CINÉGRAPHIA
Journal of Literature, Film, and Other Media

Issue 1, Winter 2025

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To cite this article: Andrew B.R. Elliott, '"La fin du monde n'aurait eu pas lieu": Historical Memories of the Apocalypse,' *Cinégraphia: Journal of Literature, Film, and Other Media* 1 (Winter 2025), 36-64.

ISSN 2982-3595 (Print)

Journal Homepage: https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/Cinegraphia/index

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Introduction

Theorising the end of the world isn’t what it used to be. Despite having anxiously predicted the apocalypse for millennia (probably from as early as out very first thoughts), among the various prognoses of death, destruction and apocalypse, we were always led to expect dystopian horsemen, devastating purge, and/or mass abductions onto innumerable flying saucers with an impressive payload and well-planned evacuation schedule. From Hieronymus Bosch’s (frankly rather enticing) Garden of Delights to the free-for-all of Ragnarok; from Zoroastrian molten rivers to Aztec’s Fifth Sun or the more egregious elements of the Christian Book of Revelations; visions of hell and the associated visual and verbal eschatology has no shortage of striking (and, helpfully, cinematic) imaginings of the end of the world. Cyclical or

linear, dystopian or regenerative, one of the few fixed and perennial elements in the history of our species has always been its ability to conjure up visions of its apparently inevitable demise.

Nowadays, however, amid an environmental crisis of our own making, the bleakness of the future looks rather dull by comparison. It's less of a bang, and not really even a whimper, just the sad, progressive collapse of a short-sighted species, like a great lung exhaling a noxious gas, with a barely-audible sigh. Many such visions imagine little more than a grim landscape of increasing devastation and the dull repetitive drudgery of a quest for things we once took for granted like petrol, medicine, or food. This reduction of the scale of disaster has, I will argue, led the film industry quietly to nudge its apocalypse films into different genres—including the historical. Instead of the disaster film, most of the films I discuss in this article either belong to or otherwise borrow heavily from other generic traditions from sci-fi to action. As such, it's never only about molten rivers and the global meltdown of the planet taking place at the theological level: more often than not, the 21st-century disaster film most often seems to involve a group of (usually white) Americans saving the rest of the world (or dying in the attempt). It's no longer Ragnarok, but its bathetic inversion featuring an action hero taking to the road or flying into the gaping maw of an earthquake, in order to protect his family/fiancée/estranged daughter/beloved pet/stolen loot. The more of these films you watch, the more they feel like *Die Hard* but with Hans Gruber replaced by greenhouse gases—as indeed is a key element of the 2008 M. Night Shyamalan film, *The Happening*.

"Welcome to the Anthropocene," these films seem to say. "You'll hate it here, but you *might be able* shoot your way out of it."

In this article, then, I want to do something I have built a surprising part of my academic career on doing: namely, taking bad films and popular-cultural artefacts seriously. In particular, I want to think about the apocalypse and the end of the Anthropocene not as futurism but, rather, as Bad History (the subject of a forthcoming book). The premise and argument of that book is what I propose here: that there are modes of thinking historically which become embedded into every life, but which we tend not to include as historical contributions. These historical contributions are myriad; they might be as small and inconsequential as our everyday interpersonal snipes of character assassination over the breakfast table ("you always do this", "I guess that's just who I am", etc) wherein we map the personal progression of character onto the unchanging teleology of historical progress. They might be great big narratives of progress which overlook the minutiae in the attempt to sustain a particular ideology. They might be the grand rewriting of history in order to insist on some deeply held belief: those are the conspiracy theories which, from Roswell to Princess Diana, from illuminati to 9/11, rely for their power on the ability to rewrite history whilst sloughing off the very historical basis of authority and analysis on which they are themselves predicated. They might even be histories told *without* us, through AI and new computing technologies.

Here, then, I am trying to think about the end of humans, and what history might look like if there weren't any humans left to tell it. Instead of thinking about the

Anthropocene as a function of ecological theory, I want to think about it as a cultural phenomenon of bad history—as a way of writing an uncertain future history which we are simultaneously trying to avert, and one rooted in facts and science (as Robert Sinnerbrink discusses in this volume) but where the proof of those facts is not yet possible.

To sustain that hypothesis, I choose to explore the apocalypse as a trope rooted in a hypothesised posthuman future. It’s worth making two observations: First, the examples I use of cinematic apocalypse are almost uniquely negative. That is to say that the apocalypse films almost universally agree that the end of humanity is a Bad Thing. This implicit assumption comes into instant conflict with some of the more prominent writing about the Anthropocene, which doesn’t always think of the end of humanity as such a terrible thing (indeed, *The Happening* does pose some rather awkward questions in this respect about whether the plants are merely retaliating against a total war of herbicides. The second observation is that throughout this article I frequently conflate disaster film with apocalypse films, which is clumsy but often necessary for the purposes of my argument. What I mean here is that the latter fits into the former, but not vice versa, so when I’m talking about disaster films here I mean, predominantly, those which talk about the existential threat to humanity. While a film like *28 Days* does of course imagine some kind of apocalypse, it’s not the ecological catastrophe kind of apocalypse that I’m talking about featured in *The Day After Tomorrow* even if they both share many genre conventions. Similarly, films like

Volcano, *The Missing*, or *Twister* talk about meteorological disaster, but not those which threaten to bring about apocalypse as the end of humanity.

