. *What if* this happened to me, what would I do? They depict a visceral response, an affective, psychological and sometimes physiological 'jolt', marking an arrival in new field of crisis attunement. The stories capture an uncanny frisson in this confrontation with the crisis real, in 'the moment at which the known abruptly seems unfamiliar and disturbing, the moment in which *a sense of being-at-home in the world* is existentially unsettled' (Wylie 2017,25-26).

Both Campbell et al.(2019) and Lepselter (2011) dismiss awakening stories as dramatization or spectacle, as justificatory revelation of prior trauma or privation to explain non-normative behaviour. I argue instead that these stories allow the prepper, as a peculiarly crisis-attuned survival subjectivity, to speak to wider themes on the politics of emotion, agency and the body in the post-Fordist, Anthropocenic present.

There has been little academic work on the meaning, function and social implications of awakening beyond religious spheres. In section 2, I look across existing research to mark the uniqueness of prepper awakenings. In section 3, I reflect on prepper awakening narratives structured across three key sites, of the body, the home, and public spaces. In conclusion, I consider what political potential prepper awakenings can offer to the problem of our emotional and agential frigidity towards the crises of the Anthropocene.

2. DEFINING PREPPER AWAKENINGS

'Awakening: noun: 1 An act of waking from sleep; 2 An act or moment of becoming suddenly aware of something; 2.1 The beginning or rousing of something; Adjective: Coming into existence or awareness'

The figurative use of awakening first entered the world's spiritual vocabulary, Cameron (2013,10) suggests, around the middle of the first millennium B.C. when the Dona Sutta

attributes to Siddhattha Gotama the statement *buddhosmi*, "I am one who has awakened." As Cameron (2013,12) details, *buddha* is the past participle of the verb *Bujjhati* that means to see, perceive, or understand, and so can equally be translated as "one who has seen." Awakening emerges as a liminal event between seeing and not-seeing (Cameron 2013), a threshold between different perceptive states metaphorically differentiated as 'asleep' and 'awake,' and a temporal threshold or meeting place between an (unknowing) past and (knowing) future, incorporating an implicit hierarchy.

Awakening expanded beyond a descriptor for the first stage of a spiritual journey to Enlightenment, when used in the context of the *naḥda* movement in the late 19th century Arab-speaking world (Brownlee&Giabi 2016; nahda: awakening, renewal, reemergence, renaissance, rebirth). Brownlee&Giabi (2016) also point to semantic-political affinities with early 19th century *Risorgimento* movement in support of a united Italy (Risorgimento: 'rising again'). Its use became more widespread through the naming of three North American evangelical protestant 'Great Awakenings', which historians identify from the early 18th century. As 'awakening' expanded from religious into wider cultural and political spheres, it retained connotations of ideological conversion and personal transformation (Schneider-Mayerson 2015). It now names both individual and collective moments of transition to heighted awareness and agency across spiritual (Cameron 2013), religious (Clark 1929), political (Brownlee&Giabi, 2016), environmental (Schneider-Mayerson 2015), cultural and sexual fields. Awakening attains meaning through differentiation from a cluster of related concepts: 'conversion', 'enlightenment', 'revolution' 'renaissance' and 'resurgence'; and in tension with opposing concepts, including cognitive disassociation, brainwashing and false consciousness.

In identifying the singularity of prepper awakening narratives, I have drawn on work across these different domains and disciplinary cultures, considering iterations with significant shared features within a minimal general structure to awakenings. These histories turn between an individualised or collective subject awakening, and highlight differences as well as similarities not only in their narrative or ontological structure but crucially also their social context and political effects. Awakening is always narrated or experienced in relation to a socio-political field, situated within milieus with specific norms and modes of subjectification within which estrangement emerges. As preppers draw on the metaphor of awakening, they are not explicitly evoking these histories, but linking implicitly to, and subtlety remoulding, meanings embedded within a Western semantic taxonomy indebted to these histories.

As expressed through religious and spiritual awakenings, prepper awakening narratives point to a shift in *existential awareness of a core reality* concerning relations between the individual and the world. Clark (1929) defines religious conversion as 'coming into an understanding of religious *realities'*; spiritual awakenings entail awareness of a spiritual meaning to life and a move closer to accessing the 'reality' of existence. Travisano (1986, 244) argues that "[i]n conversion, a whole new world is entered, and the old world is transformed through reinterpretation." The contours of this newfound reality may have been drawn up in advance, or old doctrines may be reappraised in a new light. For preppers, this sudden existential awareness is of the individualisation of insecurity alongside the proximity of crisis.

