

MAIN SECTION

Theorizing Eco-Dystopia: Science Fiction, the Anthropocene, and the Limits of Catastrophic Imagery

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ABSTRACT

This essay considers a peculiar kind of science-fictional writing with environmental concerns that pivots on the imagery of catastrophe and blends the dystopian and the post-apocalyptic traditions. This sub-genre is known as eco-dystopia, which, I argue, merges the catastrophic imagery of the post-apocalyptic tradition with the consequential mode of dystopia. Eco-dystopias rely on the imagery of catastrophe to warn the public about the dangers and the consequences of the Anthropocene. However, such imagery presents strong limitations when used to dramatize and conceptualize the Anthropocene, as it is modeled on catastrophes that have little in common with the current ecological crisis.

KEYWORDS

Anthropocene; science fiction; eco-dystopia; comparative literature; apocalypse.

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It has often been argued that the Anthropocene is a phenomenon so complex and so distant from human comprehension that it is intrinsically *weird*¹ and can thus be understood and described most appropriately only through means of speculative fiction (and indeed discussing climate change and our response to it would require an entirely new lexicon).² It comes as no surprise that international and especially Anglo-American science fiction has made extensive use of the tools and the tropes of dystopian and post-apocalyptic imagery in order to describe the Anthropocene in general and climate change in particular. There are several ways in which science fiction elaborates ecological concerns, of course:³ by representing alien worlds where extreme environmental situations force the characters into different and more nuanced synergies with the environment (including processes of terraformation), or by presenting encounters with alien species that force the characters to rediscuss their understanding of the boundaries between human, animal, and vegetal and that contest the supposed exceptionalism of the human species, and thus an anthropocentric perspective. However, although it is but one of the many ways in which science fiction deals with environmental anxieties, the imagination of catastrophe is by far the most pervasive.

It might be argued that discussions of the Anthropocene should not be concerned with unrealistic representations like those of science fiction. However, I suggest that the analysis of science-fictional representations of disaster is important because they are not limited to this genre, but migrate into our culture at large. The imagination of catastrophe is pervasive in environmental activism as well, and rightly so:⁴ the Anthropocene is an age of disasters, characterized by mass extinctions, ocean acidification, extreme weather events, drastic changes in climate, and an increasing amount of land that will be rendered inhabitable. Arguably one of the foundational texts of modern environmentalism, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), opens with the uncanny image of a small American town progressively emptied of life due to the effects of pesticides. People get sick, birds die, farm animals are infertile, bees disappear and no longer pollinate the trees, vegetation becomes brown and withered—silent

1 See Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology. For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

2 Matthew Schneider-Mayerson and Brent Ryan Bellamy (eds.), *An Ecotopian Lexicon* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

3 A lot has been written on the relationship between science fiction and ecology. Besides the texts that I directly quote here, see Patrick Murphy, "The Non-Alibi of Alien Scapes: SF and Ecocriticism," in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, ed. Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 263–278; Brian Stableford, "Science Fiction and Ecology," in *A Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. David Seed (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 127–141; Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place, Sense of Planet. The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); the monographic issue of *Critical Survey* 25, no. 2 (2013), ed. Rowland Hughes and Pat Wheeler, on the topic of eco-dystopia; Dori Griffin, "Visualizing Eco-Dystopia," *Design and Culture* 10, no. 3 (2018); and the monographic issue of *Science Fiction Studies* on science fiction and climate crisis, ed. Brent Ryan Bellamy and Veronica Hollinger, 45, no. 3 (2018).