My main arguments, then, will be that some of the questions pertaining to historical film are really helpful to think about how we narrate the apocalypse in the context of the Anthropocene and its relationship with cinema. Using examples from these well-known films I address the processes of implicit narration which underpin the disaster and apocalypse genre. In Part Two, I suggest that these implicit modes of narration can partly be viewed as a kind of clumsy psychoanalysis, measuring the anxieties and angst of a filmgoing public in the midst of a breakdown in late capitalism and, in particular, in the context of a moment where the globe is obliged to think in terms of what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls the redoubling of the human. In Part Three I use those ideas to argue that responses to the Anthropocene (including climate change denial) are embodied within tropes of the disaster film, which follows a similar kind of postcolonial discourse to that which was, in part, responsible for the Anthropocene in the first place.

Part One: Visions of the End

The 2009 film, 2012, directed by Roland Emmerich is, admittedly, a rather forgettable film. It has some good special effects, and there are some good jokes, but as far as disaster films go, I found myself in the unusual position of rooting for the apocalypse, since at least the planetary destruction would mean the 2-hours-and-20-minute film would be over. The plot, briefly, is that for a reason which is never entirely explained, the earth's crust has started to heat up, and this brings about seismic (literally)

changes in the behaviours of the tectonic plates. New volcanoes create megatsunamis and start to mess around with the climates of those regions—India, Indonesia, Polynesia, and so on. These changes are spotted in advance by some scientists who try to warn the world (for which read: the US president). Because those places are the places that the Global North tends not to care about very much, everyone ignores the scientists and they get on with life as usual. Over the next six months the heat continues to build and the water begins to rise up; climate-related phenomena start getting a little bit strange but not life-threatening. Then, suddenly the climate goes completely off-balance, and someone in the special effects department gets the kind of budget that they have dreamed of for years: it is not for nothing that Emmerich (director of *Independence Day*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Godzilla* and *White House Down*) is known as the “master of disaster”. Great cracks appear in the earth, then widen so that first people fall in, followed by cars, buses, traffic, then bridges, ships and even aeroplanes. Highways and overpasses get thrown around like a toddler’s playset and buildings and infrastructure get tossed into the gaping chasms opening up across the world. In the midst of this chaotic end of the world, climatologist Dr Adrian Helmsley and failed-novelist-turned-chauffeur Jackson Curtis gather together their loved ones and each races across the world to try to outrun the tsunamis. They end up at the Three Gorges Dam in China where the Chinese government has been secretly building a gargantuan military complex furnished with large submarine-like ships which will act as bunkers to weather the worst of the storms before, apparently, repopulating the planet.

Once there, the team force their way onboard the new Arks (yes, you read that right) which will preserve two of each animal and seemingly some of the worst humans that the planet has produced, as well as Oliver Platt. Crowds of refugees surge on the rocks as they realise they are about to be left behind. After some tense negotiations, at the behest of the German Chancellor the commanders of the Ark containing the US Administration eventually decide to open their cargo doors. Survivors rush onto the ship, destabilising the ark. The launch fails, throwing the ship out of control and threatening to sink everyone on board until, in a classic Aristotelian peripeteia, they pull up just in time, make it over the looming mountain peak, and wash out over the Himalayas bobbing along in the current of a helpful super-mega-giga-tsunami.

A second interesting example is Emmerich's earlier 2004 film, *The Day After Tomorrow*, which is also a climate-related apocalypse film. In the opening act, paleoclimatologist Jack Hall, played by Dennis Quaid, recognising the signs of an impending ice age, tries in vain to warn the international community (for which read: the US President). His claims are dismissed and no-one does anything, even though he and the scientific community strongly suspect that the impending Ice Age is looming and liable to bring about societal collapse and mass deaths. In time, their hypothesis finds corroboration when Atlantic weather stations detect a massive drop in temperatures, so they build a forecast model. The US President again refuses to evacuate the northern states, until three superstorms emerge above Canada, Scotland and Siberia which flash-freeze anything they come into contact with. Tokyo is next, getting hit by a gigantic hailstorm, and LA gets a supertornado as the world plunges

into a new Ice Age. With his son stranded in the New York Public Library, Jack abandons his research and decides to travel across the country in a desperate attempt to save his family and avert disaster, which he sort of does: he makes it to New York, hunkers down in a restaurant, and then is reunited with his son when the storm subsides.