Prepper awakenings share a spatial inflection to this real-isation; a *realisation of distance* from an ideal or newly perceived reality. In Islamic tradition a spiritual awakening known as 'Yaqzah' is the first step on the path of initiation, entailing a realisation of the subject's distance from the source of perfection and goodness (Naderlew et al.2020). Political awakenings, such as the intellectual awakening on US southern black campuses of the 1960s (Bascomb, 2010), signal awareness of distance from civil rights and appropriate recognition in institutional forms. McLoughlin (1978) highlights that crises prompting cultural awakenings expose gaps between previously accepted understandings of oneself or society and the 'reality' of lived experience, or of distance from established or emerging societal perspectives. Kloes (2019), writing about the protestant German Awakening of 1815-1848, argues it expressed tensions over progressive social changes from which devotees felt estranged. Prepper awakenings entail a sudden awareness of distance from a security ideal and prior sense of safety, what Berlant (2011,13) describes as the 'bruising processes of detachment from anchors in the world.'

This real-isation of distance within a newly perceived reality is a shifting structure of relationality in which the self does not remain unchanged. Awakenings, therefore, entail *a remaking of the self*. In Buddhism, this involves transition from 'belief in a self,' to 'a doubt-free seeing that there is no self' (Cameron 2013,14). Conversion can also be expressed as 'a process of unselfing' (Bidwell 2001,331). As Bidwell (2001,330) writes "[t]he experience itself is named awakening because it resembles the experience of awakening from a dream – a dream that consisted of identification with the fictitious "I" or ego." For prepper awakenings, the fictitious self that is revealed and 'shatters' (Anderson 2014) is the infrastructurally-embedded, secure 'modern' self (Kaika 2004; Head 2016).

The remade self undergoes *a shift in affective attunement,* allowing the Real to be sensed, perceived and witnessed. This can be experienced and expressed through sensual registers, likened to having been asleep, in a dream-like state of unreality, and moving into the Real, awake and aware. This hyper-awareness links to shifts in cognition; from unthinking to thinking subjects able to recognise and reflect on the negative futures infusing the present.

Crossing this threshold of affective attunement unleashes the subject's *agential potential.* Awakening as politicization is invoked, for example, in work on the feminist awakening in China (Fincher 2018); the 'Black Awakening' of the 1960s (Bascomb 2010); and the 'Maori awakening', which Kaupapa Māori theory names as a "conscientization" (Rico 2013). These collective awakenings are tied to struggles for wider change, the restructuring of institutions and redefinition of collective social goals. Brownlee and Ghiabi (2016), however, question this agential link in the context of the so-called 'Arab Awakening,' a term first used by George Antonius in his famous book (1938). Awakening, they argue, implies a pre-existing lack of agency or absence of political being, something that was not there previously or existed only latently in those 'previously asleep'. Billaud (2021,4705) argues that this reinforces a commonly held idea that 'political consciousness emerges only during historical trigger events or through specific modes of socialization,' overlooking the 'ordinary' or 'slow activism' of subaltern groups. When attributed rather than self-adopted, the language of awakening signals a change in perception of the racialised Other, from passive and weak to (dangerously) active (Brownlee&Ghiabi 2016). Claims of passivity and weakness in the 'sleeping' society were notoriously expressed in the Nazi party anthem 'Germany Awake' ('Deutschland Erwache!'). They underpin 20-21st century awakenings to conspiracy, most recently in relation to QAnon, the anticipated US 'Great Awakening' of 2021 and the 2022 'ReAwaken America' conservative tour. For prepper awakenings, wider society is composed of 'sheeple' blithely ignoring signals of impending crisis. Within prepping the agential potential unleashed by the remade self is channelled not into collective action but individualised forms of adaptation and preparedness. Preppers do not seek to alter, but to survive, the 'horrifying Real,' in what Schneider-Mayerson (2015) identifies as a troubling political nihilism, but Bound (2020) argues expresses an alternative form of political resistance and struggle for recognition.

Finally, awakenings *disrupt temporal regimes*. At first glance they imply abrupt, unprecedented events marking a distinct temporal threshold, aligning with messianic apertures and utopian rupture. Whilst revolution has come to mean linear movement through a radical change in the status quo (Brownlee&Giabi 2016), awakening holds on to a prior meaning of cyclical or episodic re-emergence. The prepper awakens not only to the present

reality of crisis, but to temporal contingency through ongoing anticipation, a prophesy that does not require fulfilment (Caduff 2015). Yet, awakenings also disrupt the past. As Freud (1919) details, the uncanny is produced not only through veiling, but through repression. In the shock of awakening, there is something long known and almost familiar in the terrifying and unhomely, in the realisation of abandonment in crisis. The uncanny disrupts the implied temporal linearity of before and after, transforming relations with the past and futurity as crisis 'burrows' forwards and backwards (Hitchen 2020) through an affective response to what could have and could still happen, suppression of the previously sensed and the presencing of future crisis.