4 See Greg Garrard, "Environmentalism and the Apocalyptic Tradition," *Green Letters* 3, no. 1 (2001).

apocalyptic signs that precede the end of life as we know it. The combination of catastrophic imagery and science-fictional topoi is so pervasive that even ecological nonfiction often employs the means of science fiction to describe climate change,⁵ as is the case, for instance, in Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us* (2007), which imagines the consequences of the extinction of the human race, Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway's *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* (2014), describing the long-term effects of climate change and written as an essay by a Chinese scientist of the twenty-fourth century, or William T. Vollmann's two-volume *Carbon Ideologies* (2018), framed as a letter to a future inhabitant of a post-apocalyptic Earth.⁶

But what shape do catastrophes take in contemporary science fiction? This essay considers a peculiar kind of science-fictional writing with environmental concerns that pivots on the imagery of catastrophe and blends the dystopian and the post-apocalyptic traditions. This sub-genre is known as eco-dystopia, which, I argue, merges the catastrophic imagery of the post-apocalyptic tradition and the consequential mode of dystopia. Of course, every taxonomy of a genre cannot help being approximative: someone might even argue that abstract models of genres only exist to be disproved by the actual texts. Keeping this in mind, my definition of eco-dystopia is not meant to be binding or rigid; rather, it is intended to highlight certain features (that may be more or less present in each example) of a hybrid form.⁷

A consistent number of science-fictional works try to imagine and foresee the development of human activities on the planet, representing the consequences of pollution, overpopulation, and climate change: John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), John Christopher's *The Death of Grass* (1956), James Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962), John Brunner's *The Sheep Look Up* (1973), George Turner's *The Sea and Summer* (1987), Bruce Sterling's *Heavy Weather* (1994), Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), Maggie Gee's *Ice People* (1998), Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army* (2007), Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007), Liz Jensen's *The Rapture* (2009), Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* (2009) and *The Water Knife* (2015), Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013), Nathaniel Rich's *Odds against Tomorrow* (2013), Kim Stanley Robinson's trilogy *Science in the Capital* (2004-2007) and the novel *New York 2140* (2017), as well as

5 Ursula K. Heise, *Imagining Extinction. The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 215.

6 I have discussed this book in Marco Malvestio, "All Our Choices Will Probably Run Out". La non-fiction post apocalittica di William T. Vollmann," *Ácoma* 17 (2019).

7 It is also worth mentioning that this categorization is valid for Western literature and films, while non-Western traditions (African, Asian, Latin American) have elaborated different approaches to the genre that may avoid the flaws of Western works. For further details on these alternative imaginations, see Suzanne M. McCullagh, Luis I. Prádanos, Ilaria Tabusso Marcyan and Catherine Wagner (eds), *Contesting Extinctions: Decolonial and Regenerative Futures* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

movies such as Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004). My aim is to provide a definition of this form while at the same time highlighting its limits in depicting the Anthropocene.⁸

Between dystopia and apocalypse: Theorizing eco-dystopia

Of the two kinds of abstraction on which, according to Darko Suvin,⁹ science fiction is based, that is, the extrapolation of elements of the present to build future scenarios, and the analogy between invented and real elements, dystopia belongs to the first group. Although it seems like an easy concept to grasp (or maybe precisely because of that), it is quite difficult to offer a definition of dystopia that simultaneously takes into account both its position in the realm of science fiction and its own story, which is connected to the literary form from which it takes its name, utopia.¹⁰ A working definition, which is hopefully not too specific or generic, could be as follows: dystopia describes human society as it could be in a near future or in an alternative present, providing that some of its features (for instance, mass surveillance, digital technologies, or overpopulation) are increased. In other words, dystopia (contrary to utopia) imagines a negative version of our world based on aspects that are indeed present in it, and is meant to serve as a warning against the realization of such a reality.¹¹ While utopia means both a place that does not exist (from the Greek οὐ-τόπος) and a happy place (εὖ-τόπος; Thomas Moore, who coined the word, highlighted the ambiguity, which arises from the fact that the two words are homophones in English), dystopia stands for a negative situation (δυσ-τόπος, *dys* meaning "bad"). That not every dystopia is necessarily an eco-dystopia is almost self-evident: A dystopia could easily focus on a pejorative aspect of society that is not an environmental aspect (for instance, one of the most famous dystopian novels of all time, George Orwell's *1984*, presents few ecocritical issues). On the other hand, as stated above, not every work of science fiction is necessarily dystopian.