My last example is David Rosenthal’s 2018 film, *How it Ends*, in which a young lawyer, Will (Theo James) faces the end of the world with his future father-in-law (played by Forest Whitaker), and must get back to Seattle to rescue his fiancée, Samantha (Kat Graham). The film opens with Will visiting Samantha’s parents in Chicago where he has a tense dinner and plans to fly back the next morning. At the airport all of the flights are mysteriously cancelled due to an unspecified seismic event on the west coast, and so Will and his would-be father-in-law take to the car. On the way they are both surprised and then shocked by the breakdown in law, order and human decency, and find their rescue mission sabotaged and besieged at every turn. Finally they are reunited in a sense, but against the backdrop of volcanoes and earthquakes and massive destruction. Curiously, it is never explained what the phenomenon actually is, nor why it happened. Climate change is, I suppose, just taken for granted by 2018.

Despite the differences in the causes of the apocalypse, what emerges quite clearly in all three of these examples is the extent to which they follow to a fairly rigid formula. The dominant theme of scientific warnings being unheeded is poignant, for sure, in the context of a similar refusal to accept scientific consensus in the current climate (like the discussions over/total refusal to read, the annual IPCC reports which predict

increasingly disturbing prognoses). Likewise, the personification of the weather as an antagonist unites all three examples, as does the familiar tropes of the action film—perhaps the most obvious example is the flash-freezing ice-storm from *The Day After Tomorrow* which sees both Jake Gyllenhaal and Dennis Quaid leaping through holes and windows to escape, and slamming doors in the face of the oncoming ice. To those familiar with popular cinema and the tenacity of genre conventions, none of these is particularly surprising. However, what *is* perhaps surprising (to non-US viewers at least) is the extent to which one genre manages to cling to the wreckage of so many of these visions of the end, namely the road trip.

Perhaps, though, that should not surprise us so much when we think about it. As most genre theorists (in particular Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark)[1] make abundantly clear, the road trip represents something primal. It touches something deep in the psychology of freedom. Particularly in the Hollywood version of the world it sets up a dichotomy between stasis and progress, between oppression and liberation, between the madness of staying and the madness of leaving. As Cohen and Hark argue:

> Forging a travel narrative out of a particular conjunction of plot and setting that sets the liberation of the road against the oppression of hegemonic norms, road movies project American Western mythology onto the landscape traversed and bound by the nation's highways.[2]

1 Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, *The Road Movie Book* (Routledge, 2002); David Laderman, *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie* (University of Texas Press, 2010).

2 Cohan and Hark, *The Road Movie Book*.

David Laderman similarly codes the road as the linear trajectory away from oppression and into freedom, making the road movie into a transgressive act which pushes the protagonists into liberation:

> Road movies generally aim beyond the borders of cultural familiarity, seeking the unfamiliar for revelation, or at least the thrill of the unknown. Such traveling, coded as defamiliarization, likewise suggests a mobile refuge from social circumstances felt to be lacking or oppressive in some way.[3]

What is particularly strange in the context of the environmental disaster film, though, is that by falling back on these unbending genre conventions, in the disaster movie framework none of these three films seems capable of imagining a threat which cannot be solved by jumping in the car and driving off into the sunset. Indeed, if one were to take almost any disaster or apocalypse film, I'm fairly confident that one would be able to find a specific chase-style sequence in which the protagonists tool up, gas up, and then jump in their car to hit the highway in a quest for freedom. I'm marginally less confident, but nevertheless still quite confident, that in their escape they are replaying the deeply-embedded Manifest Destiny tradition by heading either west or north as they do so, though I do concede that *The Day After Tomorrow*'s Vice-President Becker accepts an evacuation south into Mexico—but more on that in a moment.

The reason I feel particularly confident in that bet because it's not really *my* bet, but a rich and long tradition dating back to Hernán Cortés, Hernando de Soto, and

3 Laderman, *Driving Visions*, p. 2.

chronicled in Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and later theorised by Tzvetan Todorov's *L'Amérique*. Whether it's a teen high-school drama in which a letter must be intercepted or virginity must be lost, whether it's breaking free from the patriarchy in a 1966 Ford Thunderbird or riding from LA to New Orleans in search of the spirit of America, what is clear from the road-trip subgenre is that the road has come to be integrated deep into the US psyche as a metonym for freedom, in a subconscious schema which long predates the invention of the automobile. Laderman continues the above quotation by suggesting that "thus the road movie celebrates subversion as a literal venturing outside of society"[4] In particular, the travels to the West or, indexically, from civilised urban centres to wild or backward woodlands have come to form, as Will Wright ad John G. Cawelti persuasively document, a ready-made metaphor for the manifest destiny and the search for a cause of self-actualisation, whatever that really means.