In summary, awakenings signal a *relational real-isation*, an existential awareness of and confrontation with the reality of the self-world relations that comprise, in the case of preppers, the assumed security dimensions of the 'ideal' modern self (Head 2016). This confrontation remakes the relational self as an anticipatory subjectivity, attuned to the inevitability of crisis and the requirement for self-rescue, which activates individualised preparedness agency. As I come on to describe, this has an inherently infrastructural dimension, in the shock of disconnection from regimes of support, the horrifying real-isation that vulnerabilities and dependencies entrusted to the state have been left abandoned.

In the following, I illustrate these claims through prepper awakening narratives situated across the body, home, and familiar public spaces; considering how they challenge the forms of relationality implicit to the safety fictions of these spaces. Anderson (2014) postulates that precarity as a structure of feeling is tied to a previously held promise of future stability, distinguishable from those for whom precarity has always been the norm. Under post-Fordist and neoliberalising apparatuses, these exclusive and fragile promises are being withdrawn. To paraphrase Berlant (2011), then, what 'promises' - of safety, security, stability or identity - were these subjects leaning towards? What has been shattered in their awakening to prepping, and what has been revealed?

3. AWAKENING NARRATIVES

Body/self: '*I was just a shell*'

The prepper body has typically been approached through its representational forms and cast as hyper-masculine and able-bodied (Kelly 2016), with prepping an attempt to reinscribe 'traditional' able-bodied gender-roles and revitalise white physical masculinity (Schneider-Mayerson 2015). In contrast, both mental and physical ill-health and disability has emerged as a key theme within this research in the narratives of interviewees, through conversations

and observations at prepper meets, through online discussions in general forums and the presence of disability and medicine-specific branches of online prepper groups. Rather than signalling the re-activation of an ideal body unshackled from the softening effects of dependency and feminization of late-modern forms of labour, therefore, differently-abled and gendered bodies inflect awakening narratives. What they share is a severing of relational ties supporting the security fictions of the healthy body; both between the self and body, and infrastructures of public health.

Prepper awakening narratives tied to experiences of ill-health communicate a sense of the *bodily uncanny,* of dislocation and estrangement from the body and a prior sense of self. In *The Wounded Storyteller* sociologist Frank (1995,6) outlines a narrative form in which illness is storied as a shift in 'self' and 'body' relatedness, as 'life's map and destination is lost, and prior body-selves are unmade.' This loss of a prior reality of the self through illness can work through a paradox. The individual is produced as an autonomous entity, just as the self is dissociated from the body as an 'it' that needs to be cured (Frank, 1995). However, while the well-tamed body is characterised by its absence in public settings (and through Enlightenment, we attempt to escape the body entirely), 'disturbing physicalities' and unpredictabilities associated with illness draw a person inside their body (Mol 2008). This is not a question of transcending the body but inhabiting it – but *this* body is now entirely unfamiliar - a different 'it' than the prior body-self.

This shattered sense of prior self and radically reshaped body-consciousness is powerfully conveyed by 'James', a regional rep for a large online prepper group, as he relates the illness that prompted his awakening to prepping:

> In the wake of becoming…getting these cluster headaches, I was just a shell, and all I was, was a cluster headache sufferer. That's all I could see. It was all I could respond to. It was all-consuming. And I can happily say, it very nearly destroyed me on several occasions… it destroys aspects of you.

This threat of disintegration includes temporal rupture, as illness disrupts a coherent sense of life's sequence and loss of 'any stable expectation of a relation between…the present and what will happen in the future' (Frank 1995,60). What enters the ill person's life is contingency - both of mechanical functioning that comes with a symptom-free life, but also the deeper contingency of mortality - that needs to be staved off. As the bodies' internal feedback and regulation systems fail to function, these services must be partially externalised

(Mol 2008), compounding the loss of predictability and control of over the body by introducing external dependencies and contingencies:

> The body's own contingency is remedied, but only by dependence on an agency that is other to the body…[but] this dependence institutes its own contingency…[I]n the television commercial the availability of the drug is unquestionable (Frank 1995,85).

Prepper awakening narratives relay this shock of the breakdown of prior expectations of health and sudden contingent dependency on external systems that support health and enable life. As 'Jane' narrated, it was the difficult birth of her daughter following a long spell of IVF, their separation and traumatic first weeks in ICU, the shock of her daughter's profound vulnerable dependency and her own sense of helplessness, which awakened her need to start prepping. Having met through a weekly pot-luck lunch during my maternity leave, we now stood in the hallway of her small terraced house, wedged between the buggy and coat-rack, discussing the contents of her bug-out bag in whispers as our babies slept in the next room (an emergency shelter, a FAK, a water-purifying bottle, foil blankets, an axe, a baby carrier). Jane's prepping intersects with what Kerrane et al.(2021) have described as 'survivalist intensive motherhood', where a typical labour-intensive, child-centred parenting culture has been reframed around the survival of the family. In her car-boot she had packs of emergency energy biscuits; she'd researched and agreed plans with her partner on how to escape the city on bikes if the SHTF[1] ('*I'm not bugging in; all my preps are about getting the fuck out of here as fast as I can*').

