

Jenny Stümer Editor's Note on
Posthuman Survival

For this issue of *Apocalyptica* we turn to the notion of posthuman survival. Of course, the concept of the posthuman encapsulates a diverse and vast range of theoretical approaches, the scope of which by far exceeds the discussion we are suggesting here. However, at its core posthuman thought questions the centrality of the human, which gains particular significance in the context of evolving anthropogenic crises. As such, the often postulated ‘posthuman condition,’ and particularly its relation to measures of ‘survival,’ is vital in working through the many aspects of apocalypse in past, present, and future. Seen in this light, the construction of the human as a narrative, fantasy, and hegemonic point of reference is pivotal to understanding the histories of colonialism and global capitalism as based in hierarchies that categorize (or decategorize) the meaning of specific lives. The conceptualization of the human also inflects current framings and discussions of anthropogenic climate change and its many interconnected shades of vulnerability and injustice. At the same time, Eurocentric conceptions of the human also have vast effects on how powerful nations in particular conceive of, respond to, and prepare for various anticipated crises, such as those related to migration, ecological devastation, food and water scarcity, etc. The problem of the human in shaping these understandings and their political consequences, in other words, is grounded in its capacity to dress up as a universal concept, uniting a global community in peril, while simultaneously effecting and sustaining a complex web that confines the majority of people to a state of permanent exposure, exclusion, and inequality. As Rosi Braidotti (2013, 1) puts it, “not all of us can say, with any degree of certainty, that we

have always been human, or that we are only that.” And, more pertinently, “the human has exploded under the double pressure of contemporary scientific advances and global economic concerns” (Braidotti 2013, 1) invoking what she calls a “posthuman predicament” at the core of apocalyptic upheaval.

Of course, the posthuman certainly reproduces its shares of inhuman advances (consider the threat of viral human-animal exchanges resulting in ever less controllable pandemics, the traumatic escalation of drone warfare at the expense of largely vulnerable populations, or the techno-colonial fantasies and ambitions to colonize Mars in the aftermath of planet Earth’s destruction, etc.). These developments are concerning and deserve critical attention; however, the posthuman also holds vast promises for rethinking the apocalyptic potential of revealing, rupturing, and transforming these problems as well as the structures they rely on. For example, Pramod Nayar (2013, 2) thinks of posthumanism as the “radical decentering of the traditional sovereign, coherent, and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by, and constitutive of multiple forms of life.” Nayar’s approach speaks to the apocalyptic potentials of ending a destructive and non-inclusive world as a means of making a new (and perhaps) better one. This account changes the construction and meaning of the human at the core of anthropogenic disaster and potentially opens new vistas for taking stock of existing ecological and political vulnerabilities, potential multispecies in/justice and various cross-species entanglements which may prove vital in understanding the nuanced politics of apocalypse today.

In this context, it is important to point out, that the human as a category of power has long been subject to wide-spread philosophical and practical critique by public intellectuals, artists, and activists alike—most notably by black feminist scholars (Wynter and McKittrick 2015, Ferreira da Silva 2015, Weheliye 2014). Exemplifying this critique, Sylvia Wynter (2015) maintains that conceptions of the human are inherently related to the notion of ‘Man’ which has attained a ubiquitous and exclusive presence since the enlightenment, projecting a particular ideal of the human that centers whiteness and Europeanness in such a way that ‘others’ do not qualify to measure up. The concept of ‘Man’ thereby enables and supports a fundamentally racist, sexist, violent, and ultimately unsustainable structure of global exploitation, which has not only significantly propelled what is now commonly perceived as ‘the end of the/world’ but which may also describe precisely that which needs to be abandoned or which needs to ‘end’ in order for new and more just (posthuman and post-apocalyptic) worlds to emerge. Building on this line of thought, Braidotti

explains that appeals to the human “are always discriminatory” (2020, 2) reproducing structural inequalities that are ultimately reliant on differential hierarchizations of the human. In this continuum, the white, masculine, Eurocentric, able-bodied, heterosexual subject called ‘Man’ reigns supremely, marginalizing all other positions. However, the decentering of this harmful standard also brings about the proliferation of different views and experiences that may vitally retell the trajectory of possible contemporary politics.