A small spoiler here, but by way of a bathetic proof of my argument, the 2018 film *How it Ends* even finishes ambiguously with the protagonist driving off to Canada in a Jeep, trying to outrun a gigantic volcanic eruption taking place somewhere in the woods to the north of Seattle. The fact that the film never resolves this question merely embodies how much the road trip genre embodies the *hope* of escape rather than the escape as a *fait accompli*. Hence, in the face of a literally existential threat to humanity, hopping into the car and outdriving a tsunami seems to be a perfectly rational response to many of these apocalyptic dramas. Where the threat ramps up, as

4 Laderman, *Driving Visions*, p. 2.

in the 1995 *Waterworld*, or in 2012, so too does the mode of transport get supersized, so a small peril is escaped in a propellor plane, but the bigger the threat, the bigger the aircraft, moving from the fictional Antonov 500 to the arks themselves.

Such a trope is even taken to its extreme in the lesser-known 2003 Thomas Vinterberg apocalypse film, *It's All About Love*. In its final scene, as the entire earth freezes over, we find Sean Penn as a passenger in a commercial flight fruitlessly circling the globe searching for somewhere to land (a trope also recalled in the 2013 *Snowpiercer*), but in the passengers' full knowledge the last few survivors are simply waiting for the fuel to run out. In all cases, though—even the negative ones—the go-to response is that disaster can always be outrun and the search for freedom can be guaranteed simply by getting one's motor running and heading out onto the highway.

Part Two: Narrating the Anthropocene

As such, the attempts to escape the end of the world, and our attempts to imagine those apocalypses, reveal a fundamental limit of the human imagination. The reason that many of these disaster films so frequently leap into the road movie genre is, I suggest, because of two things. First, the road has been coded deeply into the moviegoing psyche as a metonym for freedom and escape. Second, however, because narratively we have nowhere else to go. That is, we are incapable of imagining an end of the world which takes place without us. Part of the reason for that limitation is, I think, a vestigial post-enlightenment dualism embedded into our 'rational' thinking. After a series of Enlightenment thinkers from Bacon to Descartes, we have become so

immersed in a dualist ontology that even our discussions of the Anthropocene cannot take place without our foregrounding of the human experience at its front and centre. If we consider the language which we use to describe the apocalypse, we can find embedded into that language a model which talks of humans and the planet—as though the two were different—or humans and nature.

The reality is quite different. The practical consequences of the Anthropocene force us to avoid this untenable distinction. As John Green flatly observes, there are no sidelines in the face of a planetary destruction: "In the Anthropocene, there are no disinterested observers; there are only participants."[5] James Martin puts it even more forcefully, recognising that:

> We are not masters of nature—we are a component of nature. We must have the deepest respect for what nature has taken 4 billion years to create. Nature's biodiversity is of staggering complexity, and we are immersed in this complexity. When we interfere with it, we damage it in subtle ways… The environment should not be something that we manipulate, like landscaping, but something we understand and treat much more responsibly than today.[6]

Avoiding this distinction is difficult since a fundamental separation between humans and nature has been embedded into our language for so long that the two concepts seem to be of a different category altogether. In everyday language, we talk of David Attenborough making Nature documentaries, while Bill Nye is "the Science Guy", even

5 John Green, *The Anthropocene Reviewed: Essays on a Human-Centered Planet* (Dutton, 2021), p. 5.

6 James Martin, *The Meaning Of The 21st Century: A Vital Blueprint For Ensuring Our Future* (Eden Project Books, 2007), p. 276.

if in reality *all* documentaries are nature documentaries because everything in them is a phenomenon of nature (on a long enough timeline). Even Trivial Pursuit talks about "science *and* nature," though I would challenge most to be able to discern any differences between the two, and as though Art, Literature, History and Geography weren't also a part of nature. From everyday speech to our attempts to grapple philosophically with the Anthropocene, our terminology inevitably places nature as something outside of and alongside the human experience.

The Anthropocene, then, emerges as a term which tries to imagine the end of humans, even though it usually fails. The language deployed by the Anthropocene—even the term itself—is seemingly incapable of sloughing off its insistent human-centred focus: when people talk about saving the planet or environmental collapse as marking the end of the world, their language reveals a complex framing which cannot imagine a life without them. We are a little like the child, Andy, in *Toy Story* who cannot comprehend that life might go on in his absence, or that things and objects might have feelings or emotions or agencies which our worldview simply cannot comprehend.