This simultaneous mistrust yet vulnerable dependency on external life-support was also part of the awakening narrative of 'Lucy,' a key moderator and organiser within a large online prepping group. In considering her motivations for becoming a prepper, Lucy spoke of the lack of support she encountered in caring for her mother before she died of a terminal illness. As Mol (2008) describes, poor care produces the individual by disrupting the balances and flows between a fragile body and its intricate surroundings; in this case, both Lucy and her mother were isolated and individuated. Lucy expressed the insecure tension of dependency on and felt failure of the NHS (that she also fearfully anticipated being withdrawn entirely through privatisation), to prevent her mother's death.

> I see the NHS obviously going downhill … and that worries us a lot…. because I've seen… I mean, my Mam had cancer, she died of cancer. And … I couldn't…You know, seeing someone who's in pain …because hers was like, eh, sort of all over her body, and that…The thought of a societal breakdown where, if you become ill, and

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[1] SHTF: 'shit hits the fan', a common abbreviation for an unspecified crisis event

you haven't got like…you don't know how to make like aspirin or stuff like that…I do feel more vulnerable about my health…going through that journey with my Mam. I was her carer when she was, eh, when she was like bedbound…I wasn't [a nurse], I mean, I used to empty her catheter and clean her and stuff like that and try and… make it…possible…[try] to help.

This is narrated alongside stories of her mother as an independent and resourceful woman who overcame periods of homelessness, who taught Lucy and her sibling's skills of self-reliance including foraging and animal husbandry. Lucy's kindled desire for health autonomy was exposed and challenged when her son was later diagnosed with diabetes (incorrectly, as it emerged): *"Should I just give up, because like…what's the point if like…if I can't keep **him** going? I don't know how to make insulin."*[2] It is significant that both Jane and Lucy narrate awakenings to the vulnerable body within acts of caring for dependent others, signalling a gendered inflection and pointing to the significance of an ethic of care within prepping. As Lucy talks through her experiences of handling a life with disease, her stories point to a breakdown in the collaborative logic of care that Mol (2008) identifies as the ideal. Lucy expresses a profound insecurity in these states of health dependency, as poor health simultaneously reveals a need alongside its denial. As Berlant (2011,43) describes:

When one's sovereignty is delivered back into one's hands...its formerly distributed weight becomes apparent, and the subject becomes stilled in a perverse mimesis of its enormity.

Rather than 'self-*dissolution*' through urban cognitive overload (Lasch 1984,52), or an awakening through the obliteration of the self, this is an abrupt reinstatement of the boundaries of the autonomous-self. Mol (2008,19) attributes the experience of overwhelming isolation in ill-health to the production of the individualised disembedded health consumer within a logic of choice rather than of care: 'as patient-customers we are left alone'. Possessing the bodily-skills to care for your own or the fragile body of dependent others is a physical competence that demands you educate and train your body (Mol 2008). Medical discourse mediates between the coherence of the body and the order of society and so, just as the ideal body is entangled with notions of citizenship, bourgeois civility and control, an inability to control, tame or transcend the body destabilises these biopolitical framings (Mol 2008). For preppers, the unexpected incoherence of the sick body situated in a logic of poor, neoliberalised care, metaphorically spills into imagined insecure futures of absolute healthcare scarcity, anticipated social chaos, disrupted social norms and wider societal breakdown.

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[2] Diabetes and insulin dependency is notorious as an almost insurmountable prepping challenge, frequently discussed in ethical scenario explorations (see Kabel&Chmidling 2014).

Home: '*You can't go in there!*'

The home is powerfully scripted in mainstream discourse as the epitome of 'individual freedom, a place liberated from fear and anxiety, a place supposedly untouched by social, political and natural processes, a place of enjoying an autonomous and independent existence: a home' (Kaika 2004,266). These framings extend throughout existing work on prepping, as home emerges as a device to re-entrench regressive hetero-normative roles of gender, the nuclear family, private ownership and privilege (Bounds 2020). Both these mainstream framings and their extension into representations of prepping, however, rest on the normative assumption of home as a pre-existing place of comfort and safety that must be preserved, to which crisis is not only an outside threat, but an anomaly. Just as this framing has been thoroughly challenged through feminist analyses of normalised violence and insecurity within the home (Brickall 2020; Cox 2006), the awakening narratives informing this research trouble notions of home as a place of comfort and security, revealing a nuance of the 'domestic uncanny'.