8 I have discussed examples of eco-dystopias in my book *Raccontare la fine del mondo. Fantascienza e Antropocene* (Milano: nottetempo, 2021), 19-22 and 107, as well as in "Sognando la catastrofe. L'eco-distopia italiana del ventunesimo secolo," *Narrativa* 43 (2021). While this essay shares with those works some references and a theoretical framework, it is an original contribution.

9 Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 27-30.

10 On the relationship between utopia and dystopia, see David Seed (ed.), *Imagining Apocalypse. Studies in Cultural Crisis* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky. Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000); Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future. The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso Books, 2005); Peter Fitting, "Utopia, Dystopia and Science Fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. George Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 135-154; Adam Stock, *Modern Dystopian Fiction and Political Thought. Narratives of World Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2019). On utopia and ecology, see also Geoff Berry, "Afterword. The Utopian Dreaming of Modernity and Its Ecological Cost," *Green Letters* 17, no. 3 (2013) (which closes a monographic issue on the same topic).

11 Gregory Claeys, "The Origins of Dystopia: Wells, Huxley and Orwell," in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, 107-134, 107.

Thus, eco-dystopia is a particular kind of dystopia that focuses on ecological elements and incorporates features of the post-apocalyptic genre.

The post-apocalyptic genre often borders and merges with dystopian imagination, as noted by several scholars.¹² However, at least in theory, the distinction between dystopian and post-apocalyptic texts is quite straightforward. While dystopia proposes or attempts to propose a prediction of the future of a society on the basis of certain tendencies that can be traced in its present, the post-apocalyptic sub-genre represents the survival of individuals (as in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, 2006) and/or societies (as in Walter M. Miller's *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, 1959) after a catastrophic event. It seems clear that a dystopian novel is not necessarily post-apocalyptic, as in most cases it does not focus on the catastrophe or the event that initiates the worsening of a society, while a post-apocalyptic novel, despite describing a situation in which it is not desirable to live, starts with an event (an atomic war, a pandemic) that, by virtue of its exceptionality, does not represent the worsening of present conditions. In other words, while the post-apocalyptic novel is based on the rupture between the past and present of the narration, dystopia is based on the (hypothesized) continuity between the present/future of the narration and our present, which often appears in the form of ruins, unusable technological instruments, and so on. As Christopher Palmer wrote, "often through its valuing ordinary decency, contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction interrogates the nature of 'the ordinary' in a situation in which the ordinary is itself in question and ordinary decency often turns out to be itself anomalous."¹³

The reason why this distinction is relevant when discussing eco-dystopias is that, in the context of an ecological dystopia, every dystopian novel is also, at least partly, but inevitably, apocalyptic. Eco-dystopia qualifies as a hybrid genre, in which rumination on a catastrophic event (usually climate change) is not simply a narrative tool, but a way of reflecting on our present. Eco-dystopia merges the narration of the catastrophe of the post-apocalyptic novel and the predictive speculations of dystopia. In eco-dystopias, we can find "apocalyptic" events, meaning decisive fractures between two moments in time, but more frequently these "apocalyptic" events are nothing more than the continuation of currently ongoing processes, in accordance with an understanding of climate change not as a single phenomenon, but rather as a summation of phenomena too various and too wide to be clearly deciphered, not to mention stopped.

12 This confusion in categorizing also emerges in several studies dedicated to the sub-genre, such as Susan Watkins, *Contemporary Women's Post-Apocalyptic Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2020), 8, and Heather J. Hicks, *The Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Twenty-First Century. Modernity beyond Salvage* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 7-8. Hicks highlights the terminological variety of the definitions of this narrative form: "post-apocalypse, neo apocalypse, crypto-apocalypse, counter-apocalypse, ana-apocalypse, ironic apocalypse, technological apocalypse, anti-apocalypse, capitalist apocalypse, slow apocalypse, and postmodern apocalypse, among others" (6).

13 Christopher Palmer, "Ordinary Catastrophes: Paradoxes and Problems in Some Recent Post-Apocalypse Fictions," in *Green Planets. Ecology and Science Fiction*, ed. Gerry Canavan and Kim Stanley Robinson (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 158-178, 158-159.