Even our most urgent calls to action to protect the planet, or nature, inevitably recentre us as the protagonists of a narrative we don't actually get to write. Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz's book, *The Shock of the Anthropocene* takes as its starting point not the environmental catastrophe but the human origins, a stance encapsulated by their subtitle, "The Earth, History, and Us". Carolyn Merchant, in her timely study of the Anthropocene in the humanities, lays out a terrifying set of

statistics about the ongoing (and still unfolding) climate crisis before asking "what do these trends mean for the future of humanity and the planet?"[7]

That is not to say that it is impossible, of course, to imagine a humanless planet. It just takes effort and care. The term 'apocalypse' itself is surprisingly not complicit in the conflation but actually contains the idea of rediscovery by the removal of something else which has been obfuscating. It turns out the "'Apocalypse' and 'Revelation', from a strictly etymological point of view, can be considered synonymous. The term '*apo-kalypsis*' comes from '*apò*', and '*kalypto*' (which means 'cover' or 'hide'). So originally *apokalypsis* meant the concrete act of discovering, in the primary sense of removing a cover. Similarly, 'revelation' meant removing a veil."[8] While, of course, the question about who or what it is that knows that unknowable thing veers off into both eschatology, theology and/or hermeneutics, the effective point is the same, that the apocalyptic tradition (in its Christian sense at least) has always contained the idea of the uncovering something else (by imagining a nasty end for humans), rather than the destruction of the planet. Even the biblical story of Noah—on which 2012 is clearly drawing—sees the continuation of the planet but the destruction of most of its humans for their wickedness and their turning away from God's laws (including, but not limited to, their entrustment of the planet as stewards.)[9]

7 Carolyn Merchant, *The Anthropocene and the Humanities: From Climate Change to a New Age of Sustainability* (Yale University Press, 2020), p. 4.

8 Alessandro Bruni, 'Apocalypse - Revelation: The Ways of Intuition', in *Bion, Intuition and the Expansion of Psychoanalytic Theory*, ed. by Antònia Grimalt (Taylor & Francis, 2022), chap. 5.

9 Here I am referring to the often-cited verse, Genesis 1:26: "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth." Here 'dominion' is often understood as 'authority' from the Latin Dominium, whereas 'stewardship' is often thought to be a better fit, as explored in Pope Francis' 2015 Encyclical Letter, 'Laudato Si'. See Nancy Opstad Weldon, 'A Biblical Hermeneutic for

Some thinkers, of course, recognise the Anthropocene for that clean break between humanity and nature. Jeremy Davies, for instance, sees a political dimension in the terminology in his recognition that the arrival of the Anthropocene also implies that we have arrived at the end of the Holocene, and the end of its concomitant pleasures. “With its demise, the civilized rights and pleasures previously confined to the Holocene will have to negotiate radically changed ecological conditions if they are to endure, let alone if they are to be extended more generously to more people. That is the political problem of the Anthropocene.”[10] Through that end, Davies reasons, the Anthropocene’s cold indiscrimination brings about a new mode of viewing humans and nature as one interconnected being. “Humanity is not at the center of the picture of the Anthropocene, opposing, by its powers of mind, the passive matter that encircles it. Instead, human societies are themselves constructed from a web of relationships between human beings, nonhuman animals, plants, metals and so on.”[11] Such a web of interconnections, in fact, forms the basis for one of the most prominent voices in the ecological and biophysical community which talks of the Anthropocene as something fundamentally unconcerned with humanity. James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis’s Gaia hypothesis remains one of the most well-known, and controversial, of the discussions about the future of the planet, having provoked quite intense debate

Dominion: Domination vs Stewardship’, *Obsculta*, 9.1 (2016), pp. 73–81.

10 Jeremy Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene* (University of California Press, 2016), p. 2.

11 Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene*, p. 7.

among climate scientists and ecologists since the 1970s. In short, Lovelock and Margulis's thesis is as follows:

> The Gaia hypothesis postulates that the Earth's surface is maintained in a habitable state by self-regulating feedback mechanisms involving organisms tightly coupled to their environment. The concept is based on several observations:
>
> • The atmosphere is in an extreme state of thermodynamic disequilibrium owing to the activities of life, yet aspects of its composition are remarkably stable.
>
> • Present conditions at the surface of the Earth are close to optimal for the dominant organisms.
>
> • Life has persisted for over 3.8 billion years despite increasing solar luminosity and variable exchange of matter with the inner Earth.
>
> • The Earth system has repeatedly recovered from massive perturbations.[12]

This last point leads us to one of the Gaia hypothesis' greatest points (and its most controversial, since it is empirically untestable), namely that the earth is approaching one more of its massive perturbations, most chiefly in the positive feedback loop between glacial melt and sea levels. It is oddly fitting to see that here 2012 actually finds some scientific justification in its imagined escape through arks, a cyclical view of climate history supported by Arnold Toynbee.[13]

12 T. Lenton, 'GAIA HYPOTHESIS', in *Encyclopedia of Atmospheric Sciences*, ed. by James R. Holton (Academic Press, 2003), pp. 815–20 (p. 815), doi:10.1016/B0-12-227090-8/00040-3.

