

APOCALYPSE

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D. Introduction (length depends on the topic describing importance of subject and content)

It would be helpful to know how other contributors have organised their introduction. My preference would be to keep this very short – a summary of the chapter; little more than an abstract, really – and to describe the importance of subject and content in the actual body of the chapter. Does this seem okay?

E. Main Text

Three Strands of Apocalyptic Thinking

Veteran environmental activist Bill McKibben begins his latest monograph, *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?*, with a contemplation of the diversity of human experience: “the sum total of culture and commerce and politics; of religion and sports and social life; of dance and music; of dinner and art and cancer and sex and Instagram; of love and loss” (McKibben 2019: 8). This extraordinary tangle, McKibben asserts, is threatened by the unfolding climate emergency. “We are putting the human game at risk”, he writes, and have already “changed the board on which the game is played, and in more profound ways than almost anyone now imagines” (McKibben 2019: 15). In what follows, McKibben describes climate breakdown as a cataclysmic event that will mark the end of familiar (human) habits, comforts and places. He warns his readers about the arrival of a radically different future. “The world we’ve known”, he remarks, “is quickly being replaced by a new one” (McKibben 2019: 60). McKibben’s approach contains all the ingredients of apocalyptic thinking. The North American climate campaigner does not profess his personal faith, or offer any lessons about values or expectations that are conventionally associated with apocalyptic religion, such as divine judgement, the cleansing of human fault, triumph over death, or eternal peace. Nevertheless, his attitude towards past, present, and future clearly recalls the rhetorical conventions of apocalypticism, in both its ancient religious and modern secular forms. McKibben imagines the future as a period of cataclysmic change: a new world. He describes the many environmental crises of our age – record temperatures, pollution, extreme weather events, and so on – as harbingers of an age of planetary catastrophe that has yet to come. Moreover, McKibben views the present as a unique turning point in the unidirectional unfolding of history: the moment before the end. Or, as he puts it: “we’ve got a window, even if it’s closing at exponential speed” (McKibben 2019: 198). In the central chapters of his book, McKibben elaborates on this idea when he scrutinizes contemporary social attitudes and political-philosophical orientations, and invites his readers to consider their quotidian routines as symptoms of social and planetary decay. We must change our lives, McKibben insists, because individual human actions are observable causes of global heating. Carbon dioxide emissions have tipped the planet’s biological and geochemical systems towards progressive

devastation, and are triggering a series of overlapping environmental catastrophes. Extinction rates have grown disproportionately, as a result of habitat destruction, pollution, invasive species, human population growth, and overharvesting. Evolutionary biologists have warned that a mass extinction of species – only the sixth to occur in the 3.5 billion years of life on Earth – is taking place in our present, as a result of human activities. Just as importantly, for McKibben, many humans appear to have lost touch with more-than-human nature. Unthinkingly, we take finite resources for granted and act without meaningful attention to the complexity and precarious equilibrium of holocene ecosystems. In McKibben’s eyes, the alienating patterns of everyday life in advanced capitalist societies are concrete, tangible anticipations of the broken world that awaits us. They appear to him like empty rituals of a humanity who has lost its sense of planetary belonging. McKibben demands that we imagine afresh what it means to be human, and re-think all aspects of public and private life in view of the imminent, near-certain collapse of human civilizations. In this way, he adopts and promotes a cognitive stance that comparatist and poet Michael André Bernstein, a prominent critic of the apocalyptic imagination, has called *foreshadowing*: “a technique whose enactment can vary tremendously in its degree of intricacy, but whose logic must always value the present, not for itself, but as the harbinger of an already determined future” (Bernstein 1994: 2).

In sum, *Falter* provides a good illustration of the rhetorical power of apocalypticism and of the structural similarities between religious and secular visions of end time. It also exemplifies the pervasiveness of apocalyptic thinking in Twenty-First Century culture, across widely different political contexts. Visions of the end of the world are, of course, a dominant theme in popular entertainment, and endlessly re-iterated in films, television series, literature, and gaming (Szendy 2015; Tate 2017; De Cristofaro 2020). But they also inform political debates. Like McKibben, many contemporary environmental writers and climate activists employ the rhetorical conventions of apocalypse, even if they show no personal interest in religious faith. Human rights campaigners, critics of advanced capitalism, and analysts of global existential risk also adopt the language of the Biblical Book of Revelation. At the opposite end of the political spectrum, ethnonationalists and ideologues of the far right have rallied in defence of toxic fantasies of the ethnically homogenous nation, couching their dislike for migrants, minorities, and persons of colour in similarly apocalyptic terms. In an important, recent study, *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism*, Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective describe the rise of far-right apocalypticism, since at least 2016, as a sinister, convulsive response to global heating: a violent vindication of the material interests of

dominant (white) groups in the Global North, and a sign of the progressive breakdown of essential forms of transnational and intergenerational solidarity (Malm and Zetkin Collective 2021). More traditional explanations of far-right apocalypticism have highlighted the connection between white supremacists and evangelical Protestants, especially in the United States, where a dense network of seminaries, bookstores, publishing houses, and radio and television stations, has granted Christian fundamentalists considerable power over presidential elections, and domestic and foreign policies (McQueen 2017: 3-6).