Moreover, eco-dystopias tend to indulge in the representation of the consequences of climate change in ways that are similar to the usual tropes of post-apocalyptic fiction: by showing, in other words, the known world reduced to a wasteland deprived of life and littered with the remnants of a past civilization (which is to say, our present civilization). In Bruno Arpaia's *Qualcosa là fuori* (2016), for instance, the catastrophe is represented by the consequences of climate change: while there is no clear apocalyptic event, the novel (which focuses on a group of people migrating from Italy to Scandinavia, due to unendurable climatic conditions) clearly draws on the post-apocalyptic genre. At the same time, the disaster imagined by Arpaia is but the continuation of processes that are currently ongoing in our present, thus qualifying his book, technically, as dystopic. In Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, on the other hand, the dystopian and the post-apocalyptic elements are paralleled in the narrative structure. The story focuses on the life of Snowman on a post-apocalyptic Earth, with flashbacks detailing the events that led to the destruction of civilization. In the flashbacks, the United States is described as a dystopian nation, increasingly ruled by corporations, with a wider divide between the rich and the poor, and with frequent environmental disasters. By paralleling a planet disrupted by climate change with a more traditional apocalyptic event (a laboratory-engineered pandemic), Atwood highlights the difficulty of representing the Anthropocene as a single catastrophe, while at the same time adopting the catastrophic paradigm to represent it.

The limits of catastrophic imagination: Six theses

Due to the aforementioned pervasiveness of the imagery of catastrophe in environmental activism, it is important to highlight its limits in representing the Anthropocene. In an article published on *Public Books* in 2015, Ursula K. Heise lamented the lack of originality of contemporary dystopias (including Oreskes and Conway's aforementioned *The Collapse of Western Civilization*, a nonfiction book with a science-fictional frame). These novels, she argued, lack a proper imaginative investment, as they rely on worn-out tropes. "Dystopia," Heise argues, "is flourishing. In the process, it is becoming routine and losing its political power".¹⁴

Contemporary dystopias [...] aspire to unsettle the status quo, but by failing to outline a persuasive alternative, they end up reconfirming it. This weak cocktail of critique and complacency may explain the current popularity of "apocaholism," as biologist Peter Kareiva has called it. Dystopian science fiction seems like a ready-made tool with which to engage current social and environmental crises—but only because

14 Ursula K. Heise, "What's the Matter with Dystopia?," *Public Books*, January 2, 2015, available at: <https://www.publicbooks.org/whats-the-matter-with-dystopia/> [last accessed February 11, 2022].

it so often recycles worn scenarios from the apocalypses of the past. At this point, postapocalyptic wastelands have themselves become too reassuringly familiar. Perhaps Michael Crow, the president of Arizona State University, was right in accusing writers of dystopian fiction a few years ago of being complicit in pervasive social pessimism, and calling on them for new utopian visions. When dystopia becomes routine, science fiction writers have new tasks cut out for them.¹⁵

Heise's critique is definitely on point: readers can easily verify that the tropes of eco-dystopia are so well known and circulated among the public that they are constantly reprised, often with very little imaginative effort. There is, in other words, a problem of quality, as is to be expected with such a popular and widespread genre. At the same time, however, there is also a series of intrinsic problems, or intellectual flaws, in eco-dystopia and more generally in the adoption of the imagination of catastrophe to describe the Anthropocene. While it is true that the intrinsic mode of eco-dystopia focuses on a catastrophic event that is continuous with ongoing processes, thus complicating the apocalyptic model and introducing a consequential element that is typical of dystopia, many eco-dystopias rely on a simplistic understanding of catastrophe and risk banalizing the very ecological concerns about which they aim to raise awareness. This is not to say, of course, that all contemporary dystopias share some invalidating defects that make them unworthy of attention, but only that their generic model presents a series of ambiguities. I have summarized these in six theses.

1) Eco-dystopias are spectacular and sensationalistic, but the Anthropocene usually is not.