13 See, for instance, H.H. Lamb, *Climate History and the Modern World* (Methuen, 1982), pp. 5–6.

As a simple demonstration of how Gaia’s rheastasis works (that is, how it maintains the stable temperatures required for human life), we might follow *The Day After Tomorrow* to think about arctic frosts. Currently, and for the last 50 million years or so, arctic permafrost reflects the sun and cools the planet. It is one of the most important elements for maintaining a stable temperature. As the earth heats up, and particularly over the north and south poles, so too do these regions heat up and so glaciers melt. This sets off a vicious cycle leading to a tipping point beyond which the planet cannot right itself: the shrinking glaciers and frost makes it less cold, making the poles less able to reflect light and heat back out of the atmosphere which causes further heating and higher sea levels, which causes more heat loss (and energy use) which melts even more ice, etc. “The predominance of positive feedback in the recent glacial–interglacial cycles suggests that the Earth system is nearing a transition to an alternative state”, the Gaia hypothesis argues. “Eventually, self-regulation will collapse and the Earth will be sterilized.”[14]

Now, I don’t propose to go into the merits and oversights of the Gaia hypothesis because, in all honesty I don’t think I understand it, and it is not absolutely essential for this argument. But for our purposes here it is really interesting because it is one of the few moments where literature, cinema and science all coalesce to ask a really important question about apocalypse and catastrophe. Namely, if (or when) humans end, then who gets to narrate that ‘end of the world’? As Chakrabarty terms it, as we

14 Lenton, ‘Gaia Hypothesis’, p. 815.

are forced to think about deep time, we get a shock of recognition, even as we recognise the uncanny nature of something we have never seen before.

Part Three: Historical Narratives of Escape

Even if it is not really the end of the world but simply the natural cycles by and through which Gaia or the planet, or whatever you wish to call it, shifts into a new period, how do we get to narrate that text when we are ourselves part of its story? Thus, we realise that a part of the problem is not biological but metatextual. We require a narrator who is capable of sitting outside of the narrative, but we are equally rejecting as impossible any narrator who is not human, and therefore going to be destroyed at the end of the Anthropocene. This does seem like an intractable problem for us, unless Gaia herself enrols in a filmmaking class and starts to document the process.

Again, though, in terms of the Anthropocene, Chakrabarty offers a really interesting way out of this trap. In his discussion of the human condition in response to the Anthropocene, he argues that the human condition undergoes a fundamental shift to create two opposing views of the world, the *homo*centric and the *zoe*centric. He posits, in his Tanner Lectures at Yale, published as *The Human Condition in the Anthropocene* that the 1968 NASA photo, Earthrise, marks the culmination of a growing shift of the human gaze from the inside-out to the outside-in. (p. 151). It is worth citing his argument in full here, because its wonderful progression anticipates my own conclusion neatly:

> There are three things to be noted about [the] consciousness of globalization: (a) it turns [...] on the question of humans dwelling together in a global world when technology weaves the planet into a huge network of connections; (b) the history it recalls is the history of the last five hundred or so years, the history of European expansion, of globalizing capital with all its inequities, and of modern technology; and (c) although the environmental concerns of the past four decades did call attention to man’s relationship to his environment including other species, this epochal consciousness remained profoundly homocentric. Humans were at the center of this narrative, however it was told.” (152)

Thus, the point about this homocentric viewpoint is that it sets off a dissonance between the recognition of globalization, and therefore the view of the globe from a non-human perspective. As such, the escape of the human becomes the only solution in order, literally, to live to tell the tale. In the typical disaster film formula outlined above, the instinctive race to reunite a fractured family and to save the world is a reflexive response to the threat of extinction, but it is one which is rooted in the history of European expansion. In this last part, I propose to finish by showing my reasoning to explain why I think that is the case.

There is an obvious point which is implied by my earlier mentions of Will Wright and John G. Cawelti, who were not in fact describing the road trip but its spiritual predecessor, the Western. Both writers were studying not the trope of escape from bourgeois oppression or mundanity, but the monomyth of the movement away from civilisation and beyond the frontier, a myth which is underpinned and perpetuated by

the fundamental insistence on—and unwavering belief in—Manifest Destiny. Following the expansionist logic of the myth of the American Frontier (and its implicit *terra nulla* hypothesis), these examples show also the paucity of human imagination because we are unable to imagine an apocalypse from which we cannot escape—since there is narratively speaking no place for us to escape to (despite the insistence, discussed below, of tech billionaires on cultivating space itself).

As a cure for such a complex cognitive dissonance, here I argue that these apocalypse films do not look to the future, but instead turn to the past. Since we do not know how to imagine the literally unimaginable, nor can we tell the story from the perspective of Gaia, instead we turn to familiar cognitive metaphors. Rather than mine history for solutions to things like climate change—which is what we need, of course—instead they mine that same history for parallels where we escape one kind of problem by moving to a space/place/zone/planet which doesn't suffer from that problem.