For Kaika (2004), the domestic uncanny emerges through an un/veiling of our dependency on domestic technology and the 'elaborate energy systems' (Lasch 1984) that supply the home, produce domestic space and are significant in mooring a sense of the reality of the world (Easterling 2016). In moments of infrastructural breakdown, the construction of home as an autonomous, safe space is undermined through a new regime of visibility (Kaika 2004,281), exposing 'modernity's contradictory efforts to…promote ideologically the disconnected private home as a sacred principle, while at the same time failing to produce it materially.' In prepper awakening narratives, however, the shock of the real comes not from the ideological unmasking of our networked dependencies and so a shattering of a false sense of autonomy (Kaika 2004); instead, it is in the unveiling of the *reality* of disconnection and abandonment, the fragility and absence of assumed relations of safety and security embedded in the home.

When I asked 'Ian', a relatively recent but serious prepper about his motivations for prepping, he spoke at length about being trapped in a house fire as a child. *'It was those early days, em, experiences, it's those little things that trigger something. They* [the experiences] *give you …almost a desire …to learn more about what happened then, what I did right, what I did wrong'.* His story is made up of fragments of memory, years of retelling, newspaper clippings from the time. He and his brother are left alone in the house. He wakes to the sound of what he thinks are brick and rubble falling, but without his glasses cannot clearly see. He crawls to his younger brother's bedroom to find him sobbing, trying to break the window. The house is disintegrating around them - *'the flames started appearing through the carpets and things*

were starting to ignite ... our toilet pan had shattered, the shower cubicle was just like a giant candle, melting.' He spoke with pride about the survival tactics they instinctively adopted, crawling around on the floor, closing doors, putting clothes over their faces. Their parents, the Fire Brigade *'the whole village is out in the street'* but the parents are prevented from going in. '*Mum was trying to get the key in the front door. The Fire Brigade have pulled her away and said, "No, you can't go in there! It's going to be raging hot, there's toxic fumes! No way! You're not going!" "My two kids, my two boys are in there!" And they turned to her and said, "No, sorry love, not going to happen."* Their parents are told there is no chance of survival, but eventually a neighbour sees the children's faces at a back-bedroom window, takes a ladder and smashes the window to pull them through. After our interview he sends me photos of newspaper clippings from the press coverage of the fire.

Ian's mobilisation of this awakening story is embedded within longer consideration of his motivations for prepping, which include pleasurable memories of camping and learning about the countryside with his father, who left the family in Ian's teens. Ian attempted to follow his father into the army, but was prevented by a physical vulnerability. While Ian's preps include a slowly building stash of army food rations bought on eBay, his focus is on practising skills to 'bug-out', to escape home with minimal equipment and survive elsewhere. Ian lives with and cares for his elderly mum and keeps his prepping hidden to avoid alarming her, but has packed his bug-out bag with her needs in mind. He regular rehearses bugging-out on weekends with a prepping friend, camping in a patch of private woodland next to a disused chalk factory.

The uncanny insecurity and unease in the home also emerges in the awakening narratives of Lucy. In her explanation for becoming a prepper, Lucy referred to the intensely vivid nightmares she had when alone in her council house and pregnant with her first child. The previous occupants of the house had dumped rubbish in the garden over a period of years, so while Lucy was keen to grow vegetables she worried about the toxicity of the soil.

> My other-half was working the night-shift as well, so I was like really, really scared, and like waiting up and I was like, oh God, you know, like really terrible dreams and that…of the house while I was asleep and attacking us when I was pregnant…

Lucy's reoccurring pregnancy nightmares extend one key device Freud (1919/2003) points to for producing the uncanny: uncertainty as to whether an inanimate object is alive or not. In her nightmares the house itself comes alive and attacks her as she sleeps within. In this account, the homely and unhomely merge and conflict through experiences of precarity and

risk as the home's false promise of security and predictability is broken. Lucy also focuses on 'bugging out', justified due to the inherent risks to her local area of coastal flooding, her concerns over rioting from nearby urban centres, and the family's financial constraints in building a stash. Lucy, Ian and Jane's preference for bugging out aligns with Bounds (2020) research findings on New York city (NYC) preppers, in which a distinction between those 'building bunkers and installing panic rooms' or those envisioning bugging out of NYC, can be drawn on economic grounds.

In visions of infrastructural collapse, concerns over lack of provisions and fears of maintaining security, the home emerges as a key device through which awakening is both articulated and resolved. At the outset of this research, prepping seemed to challenge the scripting of home as a place of comfort and security through the active insertion of crisis into the home. The bringing in of the food bank and the vulnerability it is compiled to abate, the materialised future-present traces of food shortages, power outages, or medical supply interruptions, seemed to sediment objects symbolising risk and anxiety within the home. As preppers come to practice and experiment with forms of infrastructural autonomy, configuring the home as a site for survival experiments (Vine 2018), it becomes somewhere between a present-day home and a space adaptive to an anticipated future landscape of scarcity. Preppers furnish this meeting point, the line between the homely and unhomely, the comfortable and estranged, not to challenge but to *rebuild* a sense of home as a place of security and comfort. This includes actively inserting within it symbols not just of crisis but of the home's own impermanence and indifference, such as the material means to 'bug out' and be free from home when crisis demands.