Evangelical Christians are extravagant readers of the Bible: they search the Book of Revelation for hidden clues to unfolding (apocalyptic) events, and assume that a proper understanding of the scriptures will help them prepare for the imminent return of Christ and, until then, ensure their survival in a deeply hostile world (Gribben 2009). This literalist approach to the scriptures has long been a hotbed of political extremism and countercultural violence, and has inspired attacks against the modern state, at least since the days of Martin Luther and Thomas Müntzer. As sociologist John R. Hall points out, “states [have] become increasingly successful at confining and pacifying religious dispensations of the apocalyptic, or relegating them to the fringes” (Hall 2009: 159). Nevertheless, literalist and prophetic interpretations of the Biblical Book of Apocalypse persist as an organizing motif in Christian fundamentalism and political radicalism, especially in the United States. “The apocalyptic imagination”, notes sociologist John Wallis, “has a tendency to conceive the world in starkly dualistic terms [...] There are, in other words, no shades of grey within apocalypticism, nor any moral ambiguity” (Wallis 2006: 28). For the apocalyptic believer, events cohere as part of a universal, apocalyptic plan; actual or perceived opponents are traitors or agents of evil; the sense of an imminent end of history inspires plans of empowerment, and calls for ruthless action. The Revelation of John, with its mythic and graphic description of end-time conflict, provides a compelling context for such narratives of apocalyptic bloodshed. Revelation, according to feminist theologian Tina Pippin, is a source of “sublime horror”, a celebration of sadistic violence that casts its shadow on other public expressions of religious faith (Pippin 1999). In her wide-ranging study, *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media into the Twenty-First Century*, novelist and cultural historian Marina Warner comments on this characteristic of the apocalyptic imagination when she remarks that “the present disturbing diffusion of this biblical book [Revelation] has a new, unexamined moral force, a redundant nastiness, the kind that many centuries of thought about justice and humanity have striven to put aside” (Warner 2006: 380).

Evangelical Protestantism has been analysed by many political scientists as an ideological substratum of the apocalyptic far right, especially in the United States (Hall 2009: 152-56; McQueen 2017). But Christian fundamentalism also deserves consideration as a cultural and political phenomenon in its own right. As social scientist Michael Barkun explains, the growing influence of Evangelical Protestants can be gathered from the near-ubiquity of their apocalyptic worldviews in contemporary popular culture (Barkun 2006). Melodramatic narratives of end time and global catastrophe abound in social media, Hollywood movies, and internationally successful television series. They also inspire protest movements across the globe. In many parts of the world, growing numbers of people live in irrational fear of hidden, dark forces that operate conspiratorially, and whose indestructible tentacles, for them, appear to extend everywhere. This said, only a small percentage of popular narratives of apocalypse, in twenty-first century culture, are overtly religious. As literary critic W. Warren Wagar explained forty years ago, modern literature is not concerned with eschatology in the original sense of religious teaching about the end, but rather with “disaster in the highest order of magnitude: the idea of the end of the world [...] as a creative act of the secular imagination” (Wagar 1982: 5).

Needless to say, there are profound differences between apocalyptic environmentalists, evangelical Christians, and far-right conspiracy theorists. Although they share an expectation of global catastrophe, these groups operate on the basis of different ontologies, and draw radically different conclusions, at the level of politics and ethics. From a political perspective, these differences weigh more heavily than the linguistic and rhetorical similarities which they share in common. And yet, similarities of style and form are a striking indicator of deep, common cultural roots. Millenarians, environmental campaigners, and ethnonationalists borrow from the same apocalyptic tradition and seek to place this tradition in relation to the interpreter’s own circumstances, whether personal or social. In this way, they mould the contours of contemporary debates, and raise public awareness of existential risk and the possibility of global disaster. As philosopher Slavoj Žižek puts it: “an event first experienced as real but impossible (the prospect of a forthcoming catastrophe which, however probably it may be, is effectively dismissed as impossible) becomes real and no longer impossible” (Žižek 210: 328). In other words, contemporary representations of political and military conflict, environmental hazard, and economic risk function as *actualizations* of apocalyptic eschatology: despite their prevalently secular orientations, they affirm the ongoing relevance of century-old visions of end time (Kovacs and Rowland 2004: 7-11). The “post-secular” imagination, to use Jürgen Habermas’ influential term, challenges the hegemony of

institutionalised religion but remains steeped in the dark language and violent symbolism of John of Patmos (Habermas 2001). Twenty-first century culture perpetuates a fascination with radical rupture and catastrophic closure that has its cultural origins in Ancient Judaism and early Christianity. Contemporary discussions of the future remain disproportionately focused on world-altering events (catastrophism), and on ominous markers of the apocalypse-to-come. This tendency, and an apocalyptic sense of urgency, are clearly recognisable in McKibben's book: "We are faltering now", he writes, "and the human game has indeed begun to play itself out. That's what the relentless rise in temperature tells us, and the fact that we increasingly spend out days staring glumly at the rectangle in our palm" (McKibben 2019: 255).