In each case, the notion of the human has consequences on how past and present crises are politically framed and interpreted, entangling existing and potential politics, as Kathryn Yusoff (2018) has shown. To Yusoff the “sudden concern with the exposures of environmental harm to white liberal communities” evolving in the context of fears about climate change, for example, demonstrates a particular incapacity of largely white, global centers of power to acknowledge the “histories in which these harms have been knowingly exported to black and brown communities under the rubric of civilization, progress, modernization and capitalism” (2018, xiii). In this sense, hegemonic notions of the human erase the fact that apocalypses have been part and parcel of creating the very world whose end is now repeatedly lamented; a world which, it seems, “is just now noticing the extinction it has chosen to continually overlook in the making of modernity and freedom” (Yusoff 2018, xiii). However, the notion of the posthuman, by contrast, unsettles these assumptions and thereby prompts important questions about what constitutes a crisis or apocalypse in the first place? At what point do we speak of emergencies? Whose anxiety takes center stage? And most crucially, whose survival must be secured?

Such questions provide insight into the intersectional stakes of apocalyptic thinking, precisely because they expose (reveal!) the power-ridden conventions of dominant fears about human extinction or forthcoming apocalypses encoded in the many ends of the world (Yusoff 2018, Mitchell and Chaudhury 2020, Salih and Corry 2022). At the same time, the posthuman also puts into focus the many voices that have been marginalized from Eurocentric notions of the human, potentially elevating the perspectives of those who have been historically othered, dehumanized, and routinely excluded from the ‘world’. As Braidotti (2020, 2) explains, “as these multiple crises unfold, the politics of the sexualized, racialized, naturalized others are moving center stage, pushing old Anthropos off-centre.” This includes a turn to indigenous epistemologies, decolonial thought, and a long overdue reexamination of the past in terms of different scales of

'Man-made' catastrophes that may well (re)constitute pre-existing forms of local and global apocalyptic experience and crisis embodiment.

At the core of these attempts to decenter 'Man' as the measure of universal humanness stands the proliferation of a particular kind of vitality or assumptions about the agentic quality of living matter itself, which upends the Eurocentric paradigm of a fundamental nature-culture binary. Of course, the distinction between the categories of the natural and the cultural have long been pressured by technological and scientific advances; however, a non-dualistic understanding of the nature-culture continuum also throws up various questions about the politics of apocalypse, often in conflicting and ambivalent ways. For example, robotics, AI technologies, bio-genetics or transhumanism may unsettle the discriminatory structures of abusive global politics or provide new avenues for profit-minded exploitation and unethical categorizations of vulnerability and otherness. What is at stake here is, as Braidotti (2013, 2) puts it eloquently once more, "a qualitative shift in thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet" — a shift which necessitates a nuanced discussion about "what kind of political analysis and which progressive politics is supported by the approach based on the nature-culture continuum" (Braidotti 2013, 3). If the apocalypse is not simply a mythological event, but rather an experience that holds a philosophical and practical lens on the cultural politics of specific contexts, then the contestation of the human is a central means of upending the world in relevant and consequential ways, of forming and deforming the historical present. The posthuman as a vector of apocalyptic analysis thus deserve more nuanced and critical attention.

More to the point, apocalypse holds significant potential for thinking the posthuman and vice versa, precisely because the politics of the 'end' and the 'post' are productively entangled. One way of approaching this complex intersection is the notion of a radical ontological uncertainty made palpable through the upending of Eurocentric conceptions of individuality, time, space, etc. For example, on the one hand, the premise of a whole range of apocalyptic fears (and hopes) is the unsettling presumption that humanity is in a critical condition, the various meanings and implications of which are anything but clear. On the other hand, the problem of the human as a category of power also exacerbates these various crises, leading to an ambiguous loss of continuity or futurity, which changes the coordinates of what this slowly ending world may offer, represent, or operationalize. For example, anthropogenic catastrophe as well as multispecies entanglements may upend the notion of quantifiable,

linear time and non-relational space, in so far as both time and space intensify or compress under the pressures of a shrinking world. In turn, these changes in perception and lived reality effect a heightened alertness or negative affective economy in which people, communities, and nations may scramble for all kinds of ways to preserve or upend a common world. The politics of apocalypse are then also always connected to complex and ambivalent negotiations of identity politics within the realm of catastrophe as well as to attempts at managing one's existence, and the ever-looming question to what ends, how, and *if* the status quo should be preserved or survived?