Public spaces: *'Society has a very thin veil'*

Finally, prepper awakenings narrate sudden disconnection and estrangement in familiar places we understand of as 'home' beyond the private house; from the local community to the national landscape. In identifying this as a site of awakening, I am drawing together varied spaces of 'collective' or 'public' being (Amin 2012), from the workplace to urban space, to spaces projected with conceptions of intimate publics, tropes of imagined community or notions of 'common' territory. Urban public spaces, in particular, negotiate the freedom of living with strangers, with the necessity for cohesiveness and belonging (Amin 2012; Bounds 2020). This tension is resolved through forms of participation in the public realm; performances of constructed collective identity, and belief in a state contract to protect, respond and intervene. However, as feminist research on non-commensurable experiences of urban landscapes has made clear, these spaces are only safe, accessible and public for some

(Burgess et al. 1988). In this research to date, it is notable that only male preppers tied an awakening narrative into estrangement, exposure or absence in public space, lending weight to the suggestion that prepper awakenings involve a rupture in a prior sense of security and expectation of reciprocity between self and world.

A body of work in geography has sought to disturb the supposed 'co-presence of self and landscape' (Wylie 2009, 282), attending to the way absence can enter into and disrupt frames of perception (Whale and Ginn 2017). Wylie (2009,279) argues that this is not about 'bringing to light [what was] previously hidden or lost' but seeing absence at the heart of the point of view of a landscape. Such absent presences were powerfully conveyed in an exchange with 'Rick,' a heavily militarized survivalist-prepper I first met at an annual prepper camp in 2018. Held on a sweltering weekend on a farm in southern England, I'd walked up to the water standpipe at the top of the camping field and was joined by Rick, who probed me suspiciously about the research. We stood, looking out over the event field surrounded by woodland copses and rolling green fields, ringed with tents and land rovers with side-awnings in camouflage and muted greens, tables selling army surplus, or wares simply laid out on the parched grass. The British flag hung loosely on a flagpole at the centre of the field; the weekend spanned Armed Forces Day and a last-post salute was planned for sunset. For Rick, prepping was a continuum of the practices and affective state he developed in the army, and his awakening narrative depicted the shock of the ordinary experienced after leaving active service and returning to a home rendered unfamiliar through his experiences. Before finding a home in prepping, he struggled to reconcile himself with the disinterest or blissful ignorance he felt radiating from scenes of public life in the UK, towards the military activities we *'have to thank'* for the security enjoyed at home. *"All this didn't come for free, most* [people] *have got no fucking idea what's going on, right now!"* he complained, gesturing out across the supposedly bucolic countryside scene.

This absence can also refer directly to that of the state, embodied in dashed expectations of emergency response during crisis events. 'Luke' makes unbagging videos for YouTube, talking through different aspects of his prepping kit and reviewing survival items. In one, he discusses his motivations for undertaking advanced first-aid training and why he always carries a FAK, reflecting on a train crash experienced during a frequently made commute. He describes his exposure and isolation, as if the only person in the world left conscious, during *'what felt like hours'* before the emergency services arrived. He expresses deep regret for being unprepared to help others during this 'last man' role thrust upon him (Horn 2014), and his desire to always be ready for next time. His prepping is driven not by a paranoia assumed of survivalists that 'the government is coming for me', but by the belief that 'the government

isn't coming for me' (Bounds 2020,16). In his affective state of ongoing readiness, both the next emergency and the imagined absence of emergency services response to it, is presenced in his experience of public space.

For 'Chris' it was a new way of seeing the previously veiled presence of crisis in his hometown during police training, which contributed to his awakening. *'I thought [it] was perfect…then I found out it had a massive cocaine problem!…this concept of what I perceived my world to be was very rose-tinted…I saw things…the worst of people'.* After being jolted out of this false reality into 'the Real', Chris describes his newfound awareness of the fragility of the moral contract, awakening to the 'veneer of civilisation' (Bauman, 2007):

> [D]uring my time with the police, you realise that society has a very thin veil [laughing], and then you start looking into details about – and as you start researching it and looking more into it, you find youTube videos and you find communities, and you get to know people, and you share concepts and conversations, suddenly, your appreciation for how fragile our society is…becomes very, very apparent.