Critical Posthumanism in an Age of Apocalyptic Anxiety

How does this proliferation of apocalyptic images and modes of thinking relate to the political and cultural agenda of critical posthumanism? According to Rosi Braidotti, the emergence of posthuman theory constitutes a response to three momentous and interconnecting pressures on anthropocentric and humanistic worldviews: the "posthuman convergence" (Braidotti 2019:10). First, posthuman discourse echoes the existential importance and impact of scientific advances, especially in genomics, robotics, and digital technology. Secondly, it warns against the unfolding collapse of more-than-human ecosystems through global heating, extreme weather events, rising sea levels, pollution, mass extinction, and so on. Finally, at the social level, it highlights structural injustices that result from an increasingly unequal distribution of wealth and power. As a political and social movement, critical posthumanism responds to these challenges by foregrounding affirmative ethics and situated and relational forms of empathy, responsibility, and care. It challenges the social hierarchies, cultural traditions, and knowledge practices of anthropocentric humanism, and especially its dominant idea of the human, which is "based on an assumption of superiority by a subject that is male, white, Eurocentric, practicing compulsory heterosexuality and reproduction, able-bodied, urbanized, speaking a standard language" (Braidotti 2022: 10). As a theory of knowledge, critical posthumanism dislodges the abstract, interchangeable, autonomous individual of liberal moral-political theory (Herbrechter 2013). As a cultural practice, it focuses on the experiences and interests of those who have been excluded from power and constructed as sexualized, racialized or naturalized others.

Can these goals and perspectives be expressed in the imaginative language of the apocalypse? At a superficial level, secular apocalypticism appears resonant with the radical, emancipatory worldview and progressive politics of critical posthumanism. Indeed, apocalyptic thinking has underpinned numerous attempts to dislodge Eurocentric, humanistic, and anthropocentric habits of thought. Lawrence Buell, for example, has shown that the cultural and political influence of mainstream North American environmentalism, from Rachel Carson to Al Gore, owes much to the apocalyptic tradition. According to the literary scholar, “apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (Buell 1995: 285). Similarly, historians of decolonization have underlined the importance of apocalyptic thinking in the works of anticolonial thinkers such as W.E.B. Dubois, Aimé Césaire, and Frantz Fanon. Biblical apocalypse functions here as an symbolic precursor of twentieth-century anticolonial protest movements, through the imaginative approaches of critics, who find inspiration in John of Patmos’ discursive resistance against Empire (Young 2016: 159-292). A compelling example of this actualization of Biblical eschatology is provided by poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant, who notoriously glosses the Book of Revelation in the well-known opening chapter of his *Poetics of Relation*. Here the belly of a slave ship is compared to the Biblical image of the bottomless pit, and the debasement of deported Africans is described as “more eternal than apocalypse” (Glissant 1997: 6). Similarly, and closer to the time of this writing, Greta Thunberg, has evoked the dualism of the apocalyptic imagination – the idea of an ultimate battle between good and evil – in her repeated appeals to cut carbon emissions now: “Because if the emissions have to stop, then we must stop the emissions. To me that is black and white. There are no grey areas when it comes to survival” (Klein 2019: 15).

But is this strategy politically effective? In an age of posthuman convergence, can the rhetoric of apocalypse really serve to tackle the complex social and political challenges that emerge from advanced technologies, growing inequality, and accelerating environmental crisis? At first glance, many contemporary theorists of the posthuman appear sympathetic to the apocalyptic imagination. Timotheus Vermeulen, for example, cites Naomi Klein to describe apocalypse literature as “a fully rational response to the unbearable reality that we are living in a dying world, a world that a great many of us are helping to kill” (Klein 2014: 28, cited in Vermeulen 2018: 129). According to the Norwegian media theorist, environmental collapse is not a problem that can be pictured in conventional literary ways, but the beginning of the end of numerous species, including, perhaps, homo sapiens. This experience of existential crisis,

according to Vermeulen, finds its most appropriate expression in contemporary (post-)apocalyptic novels, films, and media. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), for example, is described by Vermeulen as "less a response to a particular problem than, if you allow me to stretch the term, an experiential *a priori* that informs every possible problem (Vermeulen 2018: 127). In other words, the (post-)apocalyptic imagination, for Vermeulen, speaks to the pressures of our age, because it transcends the Romantic focus on place that still prevails in conventional nature writing. In this way, it serves to reveal patterns of destruction that have been unfolding since the birth of the fossil economy, and whose devastating consequences are becoming deeper, clearer, and more frequent with every year that passes.

Vermeulen's fascination with the apocalyptic imagination, however, is not fully representative of the critical post-humanities. A closer inspection of this multidisciplinary field reveals deep-seated and growing mistrust of apocalyptic thinking. Philosopher and literary critic Timothy Morton, for example, has warned that imaginative engagement with the end of the world can distract audiences from the global environmental catastrophe that is already happening all around us. Apocalypse fiction, as he puts it, is "a way for us to try to install ourselves at a fictional point in time before global warming happened" (Morton 2018: xxiii). Similarly, Naomi Klein has argued that apocalyptic narratives are largely ineffective as a way of raising political awareness, especially in relation to climate breakdown. In her latest book, *On Fire: The (Burning) Case for a Green New Deal*, the Canadian author describes our obsession with global catastrophe as a form of escapism:

One minute we're sharing articles about the insect apocalypse and viral videos of walrus falling off cliffs because sea ice loss has destroyed their habitat and the next we're online shopping and wilfully turning our minds into Swiss cheese by scrolling through Twitter or Instagram. Or else we're binge-watching Netflix shows about the zombie apocalypse that turn our terrors into entertainment, while tacitly confirming that the future ends in collapse anyway, so why bother trying to stop the inevitable? (Klein 2019: 15).