In this regard, Kyle Powys Whyte (2021) warns about emerging forms of 'crisis epistemology' whereby the assumption that a particular emergency is new, unprecedented, urgent (or apocalyptic) might lead to actions that disadvantage disenfranchised communities once more—thereby escalating, slowly but incessantly, the very structures that brought about the current crises in the first place. Solutions to climate emergency that end up excluding marginalized communities through massive concrete structures, barbed wire, drones, and fences in the effort to protect the fossil fueled lifestyles of hegemonic power, for example, reinstate the problematic questions of whose world is ending and whose world is to be saved, escalating the tensions of apocalyptic politics once more. The question is then: Does apocalyptic thinking, in this sense, have to be avoided? Does it deprive a crisis-ridden world of political drive and creativity? Or, does the apocalypse itself hold a particular kind of politics that benefits from the changing meanings of the human, precisely because these changes produce a counterimage to/of hegemonic ideals of life, community, and world altogether?

One way of approaching these tensions (without strictly trying to resolve or exhaust them) may be a turn to the figure of the zombie, whose traces in the apocalyptic imaginary go back all the way to West African and Caribbean Vodou traditions, but whose presence also works as a constant reminder of the undead necropolitical structure of racial capital and enduring coloniality. Mel Chen (2015, 25) crucially describes the zombie as a "complexly racialized, eternally laboring figure" that maps posthuman biopolitics onto intense fears about the collapse of "borders of nation, geography, natural barriers, class, gender, age, race, ability, and health" (26). As such, the zombie is a central figure of the posthuman predicament and, yet more poignantly, of posthuman end times scenarios. In fact, Jack Halberstam points out that "every zombie represents a critique of the human" (2020, 166) invoking a central concern of ending the world and thereby reformulating apocalypse's most contentious claim through

the lens of the posthuman: The zombie imagines the end of the human as such, but, like the apocalypse as a scenario against which the zombie emerges, this annihilation of the human bespeaks the abolishment of a category that depends on “white racial fantasies of longevity (even in the face of diminished environmental capacity), technologically enhanced futurity, and a maximized relation to survival” (Halberstam 2020, 166). The apocalypse, hence, emerges as a form of heightened anxiety that articulates profound injustices located in past, present, and future, but it also describes a form of posthuman world-making. In this sense, apocalypse itself may also work as a poignant rejection of the human that can be read as a refusal of the gendered, racialized, and ableist structures that indefinitely reproduce crisis and injustice in this world. Apocalyptic thinking then not only sustains but also potentially questions the various responses to ‘the end of the world,’ particularly as they emerge in the form of human enhancement or survival at all cost.

Without claiming to reproduce an exhaustive conversation, the articles in this issue, in one way or another, begin to contour these predicaments but crucially do not aim to resolve their many tensions, conflicts, and ambiguities. In the following, our authors discuss the propensities of posthuman survival in the light of apocalyptic histories that blend different temporalities and spaces as well as forms of looking back to the past through moments of unresolved trauma, contemporary negotiations of exceptional borderscapes, elemental politics of intersecting forms of ecological violence, and the ambivalent mediation and fictionalization of artificial intelligence.

The issue opens with a special feature of Robert Folger’s Annual Tagore Lecture, entitled “(Un)veiling Extinction: Notes on an Apocalyptic History of Mexico,” which he held at University College London in April 2024. Folger outlines how the apocalypse operates as a mythical narrative that requires a human subject in order to imagine different scales of extinction. The analysis reveals that while Western notions of this ‘end’ have been conceptualized around anthropomorphism, as well as a specific hegemonic topography and linear temporality, a closer look at the apocalyptic history of Mexico in particular unveils a kind of blending or montage of apocalyptic moments in time and space that unsettle this notion. Helping to make sense of the tension between apocalypse and post-apocalypse more broadly, Mexico generates a specific form of folding extinction onto the past that is helpful in complicating the spatial, temporal, and emotional scales of apocalyptic experience. Working through this overlap, from the supposed extinction of the Dinosaurs to the colonial periods of past and present, Folger’s analysis not only untangles the

centering of Man as an apocalyptic narrative trope, but with view to the apocalyptic impulses of Mexican history, nevertheless demonstrates, how “apocalypse is not just an end, but a conclusion that folds towards a beginning.” Apocalypse in this sense “is not only destructive but opens new possibilities beyond the existing” and may thereby point us to forms of life beyond the realm of the human.