Now, the postcolonial scholars will already guess where I'm going with this argument, especially given my earlier references to Chakrabarty's work. But to walk through the logic, we can see glimpses of the repeat of colonialism to which Chakrabarty alludes. The apocalypse film, and the Anthropocene, threaten the end of the past, the demise of the rich. So once the riches which sustain life from one region have been exhausted, and given that we seem genetically incapable of coming up with any kind of resource preservation and sustainability plan no matter how many crises like these we precipitate, we are then obliged to move to another region to find and exploit new

resources. Thus, whether escaping plague, religious or political persecution, war, famine, flood or drought, we return again and again to Joseph Campbell's unit of the monomyth by restarting the cycle in a new *terra nulla*, a hitherto unrevealed[15] land of untapped opportunity. Thus, the escape motif of the disaster film performs, seemingly inevitably, a direct parallel and repetition of colonialism's own pattern of exploitation and environmental violence which has dominated history.

Of course, I'm aware that I'm writing these things within and from a nation with one of the bloodiest, most violent histories of colonialism, and that I first presented those ideas to delegates at a conference taking place at the University of Sydney, sited on and in the unceded lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, who alongside many other peoples and nations have suffered and continue to suffer the brutal narratives of colonial rhetoric and ideologies. I want to be clear that I am here acknowledging that violence and not simply using it as casual and dehumanising metaphor. Instead, I genuinely think that because of the way that progress and humanity as concepts have been interwoven and separated from ideas about nature and stewardship, these colonial narratives become watered down into narratives of expansion, escape and exploration, in a process a little like Umberto Eco's concept of 'Ur-Fascism'. [16]

15 Here I am deliberately making a reference to the etymology of the term 'revelation', discussed above, as being 'revealed', and the irony that 'apocalypse' (its etymological cognate) both means the same thing as well as being precisely the mechanism that drives us to unveil the new resource in the first place.

16 Umberto Eco, 'Ur-Fascism', *New York Review of Books*, 22nd June 1995.

That relentless encoding is, I suggest, how motifs of escape-via-colonialism then find themselves encoded into the panicked responses to events which threaten our lives, transforming Hollywood's disaster films into a public screen onto which we project our most private anxieties. As a first response to the existential threat of the apocalypse and/or planetary destruction, they offer a glimpse into our whispered prayers bubbling up from our unconscious which insists that, however bad things get 'here' in this place, we can always escape to an evergreen 'elsewhere'—paying little heed to its people in so doing, overlooking the territorial desctruction we are intent on replicating, and disregarding the inequity and privilege required to contemplate that escape in the first place.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that in this mode the disaster film can be seen as a kind of bellwether of broader cultural responses to the climate crisis. Unsurprisingly, the language and ideology of colonialism can be found also in broader cultural responses of the Anthropocene to the environmental catastrophe which we have created, and which we are continuing to create without any credible plans to mitigate it. The colonial ideologies underpinning those responses do not offer any attempt to acknowledge, to slow down, to stop, or reverse the devastating effect of our carbon and Greenhouse Gas emissions, our pollution of land and water, our wanton extraction and destruction of resources and the mounting streams of waste which we produce by refusing to understand the life-ensuring and bafflingly obvious principles of circular economies and closed-loop production.

By refusing to acknowledge our ongoing destruction of the planet, then, the responses and solutions often centre around and relentlessly replay historical responses which negate them or deny responsibility. Let’s examine just four common responses to the Climate Emergency. Instead of cutting our resource use and monitoring our waste, we have proposed:

Four responses to Climate Crisis:

1) **Loudly denying its reality** despite there being no verified science rejecting it. This is the first illustration of privilege, because you can’t deny it if it’s happening on your doorstep. It is only if we live in a country either not experiencing early warning signs of meteorological extremes or if we are rich enough to be resilient that we can deny them. Loudly denying them also means we have a voice on the international stage. We see this phase in all of the moments in the films discussed above, wherein official representatives (usually the US President) deny its reality and, in so doing, repudiate any responsibility.
2) **Letting the most vulnerable nations suffer.** There is a monstrous inequity at work in the effects of climate change. It is no coincidence at all that those nations most vulnerable to the effects of climate change are precisely those who are the most fragile politically and geographically. As of 2023, at the time of writing, South Sudan, Burundi, Central African Republic, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo all top the charts as the most at-risk countries from the effects of climate change (drought, famine, disease) and are—*in that precise order*—the poorest nations in the world. Tuvalu, the Solomon Islands, the Maldives and Kiribati are losing, or have lost, islands already due to rising sea levels even though their contributions to the pollution that

causes it is among the lowest, even when measured per capita.[17] As such, those with the least responsibility for, and the fewest defences against, climate change are both those most affected by it *and*, in a double whammy of injustice, the least likely to get a seat at the table and a voice on the global stage. It is also no coincidence that a map of colonial occupation also maps neatly onto these other maps of poverty and climate change, so again the question of the voice, and the history of those voices, are not on anything like a level playing field when viewed historically. In 2012 we see precisely this pattern—the overheating of the core is first measured in the Naga Deng Copper Mine, India, but warnings are ignored until they affect California.