A different, but similarly influential critique of apocalyptic thinking holds that the eschatological imagination, with its characteristic focus on the cleansing of human guilt, is structurally anthropocentric, and therefore politically ineffective. Literary scholar Greg Garrard, for instance, has claimed that apocalypse literature is complicit with the imaginative

traditions of Eurocentric humanism, and that both worldviews share a tendency to reduce complex issues to a “monocausal crisis involving conflicts between recognizably opposed groups” (Garrard 2011: 105). Astrid Bracke elaborates on this idea in her recent work on British climate fiction, and reminds her readers that “human minds are best at grasping events and environments on a medium scale” (Bracke 2018: 27). Apocalyptic storytelling, according to Bracke, is hampered by this shortfall of the human imagination, and by our inability to conceive and represent non-anthropocentric geological and climactic timescales. Much environmental damage happens at a scale that cannot be fully expressed by traditional modes of literary representation, including modern, secular apocalypse fiction. Global heating is brought about by individual human actions which are not ecologically significant in themselves but which collectively, across space and over time, threaten much of what we value about humanity and the more-than-human world. As ecocritic Timothy Clark has explained, this relation between individual, observable causes and vast global effects marks a stark challenge to anthropocentric narratives: “issues such as global warming or ocean acidification, so overwhelming in scale, can threaten to dwarf any individual or state action, even as both phenomena cannot immediately be seen, localised, or in many cases, even acknowledged” (Clark 2019: 38). Similarly, the temporality of species extinction runs counter to established, apocalyptic ideas of environmental collapse as catastrophic rupture. Anthropologist Thom van Dooren explains this as follows:

I have become acutely aware that extinction is never a sharp, singular event – something that begins, rapidly takes place, and then is over and done with. Rather, the edge of extinction is more often a ‘dull’ one: a slow unravelling of intimately entangled ways of life that begins long before the death of the last individual and continues to ripple forward long afterward, drawing in living beings in a range of different ways (Van Dooren 2014: 12).

Environmental thinkers, in brief, agree that the climate catastrophe requires new forms of multiscale literacy. We must learn to express and relate different and counterintuitive scales and points of view, beyond what is revealed by immediate human perception. Apocalypse literature, by contrast, tends to reduce planetary catastrophe to a temporal scale that is suitable to human understanding: the end of the world is imagined as an event that will take place within our lifetimes.

As we have seen, cultural attention to linear time and world-shattering rupture, in apocalyptic discourse, stands in the way of more complex and probing critical engagements with non-human temporalities. Ivan Callus, Stefan Herbrechter, and Manuela Rossini, among others, have described this attention to more-than-human temporal scales as a methodological core and philosophical basis of critical posthumanism (Callus, Herbrechter and Rossini 2016: 1-18). As Herbrechter points out, posthumanism should not be viewed, simplistically, as a follow-on or supersession of anthropocentrism, but rather needs to be understood as a deconstruction of “the metaphysics that is at work in the idea of the ‘disappearance of man’” (Herbrechter 2013: 15). Posthuman scholars like Herbrechter and Braidotti have also stressed the relational bond and symbiotic continuum between human and non-human worlds. These worlds are profoundly entangled, and moulded by the same natural and historical forces. They are similarly shaped by the collisions, frictions, confluences, and intimacies between species, or, in the words of Stacy Alaimo, by “the literal contact zone between human corporeality and more-than-human nature” (Alaimo 2010: 2). In her influential work on the syncopated and juxtaposed temporalities of biological and economic growth, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing has described this attention to time, in critical posthumanism, as a commitment to living and dying in more-than-human communities (Tsing 2015). Apocalyptic universalism, with its conventional focus on “man”, appears to lack attention to such nuances. In this way, it risks to obscure the experiences and interests of those who have been exploited and marginalized by imperialist and patriarchal governance. It also limits our awareness of the disproportionately negative impact of environmental degradation on the poorest, and thereby risks to undermine the success of political campaigns for climate justice. In the words of literary scholar Steven Mentz, eschatological narratives of climate breakdown reduce every account of environmental degradation to the familiar “apocalyptic story in which Old Man Anthropos destroys the world” (Mentz 2019: 1).

Literary critic Elizabeth DeLoughrey develops this idea in her recent, paradigmatic study of Anthropocene discourse: *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (2019). The North American scholar challenges the universalizing focus on novelty and catastrophic rupture in contemporary environmentalism. According to DeLoughrey, apocalyptic thinking threatens to erase plural histories of ecological violence and imperialist exploitation, from transatlantic European colonization to the modern fossil fuel industry. Indigenous and decolonial perspectives, she argues, hold the power to remind us that the “catastrophic ruptures to social and ecological

systems have already been experienced through the violent processes of empire. In other words, the apocalypse has already happened; it continues because empire is a process” (DeLoughrey 2019: 2). Similarly, Elizabeth A. Povinelli, has invited her readers to address the contemporary experience of climatic, environmental, and social collapse on a temporal scale that transcends the present, and to imagine catastrophe not as a future event that will constitute a new and dramatic beginning, but as an ancestral condition of entangled human and more-than-human life:

The ancestral catastrophe is not the same kind of thing-event as the coming catastrophe, nor does it operate with the same temporality. When we begin with the catastrophe of colonialism and enslavement, the location of contemporary climatic, environmental, and social collapse rotates and mutates into something else entirely. Ancestral catastrophes are past and present; they keep arriving out of the ground of colonialism and racism rather than emerging over the horizon of liberal progress (Povinelli 2021: 3).