The moment during police training he pinpoints as his awakening was whilst participating as a volunteer in an urban chemical weapons attack scenario. Chris describes a chilling sense of isolation and alienation experienced when stripped down, sprayed and scrubbed with brooms by masked personnel. Sitting around afterwards with other trainee police officers, he related their conversation: *"this is real! This could really happen!" And they were like, "Oh yeah, well, it would never happen, would it?" I said, "Then why are they practising it?" And the point was…*this is real*... And that was kind of very much my, em, what we refer to as an "awakening."*

Here, the scenario exercise has achieved a sense of the uncanny by, in Freud's (1919,7) words 'effacing the distinction between imagination and reality…' creating uncertainty as to whether Chris is performing in 'the real world' or 'a purely fantastic one'. Scenario exercises are an established mode of making catastrophe an operable terrain within the everyday and familiar, used by security planners seeking to overcome the disconnect between future crisis and the motivation to act in the present (Linnell 2019). Now the leader of an online prepping group with a public 'educative' front and closed, invite-only group, Chris hosts bug-out weekends and designs scenarios with the aim of facilitating awakening experiences in others.

This capacity to see the absent presence of crisis and insecurity in the landscape, draws attention to awakening's sensorial shifts. Preppers describe their awakened state as an expansion in the field of vision. As Ian articulated:

> It is quite an eye-opener. I mean, you don't realise…until you look, you don't know what's around you, and this, I find, makes you look a whole lot more…for me, it's like opening your eyes again…I'm noticing things that you just wouldn't notice normally before… I've had my eyes opened – put it that way.

Berlant (2011,8), argues that 'reflexive scanning' - a regime of visibility developed as a survival response to urban cognitive overload - 'no longer [relieves], but rather exemplifies the mass sensorium engendered by problems of survival…' in late modernity. Lasch (1984, 94) also draws on visual metaphors in portraying how the 'everyday' survivor 'keeps his [sic] eyes fixed on the road just ahead', a 'radical restriction of perspective' to avoid dwelling on the past or looking too far into the future. Preppers, in contrast, display a new affective survival condition, a form of hypervigilance to the potentiality of crisis, as 'Richard' an affluent, middle-class prepper describes:

> It's like you are the AI of disaster if you like, both financial, political and ecological. You really know your stuff, and if you could, run the AI programmes and watch a simulation, like you've got so much of that knowledge in your head.

'James' described how he sees and scans public space, identifying 'safe spaces' as he moves through the city. The regime of visibility preppers awaken to therefore allows them to see the absent presence of crisis as a reality in the full breadth of its ongoing possibility, as Whale and Ginn (2017,106), in the context of declining biodiversity, write: 'crisis is neither simply absent nor simply present. Rather it is something possible; something that might be there … but which might not make itself known.'

4. CONCLUSION

> "[T]he Badiouian Event… exists only for those who recognise themselves in it: there can be no Event for a non-engaged objective observer. …The starting point for this struggle is to become terrified by oneself" (Zizek 2010, p.xiv)

Prepper awakening narratives tell of the instance, when finally created in the image it so desires, that the autonomous modern subject becomes terrified by itself. In the moment of awakening, there is a sudden realisation of distance from the modern subject who kept veiled the smoothly functioning infrastructure and pristine networks of support to thank for its survival (Kaika 2008; Head 2016). This perception of modern life as defined by our complete dependence on intricate, implacable, supremely sophisticated life-support systems, collapses (Lasch 1984). Like urban modernity disorientation (Simmel 1903), our contemporary crisis of

the real stems from overwhelm prompted by relational entanglements. However, as the veil is lifted, the shock – and grief (Head 2016) - is not of the existence of these relations with the world. The realisation is that our dependency is on an absence; on social, technological and political infrastructure that is disintegrating and failing under regimes of austerity and overlapping crises that are exceptionalised or largely ignored by hollowed-out state institutions (Berlant 2011). Preppers awaken through the uncanny realisation of the ease of our disconnection and abandonment, to face crisis alone. If we have never been a true modern (Head 2016; Latour 1994), preppers tell us: we are now.

Berlant's (2011) thesis on cruel optimism as an attachment to conventional good life fantasies describes something of the condition of sleeping from which preppers awake. To the 'fraying fantasies' that Berlant (2011) attends, of upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and durable intimacy, preppers add the fantasy of health protection, the well-provisioned and secure home, and state support in crisis. Through awakening, the self detaches from normative promises of security; shattering forms of relational subjectification based around the healthy body, the sheltering home and the safe public sphere. It is belief in 'security's…promise of survival' (Caduff 2015, 115) preppers tell us, which embeds the threat of cascading social chaos in societies yet to truly awaken to the ongoing potentiality of catastrophe. Preppers come to view the non-prepping world as if watching that part in the disaster movie where one character says – even as the key catastrophic event is in train - 'don't worry, *it'll never happen.'* What is meant is: it'll never happen here and now, to us, to people like me. To push back on this exceptionalism and denial, we need to become terrified by our modern selves.