By merging dystopia and the post-apocalyptic genre, eco-dystopia pivots on an imagination of disaster, often on a spectacular scale. In *The Day after Tomorrow*, a huge storm covers all of North America in ice. In *Oryx and Crake*, a pandemic causes the extinction of the human race. In Nathaniel Rich's *Odds against Tomorrow* (2013), a hurricane floods New York. While it is true that the Anthropocene is an age of extremes and that extreme weather events are going to become increasingly frequent, the effects of the Anthropocene are not limited to such spectacular events. On the contrary, the most pervasive damage to the environment caused by humans is more difficult to detect in everyday life: extinctions, reduction of biodiversity, ocean acidification, pandemics, pollution, waste.

In fact, the representation of the Anthropocene poses enormous difficulties. Rather than a single phenomenon, it is to be understood as a wide variety of phenomena, whose causes and effects are not always immediately discernible. Philosopher Timothy Morton, for instance, defined climate

15 Ibid.

change as a “hyperobject”—something that is “massively distributed in time and space relatively to humans.”¹⁶ Hyperobjects are “nonlocal”:¹⁷ One cannot experience them in their entirety, only their single manifestations. However, these manifestations do not provide a complete understanding of the hyperobject. Similarly, in the case of the Anthropocene, its single aspects are but a fragment of a wider phenomenon that is more than the summation of these parts. Most Anthropocenic violence is hard to see or put in relation to the Anthropocene. The sixth mass extinction, for instance, is not happening sensationally, but is, rather, the product of the continuous alteration of habitats and ecosystems by humans—an alteration that is part of our everyday lives and that is hardly spectacular. Even climate change needs to be spectacularized (see next point) in order to be properly understood, as it is often contradictory in terms of everyday perception and looks scarier in graphs and data than in one’s experience (as William T. Vollmann sarcastically comments, “each cool day disprove[s] global warming anew”).¹⁸

2) Eco-dystopia tends to represent the Anthropocene with an exclusive focus on climate change.

Because of their attention to the catastrophic features of the Anthropocene, eco-dystopias tend to focus on the most alarming one: climate change. Eco-dystopias usually portray future Earth as a hot, uninhabitable planet or indulge in the representation of cities devoured by the rising seas (Oreskes and Conway’s *The Collapse of Western Civilization* presents several maps of the shapes of the continents in the future; Ballard’s *The Drowned World* and George Turner’s *The Sea and Summer* describe great metropolitan cities that have been turned into swamps). Whether these representations are accurate or realistic is beyond the scope of this essay; however, it is worth noting that, by attributing so much importance to climate change, eco-dystopias tend to offer an extremely limited portrayal of the Anthropocene. Erik Swyngedouw talks about “a fetishist invocation of CO₂ as the ‘thing’ around which our environmental dreams, aspirations, contestations as well as policies crystallize.”¹⁹ This fetishization again depends on eco-dystopias’ need to spectacularize and sensationalize the effects of the Anthropocene, but ends up overlooking a wider series of phenomena that are equally and violently pervasive, although less visible.

16 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2013), 1.

17 Ibid.

18 William T. Vollmann, *No Immediate Danger. Volume One of Carbon Ideologies* (New York: Viking, 2018), 11.

19 Erik Swyngedouw, “Apocalypse Forever?,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 27 (2010): 219.

3) Eco-dystopia tends to promote a catastrophic understanding of the Anthropocene as a single event.

A common feature of many eco-dystopias is a focus on a single catastrophic event—a storm, a flood, a climatic collapse. The Anthropocene, however, is not an event; it is a series of interrelated phenomena. Eco-dystopias, on the contrary, often portray it as a huge cataclysm that is dangerous and overwhelming, but also clearly recognizable as one single event. This understanding of the Anthropocene as something that, destructive though it might be, can be isolated in time contradicts the long temporality of Anthropocenic events, which have to be measured in decades, centuries, or even thousands of years. In Roland Emmerich's *The Day after Tomorrow*, “climate change” is something that happens quite literally in the course of a few days: a huge storm covers half a continent in ice and then ceases. The recent Netflix movie *Don't Look Up* (2021), while not itself an eco-dystopia, uses a meteor as a metaphor for climate change: a danger that is irrefutably approaching and that (in line with the imagery of atomic disaster) will happen at a precise moment in time. There is a time before and a time after the impact of the meteor or the nuclear holocaust, but there is not a time before or after the Anthropocene: We are in the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is not something that might happen; it is happening right now, with temporalities and timescales that are unfamiliar to us and difficult to comprehend.