3) **Turn to technology to solve it**. It is really easy to see why this is the favoured option of the world's richest and most polluting nations. Technologies like electric cars, cold fusion, Direct Air Capture and marine plastic collection are really encouraging and are for sure technologies which we should be developing to help us to roll back beyond Net Zero. However, the problem is when they are offered *as an alternative* to cutting back resources, not something to be done *alongside* it. Like the Arks of 2012, they are presented as miraculous saviours which mitigate climate change and allow us to go on polluting as before. Worse, one of the only green technologies so far to be rolled out at scale shows an unforeseen side-effect: the green rebound phenomenon. What we have found after two decades of rolling out photovoltaic panels is that houses with solar panels are often found to be using *more* electricity than they did before switching (it's completely normal. Who has never once overeaten at a free buffet?). So the technological salvation model proposes a massive, irresponsible, and (most

17 I have encountered some in sustainability circles who, with seeming earnestness, suggest that the Maldives' high emissions from hotels and hospitality make them complicit in their own demise. The stupidity of such a line of argument becomes apparent when we recognise that those staying in the luxury hotels are not Maldivians themselves.

importantly) impossible deployment of nascent or as-yet non-existent technology which relies on yet more extractive and destructive processes, and which would need to be scaled up in order to cater to and for the rapidly increasing numbers of people who now need to use them without cutting down on resource use and deploy conservation and restorative practices, as well as the literally exponentially-increasing numbers of the population itself. As we cruise towards 9 billion people, many of whom now want to drive private cars, eat meat and catch up on the party they missed in the 20th century (but that everyone else got to go to) we haven't got a hope of technology matching that demand coming online.[18]

4) **Move to another planet** and trash that one instead. The idea here is, rather than using extraordinary and disproportionate wealth accumulation to actually solve the problem (and resolve poverty, overpopulation, health and hunger with change to spare), to use our extractive and destructive processes to fund yet more probing into further planets. Then, should we find a suitable planet, we send a few advance parties, establish the requisite infrastructure, extract what we need to make it worthwhile, and then move there until numbers become unsustainable and we repeat the process. This is the Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk and Space X phenomenon, of course, and we do not need to include any maps to show which countries are proposing them nor which countries' resources are most exploited to fuel that dream.

18 For more on this, see Hannah Ritchie, *Not the End of the World: How We Can Be the First Generation to Build a Sustainable Planet* (Hachette UK, 2024); Martin, *The Meaning Of The 21st Century*; Mike Berners-Lee, *How Bad Are Bananas?: The Carbon Footprint of Everything* (Greystone Books, 2011).

Conclusion

To conclude, then, I want to end by summarising these positions and I hope to tie them back together. In Part One I argued that cinematic imaginings of the apocalypse—at least those of the Hollywood tradition—very often resorted to a series of formulaic tropes. Not least of these tropes, I suggested, was the recourse to the powerful allure of the road trip, a genre which represents freedom and opportunity but which also indexically alludes to a dissatisfaction with oppression. In Part Two, I explored the problem lying at the heart of cinema's capacity to narrate the apocalypse. Without the implied omniscience of the narrator to provide a historiographic externality and objectivity the fictional feature film struggles to conceive of an end. There is no humanity to tell the story after the demise. This is why, I suggest, the films I have studied turn instinctively to the trope of the road movie in order to escape the apocalypse. This is true even in the case of those rare films which do imagine a world after our demise. *Planet of the Apes*, for instance, does tell a post-human narrative but nevertheless needs to preserve its human narrator by having them circle in space long after the collapse of the species so that they have a narrative explanation for why they survived—indeed, Taylor even confesses midway through that film that he left for the mission because he felt like he didn't fit into the planet, so that's also a de facto road trip genre two-for-one. (Sorry for the spoiler, but it has been 55 years since the film came out). Finally, in Part Three, I explored how apocalypse films unwittingly looked backwards into historical narratives in order to conceive of the future. In the words of Alan Weisman, whose book *The World Without*

Us works along the same argument: “For a sense of how the world would go on without us, among other places we must look to the world before us.”[19]

Thus, instead of telling us about the future as they propose, they end up replaying the history of colonialism by replaying a seemingly inevitable history of colonialism. Even the defences against (or responses to) the climate crisis ended up replaying those same narratives of refutation, deferring responsibility to the most vulnerable, technological salvationism (what Yuval Harari calls Salvation by Algorithm)[20] and recolonisation. In this way, then, I propose that our ability to imagine the end of humanity takes us not into the future, since that brings us into the realm of speculative fiction and even eschatology. Instead, as the examples here have suggested, we return to the historical film as a means of reintroducing familiar implications of contingency and teleology—even if we don’t realise it.

19 Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (Random House, 2012), p. 4.

20 Yuval Harari, ‘Salvation by Algorithm: God, Technology and the New 21st-Century Religions’, *New Statesman*, 9 September 2016 <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2016/09/salvation-by-algorithm-god-technology-and-the-new-21st-century-religions>.

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