Following on from this insight, Lawrence May’s article “Undead Return: Japanese Videogames and Nuclear Memory” examines the origins of Japanese zombie video games in the light of *yōkai* folklore. May’s analysis resituates the zombie in these games as a distinctly Japanese variation of mediated undead monstrosity, which articulates a communal and public grappling with the unresolved trauma of the repercussions of the Pacific War in Japanese culture. As such, the figure of the ludic zombie emerges as a potent mediation of apocalyptic anxiety that provides insight into the historical foundations of posthuman imaginaries. In reading the zombie against (and within) the tradition of Japanese *yōkai*, however, May also puts into focus the “fertile terrain” of uncanny and abject zombification in the affective and aesthetic articulation of the nation, which, in this case, returns the repressed of post-1945 apocalyptic scars and wartime experience of “economic, emotional, political and social living death” with the end of the Shōwa era in 1989. In tracing the figure of the Japanese zombie in its specific invocation, May’s analysis further challenges the centrality of the American and Caribbean-derived figure of the undead and thereby not only importantly broadens the genealogy of the mediated zombie, but also reinstates what he calls the “double inscription of global and local concerns” that shape the cultural mediation of specific trauma articulations alongside the figure of the posthuman zombie.

Lea Espinoza Garrido’s article “‘Death or Rebirth’: Apocalyptic Border-scapes, Topographies of Exception, and Regulating Survival in Zack Snyder’s *Army of the Dead* (2021)” looks at the film’s portrayal of the border as a site of territorial and symbolic exclusion that profoundly shapes and re-organizes the ethical proportions of survival management in the aftermath of apocalypse. Crucially, exclusion in Espinoza Garrido’s analysis does not simply function in the spatial sense, as the border’s overwhelming visuality as a central trope of zombie aesthetic seems to suggest, but also demonstrates how the border maintains a specific exclusion from the sphere of the living, reproduced in the uncanny figure of the undead zombie. Reworking the layered necropolitical dimensions of the border in this way, Espinoza Garrido sheds light on the particular imaginary intertwining of apocalypse and survival with a view to the biopolitical consequences of such entanglements. The zombie, then, functions, in Espinoza

Garrido's words, as a "liminal figure" that projects the critical potential of apocalypse precisely because it not only "blurs the boundaries between living and dead, human and non-human, self and Other" but also because it "functions as a transtemporal figure onto which present, past, and future issues can be projected." In this sense, the spatio-temporal layers in *Army of the Dead* (2021) invoke the visual grammar of transnational crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and anxieties about migration control. Yet, the film also makes a specific claim about locally contained apocalypse and thereby mediates, similarly to May's analysis, the tension between global and local acts of survival, which in this instance reproduce an apocalypse that is both plural and particular in its negotiation of human and not-so-human exclusion.

In his contribution "Foul Waters: Contemporary Zombie Apocalypse Narratives and the Elemental Turn," Drago Momcilovic takes on the zombie apocalypse through the lens of elemental politics. Looking at the television series *The Walking Dead* (2010–2022) and its first major spinoff, *Fear the Walking Dead* (2015–2023) more specifically, Momcilovic conceptualizes the zombie as a "posthuman predator," who, in his embodiment of fluid elements in particular, allegorizes the ecological violence shaping postapocalyptic imaginaries today. Focusing on the prevalence of blood, oil, and water, Momcilovic reworks the zombie apocalypse as an elemental apocalypse, in which zombies not only reshape the world through various fluid exchanges with their environments, "leaking, bleeding, festering, and putrefying" into the landscape, but thereby also render these grounds malleable, unstable, and ultimately precarious. To Momcilovic this visualization of destructing the once stable grounds of human civilization allegorizes perceptions of global catastrophe as uncertain, ambiguous, and uncomfortable. It also demonstrates that the fluid elements at the center of these narratives work themselves to escalate the ecological and political violence depicted, particularly where blood, oil, and water are seen to escalate "the dismantling of cultural practices, social hierarchies, and institutions and infrastructures of the world." In reading the zombie through its elemental politics, Momcilovic thus pays attention to an increasingly wet and volatile world, in which the posthuman other is simultaneously a threat to human survival and a fitting allegory for a range of political, cultural, and environmental transformations unsettling, remaking, and finally re-imagining the very grounds on "which the dramas of human survival are now staged."