4) The magnitude of the catastrophes portrayed in eco-dystopia inhibits actions to counter the effects of the Anthropocene.

The representation of Anthropocenic disaster often aims at raising awareness of environmental problems, but the magnitude of the catastrophes portrayed by eco-dystopias might end up inhibiting actions to counter the current climate crisis. Climatic catastrophes are presented as inevitable; it is too late to counter them. Furthermore, despite their anthropic origin, they are not man-made, which means that they defy the usual “hero(es) vs. villain(s)” narrative scheme. The Anthropocene is a phenomenon for which a collective responsibility exists. Of course, as Latour writes, ‘speaking of the anthropic origin of global warming is meaningless [...], if by “anthropic” we mean something like “the human species”’.²⁰ It is anthropic in the sense that it is the product of a very specific form of civilization, which is to say, industrial modernity, fueled by colonial domination and exploitation. However, although there are various degrees of responsibility, both internationally (as it has been noted, “people in developing countries will be most affected by climate change, whereas the largest share of [greenhouse gases] in the atmosphere has been emitted in industrialized

20 Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 121-122.

countries")²¹ and within a society (different social groups have different carbon footprints), and although there are groups lobbying against environmental activism, there are no villains in the Anthropocene in the traditional sense. This lack of a clear antagonist risks disorienting the audience and thus eco-dystopias tend to represent clear antagonistic figures (usually lobbyists, corrupt politicians, or the military) in order to dramatize a crisis that would otherwise be extremely difficult to portray with traditional narrative schemes. However, there is no conspiracy behind the Anthropocene: On the contrary, it is the product of a series of collective behaviors.

Connected to this issue is another representational problem of the Anthropocene: the difficulty to trace consequentiality between causes and effects. This is caused first of all by the aforementioned difficulty to see certain effects of the Anthropocene in our everyday life. For instance, the production of waste and pollution (that led Marco Armiero to define our present age as the *wasteocene*)²² is often hidden from our eyes—waste is collected and transported outside the cities, but this does not mean that its disposal is necessarily ecological. Furthermore, the situation is complicated by the collective dimension of the Anthropocene: its catastrophic consequences are the product of the behavior of billions of people, which makes it difficult for individuals both to perceive that their own actions have an impact and to imagine that they are able to make any difference in countering the ecological crisis.

5) Apocalyptic narratives are consolatory.

Eco-dystopias often portray not simply circumscribed disasters, but the end of our civilization and the world as we know it. In accordance with the post-apocalyptic model, they portray an apocalypse. In the history of civilization, apocalyptic narratives have always provided societies with meaning, teleology, and hopes for palingenesis. The apocalypse is the culmination of history (in the Christian tradition, it is the end of history and the beginning of God's kingdom), an exceptional event that (etymologically) reveals the true structure of things. After the apocalypse, a society can be born again, hopefully on sounder and more just foundations, so that the world can be redeemed of the faults that led to the apocalypse in the first place. The apocalyptic event divides those who are defeated (the damned) and those who are saved, providing a new, meaningful identity for those who survive—with whom, usually, readers are invited to identify. In this sense, apocalyptic narratives provide a meaningful frame within

21 Michael Jakob, Ottmar Edenhofer, Ulrike Kornek, Dominic Lenzi, Jan Minx, "Governing the Commons to Promote Global Justice: Climate Change Mitigation and Rent Taxation", ed. Ravi Kanbur and Henry Shue, *Climate Justice: Integrating Economics and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 43-62, 43.