What does it mean to imagine apocalypse as an ancestral catastrophe? As we will see in the second part of this chapter, Povinelli’s and DeLoughrey’s re-orientation of apocalyptic thinking unlocks the potential of eschatology as an affirmative, situated critique of naturalized, sexualized, and racialized hierarchies of power. It embraces the ontological and political arguments of critical posthumanism and its constituent challenge to teleological, apocalyptic worldviews. At the same time, it echoes the sense of extreme political urgency that typically characterises apocalyptic accounts of the contemporary, and thereby gives a new radical edge to critical posthumanism. In this way, it paves the road for a new apocalyptic imagination, which addresses the climate emergency as a dynamic opening: an invitation to re-think categories of place and space, not in terms of eschatological closure, but as states of protracted uncertainty. A critical posthumanist articulation of apocalyptic thinking, then, can serve as the basis for new political, artistic, and epistemic modes. It calls attention to the vulnerability and value of human and non-human life on a warming planet. Most importantly, it does not require us to reject the apocalyptic imagination *tout court*, but can be achieved through a focused and nuanced engagement with its intrinsic plurality.

Futurity and Rupture

Across all shades of the cultural spectrum, people share a fascination with future catastrophe. The “end of the world” has inspired blockbusters, videogames, academic conferences, artwork, and music. In their important analysis of this cultural phenomenon, *The Ends of the World*, philosopher Déborah Danowski and anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro have suggested that the enjoyment of fictional apocalypse, until recently, appeared to be a privilege of the relatively affluent: planetary elites, upwardly mobile middle classes, and, more generally, inhabitants of the Global North, who imagined themselves safe from the environmental and social consequences of civilisational or climate breakdown. Film studios and publishing houses kept these audiences entertained with a seemingly interminable stream of near-identical narratives of collapse, in an atmosphere of otherwise unperturbed optimism about the future and without any evident awareness of the apparent contradictions that this entailed. According to a frequently cited *bon mot*, people found it easier to fantasise about the end of world than to imagine the end of capitalism (Žižek 2010: x). Cultural theorist Evan Calder Williams has described this public and commercial interest in apocalypse as a schizophrenic obsession with civilisational collapse and mass death, in a world that believes itself to be never-ending. Apocalyptic blockbusters, according to Williams, are “visions of frozen decay, a halted approximation of the process of disappearance that serves only to insist on stasis” (Williams 2011: 92). Three decades earlier, novelist V.S. Naipaul had already mocked the Western appetite for apocalypse in his bleak masterpiece, *A Bend in the River*. In a key scene of this novel, Salim, a survivor of violence and persecution, observes a gathering of European and North American academics at a newly opened campus university in post-Independence Africa, hears them listen to protest songs by Joan Baez, and quips:

You couldn't listen to sweet songs about injustice unless you expected justice and received it much of the time. You couldn't sing songs about the end of the world unless – like the other people in that room, so beautiful with such simple things: African mats on the floor and African hangings on the wall and spears and masks – you felt that the world was going on and you were safe in it. How easy it was, in that room, to make those assumptions! (Naipaul 2002: 149).

The climate catastrophe has made it difficult, for anybody, to imagine that our familiar world will simply “go on”. As Danowski and Viveiros de Castro point out, global environmental

breakdown is likely to “drag with it a sizeable portion of human population, obviously beginning with the destitute masses that inhabit the ghettos and garbage dumps of the world system”, but ultimately hitting the majority of human and non-human life on the planet (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017: 2). While this definitely puts a damper on our enjoyment of apocalyptic movies, it also has consequences for the scholarly study of apocalypse. Danowski and Viveiros de Castro argue that present-day narratives of planetary collapse no longer belong to any particular philosophical, cultural, or religious tradition. They are not the exclusive domain of Judaism and Christianity, or even of those self-styled “moderns”, who, in Bruno Latour’s words, coined the idea of man as a “being par excellence capable of extricating itself from nature [...] thanks to its soul, its culture, or its intelligence” (Latour 2018: 85-86). On the contrary, the end of the world has become, in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s words, a “shared catastrophe” (Chakrabarty 2009: 218, cited in Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017: 81). Apocalypse is darkly relevant relevant to all potential human victims of environmental collapse, and therefore to all present and future people on Earth. As Danowski and Viveiros de Castro point out, this also includes those who have resisted the ideological strictures of religious apocalyptic thinking and who are sceptical of its focus on linear time and catastrophe-as-event. The two Brazilian intellectuals express this idea through a quotation from German-Jewish philosopher and environmentalist Günther Anders:

If we distinguish ourselves from classic Judeo-Christian apocalypics, it is not only because we fear the end (which they, in turn, hoped for), but above all because our apocalyptic passion has no other goal than to prevent the apocalypse. *We are apocalyptic only so we can be wrong* (Anders 2003: 158, cited in Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017: 84; their emphasis).

What does this mean for our understanding of the apocalyptic imagination? Fascination with apocalyptic stories and beliefs spans many periods and contexts, from Gilgamesh to twenty-first century zombie fiction. In this broadest and most comprehensive sense, the apocalyptic imagination is not limited to any particular cultural tradition or indicative of any given worldview or set of values. It cannot be reduced to a single motif, genre, medium, or horizon of expectation, and finds expression in religious and secular discourse alike. It contains the emblematic narratives of Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity, in which angels, demons, and divine judgment play an essential part (Yarbro Collins 1997). But, as we have seen, it also includes literary and filmic representations of environmental catastrophe, nuclear war, plague,

and alien invasion. In its modern and contemporary forms, the apocalyptic imagination has flourished in dystopian literature, evangelical popular culture (Gribben 2009), and climate fiction (Trexler 2015). It has inspired Hollywood blockbusters (Szendy 2015), gaming, survivalist counterculture (Mitchell 2002), and the peculiarly repetitive sub-genre of last-man fiction, with its characteristic focus on fantasies of regenerative violence, virility, and procreation as a male duty towards the species (Weninger 2017). For Danowski and Viveiros de Castro, apocalyptic storytelling can even provide a basis for the political critique of apocalyptic thinking.