Awakenings have been described as experiences of physiological integration, where previously repressed material from the unconsciousness emerges to be integrated into conscious awareness (Cameron 2013). Across these awakening narratives where a sense of the uncanny is related, something 'long known' is confirmed at the moment that the familiar/homely withdraws (Freud 1919). Crisis, insecurity and precarity are therefore scripted not just as ordinary crises but as the 'real' bedrock of contemporary life. This complicates the exceptionalism of the trauma narrative rupturing the ordinary, as Berlant (2011) critiques. In awakening through a crisis *of* the real, crisis is exposed *as* the real, and that reality is of our harsh sovereignty and alienation due to 'crushed institutions, broken infrastructures, and minimal care' (Caduff 2015,115). If awakening causes 'insurrection at the level of ontology, a critical opening up of the questions, what is real? Whose lives are real?' (Butler 2004, 33, in Yusoff 2012), the answer for preppers is: crisis is real, and my life is real to crisis. The construction of non-crisis as normative realism, and the security entitlement that

sustains a belief in our swift 'return to normal', only masks this repressed awareness. Preppers therefore extend the meaning-eroding forces of modernity, by acknowledging that they mean nothing to the state and have no privilege over others to avoid their coincidence with crisis. They re-construct meaning – and imaginative privilege - around their own responsibility and capacity to survive.

Awakenings involve a remaking of the subject in relation to world-making moments, yet prepper awakenings do not fully repay this favour. Emerging in 'periods of cultural distortion and grave personal stress, when we lose faith in the legitimacy of our norms, the viability of our institutions, and the authority of our leaders' (McLoughlin 1978,2), they are prompted by crises wider society chooses to be 'insensible of,' those co-present future realities hidden in plain view (Yusoff 2012). Yet prepping does not seem to disturb, in Ranciere's (2004) terms, the order of the sensible, where the distribution of things and bodies is set and what is to be seen and heard is defined and regulated. The prepper subjectivity nevertheless emerges and is constituted in the thrust of the awakening event, through a personal conflict with their previous position in the order of the sensible. While this reveals the cracks in that order, it does not in itself lead to a renewed moment of politics or the production of revolutionary consciousness. The promise of awakening in its coupling of emotion and agency does not on its own offer, to the problem of our emotional frigidity and inaction in the face of the crises of the Anthropocene, an unbroken package of affective and agential opportunity. Schneider-Mayerson (2015) condemns the perceived libertarian individualism of prepping, pointing out that individualism is a distinctly raced and gendered philosophy. Awakening narratives, however, are defined by a shock of autonomy, revealing that prepping itself does not stem from a desire for or celebration of autonomy (Mol 2008,47). Bounds (2020,15) in her research with predominantly black prepping groups in NYC, argues that in certain forms prepping constitutes political engagement and an expression of the right to recognition. While those retreating to bunkers are for the most part "powerful elites choos[ing] isolation over democracy," "[f]or people of color who believe that their communities may have been underserved during previous disasters, prepping represents agency and a demand for recognition to address inequalities in the distribution of resources and aid."

Prepping points towards a new form of affective survival response. This is a markedly different after-story to the betrayal of cruel optimism than Berlant's (2011) 'crypt of shattered being.' It contrasts to the 'selective apathy, emotional disengagement from others, [and] renunciation of the past and the future,' techniques of emotional survival Lasch (1984,57) describes. Awakening stories express vital frisson, rather than immobilising dread, in the awareness of exposure. The real is recrafted, not as a terrifying place of trauma (Zizek 2010;

Berlant 2011), but as a space of self-reliance and resourcefulness, a place of purpose. As Vigh (2008,10) writes: 'crisis is fragmentation… yet this experience … does not necessarily lead to passivity'. In the space after awakening dependencies are rescripted, new forms of proximity, reciprocity and belonging crafted, and new fictions of safety and attachment written through trusted equipment, the skilled body, and prepping friendships and communities.

Frank (1995) details the loss of desire that illness can bring, confounding forms of forward planning and investment in the future (why buy shoes, why have dental work?). *'Hope for the best, prepare for the worst'* is a common prepper adage. But what form does this 'hope' take, and how will 'the worst' be distributed? Preppers are often asked why they would want to survive into the catastrophic worlds they imagine; and are misconceived as waiting and wanting for catastrophe to happen (Barker 2020). But if left with no choice, in a position of distributed culpability but perceived powerlessness in the face of implacable crisis futures, preppers choose to imagine they will survive, or even thrive. They hold on to an aspiration for the good future emergent from the present, even as crisis becomes their 'lived truth' (Head 2016).

> I know it might not seem like a hopeful thing to do. But true nihilism would be just not having any cash or food – just, oh it will be alright. That's true nihilism. Like actually being committed to the ongoing future of your household is actually the hopeful act… [I]f you boil it down, it's just a symptom of love…('Rebecca').

This hope of survival affirms the possibility of other worlds, *'after the world.'* It may feel like meagre pickings on which to build a pro-active emotional response to the Anthropocene. But survival may yet have something to teach us about regaining desire for the future (Frank 1995).

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