22 Marco Armiero, *Wasteocene. Stories from the Global Dump* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

which to interpret human history—the culmination of a series of sins and mistakes, but also an opportunity for redemption. As mentioned, however, the Anthropocene is not an event; it is a series of phenomena, a process. There will not be a moment when the skies open and the angels play their trumpets, signaling the beginning of the end: we are immersed, right here and right now, in the catastrophe that will change our world, which has a less exciting, less inviting, and less meaningful appearance than the apocalyptic frame with which we are familiar.

6) Eco-dystopias are ecophobic.

Eco-dystopias are centered on the idea that humans have abused the natural world, and the catastrophes they portray tend to show the natural world getting its revenge on the human species. This is not necessarily to say that eco-dystopias embrace “the idea that modern society has degraded a natural world that used to be beautiful, harmonious, and self-sustaining and that might disappear completely if modern humans do not change their way of life”:²³ this pre-modern world is not necessarily idealized in eco-dystopia, which is often anti-pastoral, refuting an idealized model of environmental representation that developed during the Romantic era and that still characterizes, to some extent, current environmentalism.²⁴

The opposition between a benevolent nature and a wicked and corrupted human race constitutes an attempt to neutralize non-human agency, the terror of which is at the basis of human culture (and has, on the contrary, been rediscovered and cast in a positive light by contemporary material ecocriticism).²⁵ Critic Simon C. Estok labelled this terror ecophobia:²⁶ “being a part of diverse narratives with potent material effects, ecophobia turns nature into a fearsome object in need of our control, the loathed and dangerous thing that can result only in pain and tragedy if left in control.”²⁷ Ecophobia, according to Estok, “is all about frustrated agency”²⁸ and, coherently, eco-dystopia pivots on events that undeniably reveal the

23 Heise, *Imagining Extinction*, p. 7.

24 See Glen A. Love, “Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism,” *Western American Literature* 25, no. 3 (1990); William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (1996); Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature. Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

25 Serenella Iovino and Serpil Opperman (eds.), *Material Ecocriticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014); see also Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

26 Simon C. Estok, “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness. Ecocriticism and Ecophobia,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 16, no. 2 (2009), 203-225, 210: “Human history is a history of controlling the natural environment, of taking rocks and making them tools or weapons to modify or to kill parts of the natural environment, of building shelters to protect us from weather and predators, of maintaining personal hygiene to protect ourselves from diseases and parasites that can kill us, of first imagining agency and intent in nature and then quashing that imagined agency and intent.”

27 Simon C. Estok, “Painful Material Realities, Tragedy, Ecophobia,” in Iovino and Opperman, *Material Ecocriticism*, 130-140, 135.

28 Simon C. Estok, *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 10.

agency of “nature” and its uncontrollability.

At the same time, eco-dystopia presents a certain (sometimes sadistic) idealization of the incompatibility of contemporary life and environmental health: in other words, the renewed agency of nature is displayed in an apocalyptic frame as a punishment for humanity’s sins. An ambiguity can thus be noted: the refusal of a dichotomy between nature and culture and the recovery of the agency of nature, on the one hand, and, on the other, the replication of anthropocentric conceptual dynamics, according to which global warming is not an effect of human actions, but rather a punishment inflicted upon us.

If eco-dystopia has become a preeminent mode for discussing climate change and the Anthropocene, this is due to its potential for spectacularly dramatizing the effects of the current climate crisis. Eco-dystopias borrow the post-apocalyptic genre’s emphasis on catastrophic imagery to represent the consequences of an ongoing process, extrapolating elements of our present world and portraying their progressive worsening. At the same time, the spectacularization on which they rely is not always successful in conveying the reality of the Anthropocene. While the best eco-dystopias are capable of representing the Anthropocene as a complex, long-term process, many of them adopt worn-out imageries and narrative schemes that are not suitable for the subject they treat. Catastrophe is a powerful narrative tool, but it comes from a tradition that has portrayed it as a simpler, clearer event: as the result of a nuclear holocaust, a pandemic, or a solar storm, catastrophes in the post-apocalyptic genre are often circumscribed, isolated, fateful. The Anthropocene is not, and precisely because it so easily defies our comprehension, we, as scholars, should seek out those narrative forms that make the best effort to understand it, and, as a society, we should strive to produce them.

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