In the light of this intrinsic plurality, any comprehensive scholarly definition of the apocalyptic would appear problematic. Ideas of apocalypse literature as a single, transhistorical, and transnational canon are undermined by the irreducible diversity of its numerous expressions, across periods and cultures. At the dawn of the Third Millennium, (post-)apocalyptic fiction continues to produce a great number of retellings of Biblical Revelation, with its distinctive focus on the struggle of good versus evil. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), for example, pits two Christological protagonists, the Man and the Boy, against hordes of malicious cannibals. Similarly, M.R. Carey's best-selling dystopian thrillers, *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2014) and *The Boy on the Bridge* (2017), are set in a near-future, post-pandemic Britain, where human survivors battle against violent, marauding gangs and against so-called "hungries": the sick, who have lost their mental powers and who feed on the flesh of the uninfected. Other novelists, by contrast, have challenged the moral dualism of the apocalyptic imagination. Nuanced and witty parodies of Biblical or zombie apocalypse include Ling Ma's subtly ironic *Severance* (2018), Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011), and Emily St John Mandel's unexpectedly hopeful *Station Eleven* (2014). In Lydia Millet's astutely anti-apocalyptic *A Children's Bible* (2020), a group of teenagers survives a hurricane and an attack by rogue soldiers, is unexpectedly succoured by an enigmatic, omniscient, and seemingly all-powerful woman, "The Owner", and finally comes to understand that even divine intervention will not save them from the long-term consequences of anthropogenic climate change. In a similar vein, other writers have drawn attention to the most objectionable traits of heterosexist, anthropocentric Millennialism, through a rich array of sinister prophet-figures: violent and negligent "Rev", in Margaret Atwood's *Maddaddam* (2013); cold and manipulative Leonard Krall, in Liz Jensen's *The Rapture* (2009); cynical, narcissistic, and self-serving Father Oke, in Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014); power-hungry and sex-obsessed Levi, in Claire Vaye Watkins, *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015). In order to do justice to this rich and diverse field, scholarly

discussions of apocalyptic literature must address shared concerns, not as uniquely defining features of the apocalyptic imagination, but as contingent starting points for situated analysis. In the final part of the chapter, this will be achieved by foregrounding two related cognitive and affective impulses: futurity and rupture. These categories will serve to re-think the political and cultural importance of apocalyptic thinking from the perspective of critical posthumanism. Futurity and rupture will function, in Rosi Braidotti's terms, as "navigational tools" (Braidotti 2022: 3). We shall see, in turn, how each impulse finds expression in diverse articulations of apocalyptic thinking.

Let us begin with futurity. As Marc Augé has explained, Western modernity figures the future as a powerful cultural horizon, shaped by communal traditions and shared knowledge practices. It is assumed that the future gives structure to the present, which would otherwise be experienced as an ungraspable, flickering spectacle of transient shapes that resists explanation. In this manner, the future establishes what the French anthropologist describes as an "essential solidarity between the individual and society" (Augé 2014: 3). Similarly, Amir Eshel has defined futurity as "the potential of literature to widen the language and to expand the pool of idioms we employ in making sense of what has occurred while imagining whom we may become" (Eshel 2013: 5). As we have seen, this attitude has its roots in the teleological worldview of Revelation. Apocalyptic writing responds to a desire to know what lies ahead. As theologian and historian Bernard McGinn points out "what is distinctive about the apocalyptic legends as compared with other forms of legends [...] is their location not in the past, but in the future" (McGinn 2000: 20). Apocalyptic narratives typically take the form of anticipations, even where they reflect on events that have already occurred at the time of their writing, like in the time-honoured tradition of *vaticina ex eventu* (historical facts presented as prophecy). The purpose of apocalyptic literature, in other words, is to prepare the reader for a near future in the light of historical and present events. The past is significant only as a forbearer of things to come, or rather, as McGinn puts it, as a "re-mythologized history" that constitutes "the necessary mediating link between the mythic beginning and the legendary (that is, parahistorical) end" (McGinn 2000: 20).

In our age of post-holocene uncertainty, this idea of the future seems to be at the point of unravelling. As Danowski and Viveiros de Castro have stressed, we are about to enter, or may have already entered, a period in which "the *near* future becomes unpredictable, if not indeed unimaginable outside the framework of science-fiction scenarios or messianic eschatologies"

(Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017: 12; their emphasis). This unpredictability also shapes our experience of time itself, which has come to appear like an uncanny and intimately threatening force: a power that subverts and disrupts common assumptions about personal identity and social stability (Kaplan 2016). For this reason, some leading posthumanists have dismissed futurity as a reactionary and short-sighted impulse. Timothy Morton, for example, contends that political debates in the environmental humanities and in climate politics are too focused on a single temporal vector: the negative long-term effects of present-day human behaviour on future human and more-than-human ecosystems. Climate activists and authors of climate fiction have sketched countless versions of dystopian or apocalyptic futures to galvanise a strong sense of urgency. Against this trend, Morton argues, it is important to recall that we are *already* experiencing – and mostly ignoring – the climate crisis in our own daily lives. Apocalyptic fear of the future is unlikely to inspire new forms of agency. Morton writes:

Maybe we already have everything we need to cope with an ecological age. Maybe the actual problem has been that we keep telling ourselves that we need a totally new way of looking at things because the ecological age is some kind of apocalypse where our familiar world is totally ripped apart. But is this hoping for a new way to see or be really ecological, or is it just a retweet of the agricultural-age monotheism that has got us into this stage in the first place? (Morton 2018: xxiii).