Teresa Heffernan's article "Orga is not Mecha: How Literal Readings of Fiction are Damaging the World" shifts the discussion from the posthuman zombie to the AI industry, tracing the fictional roots of contempo-

rary anxieties about “superintelligent machines.” Going as far as claiming that AI machines pose an existential risk of apocalyptic proportions to humanity, many AI industry giants have warned about the possibility of losing control of machines. However, critically examining these developments, Heffernan’s analysis chronicles that it is only through the lens of fiction that AI is granted this posthuman agency that far exceeds its actual capacities. To Heffernan this susceptible move away from a scientifically grounded reality stipulates a disconcerting symptom of the dangerous entanglement between fiction and science at the expense of much needed action on climate change. In this sense, the irrational fears resulting from the unsettling arrangement between fiction and science mark a “distraction from real concerns,” in so far as the fiction-science fold psychologically displaces any sense of responsibility for the actual environmental and societal damages wrought by the AI industry today. More to the point, this blind spot in AI discourse entails a troubling shift of the conversation about planetary catastrophe, which erases concerns about “the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a few, copyright violation, biased data, intrusive surveillance, ghost work, deep fakes, and the dissemination of disinformation” otherwise intensely propelled by the AI industry. Looking at the work of Stanley Kubrick in particular, Heffernan is interested in tracking an evolving relationship between science and science fiction, explaining that both vectors shape each other in problematic ways. Outlining Kubrick’s own relationship to science from his work on *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) to his later take on the subject matter in *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), Heffernan maintains that fictional accounts in turn may critique the industry’s flawed obsession with fairytale narratives.

Closing this section on posthuman survival, Alessandro Sbordoni’s commentary “The Coming Apocalypse” muses on the peculiar and repetitive temporality of apocalyptic thinking. Florian Mussgnug reviews *The Environmental Apocalypse: Interdisciplinary Reflections on the Climate Crisis* (Routledge, 2023) edited by Jakub Kowalewski, which brings together scholars from a wide array of disciplines to consider whether eco-apocalypticism can inform progressively transformative discourses about climate change. Meanwhile, Aanchal Saraf looks at Anaïs Maurer’s new book *The Ocean on Fire: Pacific Stories from Nuclear Survivors and Climate Activists* (Duke UP, 2024) in which Maurer analyzes an extensive multilingual archive of decolonial Pacific art in French, Spanish, English, Tahitian, and Uvean in order to trail moments of resistance to the environmental racism and carbon imperialism brought about by nuclear colonization.

Sticking with the themes of survival and posthuman agency, but expanding the discussion to an examination of the archeological archive

of Mexican artwork in the context of an apocalyptic imaginary, the second part of this issue offers a dossier on the exhibition “Imagining the End of Times: Stories of Annihilation, Apocalypse, and Extinction” which opened at the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City under the curatorship of Adolfo Mantilla Osornio late last year. The dossier brings together a range of short papers reflecting on the notion of ‘the end of times’ through the lens of different perspectives and disciplines. Originally presented at the exhibition’s inauguration, the papers include work by Robert Folger, Adolfo Mantilla Osornio, Patricia Murrieta-Flores, Alejandra Bottinelli Wolleter, Emily Ray, and Robert E. Kirsch. The dossier is introduced by Robert Folger and assembles a thoughtful discussion on how the end of times is inherently connected to catastrophic destruction and fear, but simultaneously offer glimpses at the cultural and political efficacy of the ‘post’ in the form of multi-layered imaginaries and desires for emerging new worlds.

We hope you find much interest in these contributions!

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