A similar critique of apocalyptic futurity stems from the doyenne of critical posthumanism, Donna J. Haraway. In her widely influential monograph, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, the North American biologist and philosopher urges her readers to shift their attention from ominous future catastrophe to the lived experience of ecological devastation in the present. “Staying with the trouble”, she writes, “requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or Edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings” (Haraway 2016: 1). According to Haraway, this important task is hindered by two substantially different, but equally widespread cultural attitudes, which are similarly rooted in the Western apocalyptic imagination. The first, which is dismissed by Haraway as “a comic faith in technofixes” (Haraway 2016: 3), places disproportionate confidence in humanity’s exponentially growing powers, technological advances, and the human ability to shape planetary processes. The second fosters a nostalgic or pessimistic attitude, and finds expression in elegiac or melodramatic narratives of (human) extinction. Haraway admits that

“bitter cynicism” may be an entirely rational response to global heating, especially for climate scientists and political activists. Three decades after the Rio Earth Summit, most researchers concur that we can no longer prevent the catastrophic consequences of anthropogenic global heating, but can only hope to limit its pace and extent. It has become difficult to maintain any hope for the future, or to perpetuate individual or collective efforts to improve the lives of human and nonhuman others. A “game-over attitude” appears sadly appropriate and yet, Haraway contends, “there is a fine line between acknowledging the extent and seriousness of the troubles and succumbing to abstract futurism and its affects of sublime despair and its politics of sublime indifference” (Haraway 2016: 4). Even in dark times, climate fatalism, for Haraway, is not a robust basis for emancipatory political movements that seek to disrupt humanistic and anthropocentric perspectives.

In recent years, Haraway’s dual critique of techno-supremacism and nostalgic despair has been taken up by many scholars in the field of critical posthuman studies. For example, Joanna Zylińska’s elegantly provocative pamphlet, *The End of Man: A Feminist Counterapocalypse*, highlights structural similarities between religious narratives of apocalyptic redemption and contemporary fantasies of technological mastery, transhuman enhancement, and planetary settler colonialism. Where Haraway challenges the concept of futurity, Zylińska focuses her critique on ideas of metaphysical transcendence or rupture. In the Book of Revelation, these ideas are expressed through the figure of the Heavenly Jerusalem, which, in Steven Goldsmith’s words, marks the “sublime rupture that occurs when time becomes space, when history meets its final antithesis in both a heavenly city and a book” (Goldsmith 1993: 56). Drawing on the pioneering research of theologian Catherine Keller (Keller 1996), Zylińska observes the same shift from historical, linear time to utopian timelessness in the writings of theorists of human technological perfectibility. “It is significant”, she writes, “that the Anthropocene should usher in not just apocalyptic narratives about the disappearance of Man as a species but also redemptive discourses about the human’s upgrade [...] coupled with research into longevity and ‘disrupting death’” (Zylińska 2018: 23-24). The idea of a momentous transition from biologically entangled, more-than-human ontologies to radical, futuristic forms of computational human enhancement has also been mocked by Bruno Latour, who describes private space travel and fantasies of interplanetary colonisation as thinly disguised travesties of religious eschatology:

We terrestrials [now] find ourselves up against an extreme version of religious religion and of secularised religion, which have merged ‘God’ and the ‘Dollar’, ‘God’ and ‘Mammon’, in an explicit project of definitive flight from this world that legitimises the destruction of the greatest possible number of resources, leaving the greatest number of surnumerics *left behind* to fend for themselves however they can. The end of the world – the end of their world – risk taking a terrifying turn in their hands (Latour 2021: 56-57, author’s emphasis).

Transhumanism and (imaginary) space travel, for Zylinska and Latour, are politically dangerous fantasies of apocalyptic end time. What they share with their religious precursors is an assumption that the future will offer deliverance from our age, and that it will leave the world profoundly and definitively transformed. In the New Testament, this expectation is clearly expressed by the Book of Revelation, whose Greek title (*apocalypsis*) denotes an “unveiling” of the ultimate order and significance of things.

Finally, the cultural influence of apocalypse-as-rupture can also be observed in recent debates about the Anthropocene, where our age is depicted as a moment of world-shattering rupture (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2015). Social theorists of the Anthropocene have adopted the technical terminology of Earth Scientists to describe our experience of large-scale and potentially catastrophic climate change as the historiographic equivalent to a “golden spike” which in geology marks the division of between epochs (Yusoff 2018: 23-64). At the fringes of this ongoing debate, some commentators have made explicit reference to the Biblical tradition. Philosopher Clive Hamilton, for example, strikes an overtly apocalyptic note when he argues that “the Anthropocene is emphatically *not* a new name for a more intense phase of human disturbance of local and regional ecosystems” but “a rupture in the functioning of the Earth System as a whole” (Hamilton 2017: 45; 10). In his monograph, *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene* (2017), Hamilton insists that humanity’s exponentially growing powers, will spell doom for all humans unless we learn:

to think eschatologically – that is, to think the end of the world of techno-industrial appropriation in an era of trial and struggle, to accept that the Enlightenment did not banish all darkness and that the lamp of Reason shines too dimly to guide us through the night falling over us (Hamilton 2017: 156).

We seem to have come full circle. Where apocalyptic religion combined fears of global catastrophe with the hope for divine salvation, the Anthropocene, according to Hamilton, leaves only room for a darker mood of apocalyptic resignation: “Where once we could fear and love God, and truly *believe* in him and his saving power, now we can only fear Gaia” (Hamilton 2017; author’s emphasis). Philosopher of religion Marcel Gauchet has sketched a similar picture of the return to archaic, religious forms of apocalyptic thinking. In the pre-modern world, he argues, meaning was established through the figure of the divine Other, and values such as justice, materiality and love were understood as timeless and given (Gauchet, 1999). Modernity gradually replaced this tradition with a new emphasis on the figure of the Self – the modern subject, which comprehends, defines, and controls what had once been Other and inaccessible. The contemporary age, however, with its global experience of helplessness and fear of imminent doom, has shifted the emphasis again, away from the figure of the Self and, once more, towards the figure of a mysterious and threatening Other.

Conclusion

The apocalyptic imagination is motivated by a sense of existential urgency, which arises from the expectation of an imminent end of history. In the epochal rhetoric of Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity, this experience of urgency gave shape to what Stephen O’Leary has described as “the temporal paradox at the heart of apocalyptic discourse”: the importance of a “declaration of the End of time [that] is itself constitutive of a community which must then reconceive and redefine its place in universal history” (O’Leary, 1994: 50). In the Twenty-First Century, environmental activists, campaigners for intergenerational and transnational climate justice, and protesters against sexism and racism have variously relied on the same motivating power of the apocalyptic imagination. In this way, they have contributed to a near-ubiquitous mood of apocalyptic anxiety: the widespread feeling that we are “living in the end times” (Žižek 2010). The rhetoric of apocalypse has given visibility to progressive political agendas. It has served to draw attention to the experiences and needs of those, whose humanity is denied by anthropocentric, Eurocentric humanism, on the grounds of their class, ethnicity, ability, or gender. Apocalyptic thinking has also been instrumental in a wider critique of advanced capitalism. In the words of theologian Graham Ward, “religion that was once the object of critique is now presented with an object for its own critique – the secular logics of Western global capitalism” (Ward, 2005:3).

On a more critical note, posthumanists have argued that apocalyptic thinking is structurally anthropocentric, and inattentive to non-human temporal and spatial scales. As we have seen, this appears particularly problematic in the context of the unfolding climate and environmental catastrophe, where the relation between individual, observable causes and vast global effects marks a stark challenge to anthropocentric narratives, including those at the centre of the apocalyptic imagination. Where conventional forms of apocalyptic thinking fail, critical posthumanism has advanced our understanding of the connectedness of human and non-human life. It serves to remind us that religious eschatology, like every other form of human cognition and imagination, is embodied (Gosetti-Ferencei 2018) and therefore shaped by the more-than-human world (Jenkins 2021). In this important sense, critical posthumanism demonstrates that the apocalyptic imagination partakes in multispecies worldmaking, which Tsing has described as an interplay of different rhythms: “each living thing remakes the world through seasonal pulses of growth, lifetime production patterns, and geographies of expansion” (Tsing 2015: 21).

This chapter has shed light on the possibility of new forms of apocalyptic thinking that are explicitly attentive to their own material entanglement and therefore resistant to the combined power mechanisms of anthropocentrism and advanced capitalism: two contemporary pressures that “are simultaneously uniting humanity in the threat of extinction and dividing it by controlling access to the resources needed to meet the challenge” (Braidotti 2022: 4). Such new forms of progressive, disruptive, and self-reflective apocalyptic thinking draw their force from non-anthropocentric knowledge practices and imaginative frameworks. The potential of non-anthropocentric, posthumanist apocalyptic thinking emerges clearly from contemporary debates about the political and social consequences of modernization and globalization. For example, the planetary health emergency of recent years, with its intense experience of suffering and political volatility, has exposed stark social inequalities and has commanded attention to troubling hierarchies of (human) power. But it has also shed light on the fact that human inequalities and suffering cannot be isolated from their wider material contexts, and must be challenged through the same intersectional practices that also apply to the more-than-human world. As human geographer Andreas Malm has stressed, the coronavirus pandemic and the climate emergency are inextricable. They appear, at a superficial level, like two different scenarios of loss but “are, on closer inspection, exactly one and the same” (Malm 2020: 4). The new coronavirus has emerged from human interactions with non-human animals,

whose habitats were ravaged by pollution, deforestation, animal trade and urban sprawl. COVID-19 then spread through networks of globalised trade and transportation that have long threatened the survival of many non-human species. Indeed, the threat from zoonotic pathogens, just like the risk of environmental collapse, are a direct result of what Malm calls “ecologically unequal and pathological exchange” (Malm 2020: 50). From the perspective of critical posthumanism, we can therefore describe the *human apocalypse* of the coronavirus pandemic as resonant with more capacious, non-anthropocentric forms of ecological grief, and with concerns about habitat loss, environmental degradation, and mass extinction (Mussnug 2022). In recent years, many theorists and advocates of human climate justice have campaigned to highlight not only the human inequities and injustices that result from colonialism and from the growth of the world-capitalist economy, but also the multiple threats faced by vulnerable non-human others. Similarly, the COVID-19 emergency may be understood not only as a trigger for urgent political action, but also as a call for a radical re-orientation of ethical and aesthetic values.

F. Cross-References (*if applicable*)

Tbc

G. References (up to 50) – currently too many

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