

Lea Espinoza Garrido ‘Death or Rebirth’:  
Apocalyptic Border-  
scapes, Topographies  
of Exception, and  
Regulating Survival in  
Zack Snyder’s *Army of  
the Dead* (2021)

Abstract: This contribution offers a critical analysis of Zack Snyder’s *Army of the Dead* (2021) and its representation of apocalyptic borderscapes and topographies of exception. It examines how the film portrays the ethical dimensions of survival and death in the context of a zombie apocalypse, in which the border functions as a site of exclusion where subjects are not only excluded from a specific territory or the sphere of the law but also, more importantly, from the sphere of the living. The author analyzes the narrative, aesthetic, and cinematic strategies that *Army of the Dead* employs to shed light on this necropolitical dimension of the border and the ways in which this dimension is intertwined with the imaginary of survival *in* and *of* the apocalypse. In particular, the author argues that the plural and particular apocalypse(s) in the film not only expose patterns of seeming exceptionalism that mask the everydayness of biopolitical exclusion and the topographies of exception they produce but also make visible the territorial dimension of the border as a recurring instrument of bio- and necropolitical control that regulates and structures survival.

Keywords: *Army of the Dead*, Zack Snyder, zombie apocalypse, necropolitics, topographies of exception, cinema and apocalypse.

## Introduction

In her “Editor’s Note” to *Apocalyptic*’s second issue, Jenny Stümer argues that “apocalyptic imaginaries [...] enable moments of pausing and reflecting or instants of critique and challenge. Apocalypse as a genre of aestheticization thereby reveals itself also as a means of handling an overly complex and often disastrous present still trying to make sense of past and future” (2023, 4). While such apocalyptic imaginaries are part of a longstanding literary and cultural history, at the latest since George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), zombie narratives have become one of the most dominant forms of cinematic representations of the end of the world. These narratives primarily unfold their critical potential via the liminal figure of the zombie which not only blurs the boundaries between living and dead, human and non-human, self and Other, but also functions as a transtemporal figure onto which present, past, and future issues can be projected. Popularized by Romero for mainstream audiences in the so-called Global North, the zombie nevertheless remains a marker for a wealth of entangled histories of racial, economic, and colonial exploitation that vastly predate its dominant imagination. In particular, as Marlon Lieber contends with reference to Tim Lanzendörfer’s and Sarah Juliet Lauro’s work, “[g]iven the zombie myth’s historical origin, any contemporary use of the figure will inevitably be connected to the histories of the transatlantic slave trade, plantation slavery, colonialism, and their aftermaths” (Lieber 2023, 182).<sup>1</sup> As such, the zombie trope functions as a “convenient metaphor for any number of contemporary anxieties” (Kee 2017, 2), or even a “barometer of cultural anxiety” (Dendle 2007, 44), which tasks us with understanding these anxieties against the backdrop of the legacies of Empire and the structures of inequality and dehumanization it has produced. Zombie movies and their fictional apocalypses thus “confront us with a scenario where human life is threatened, but the apocalypse should not [only] be understood as a vision of a dystopic future but instead [primarily] as an apocalypse of the here-and-now” (Sigurdson 2017, 94). Zombie-apocalyptic imaginaries, in other words, can be understood as invitations to explore the entanglement of histories of violence and oppression and the manifestations of these histories in the present.

It seems fitting, then, that, despite being shot mostly in 2019, Zack Snyder’s film *Army of the Dead* (2021) resonates deeply with the transnational visual inventory of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the various crises of mobility that migrants are facing around the globe; from infra-red thermometers as instruments of biopolitical control to quarantine/refugee camps erected to contain the virus and its potential carriers. So neatly

## Apocalyptic

### No 2 / 2023

Espinoza Garrido: Apocalyptic Borderscapes, Topographies of Exception, and Regulating Survival in Zack Snyder’s *Army of the Dead* (2021)

<sup>1</sup> See also Sarah Juliet Lauro (2017, ix).

attuned to contemporary challenges, *Army of the Dead* serves as a spiritual sequel to Snyder's own 2004 re-imagining of George Romero's iconic *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and presents the first project in a larger transmedia franchise. Apart from the spin-off prequel *Army of Thieves* (2021), several clips from the fictional social media channel *Guzman of the Dead 420* featured on *Netflix: Behind the Streams* on YouTube (2021), the board game *Army of the Dead: A Zombicide Game* (2024), and the immersive VR experience *Viva Las Vengeance* (2021), Netflix is currently producing a sequel called *Planet of the Dead*. Furthermore, as Snyder revealed in an interview, the franchise shares a diegesis with his *Rebel Moon* films (2023; 2024). An interdimensional portal is to play a role in the animated prequel series, *Army of the Dead: Lost Vegas*, which is currently stalled but still in development. *Army of the Dead* itself fits neatly into this playful, genre-bending assortment of transmedia texts: the highly self-reflexive film, which oscillates between comedy, action film, zombie shocker, and heist movie, is a diverting aesthetic spectacle whose carnivalesque depiction of zombified brides, bachelor(ette)s, gamblers, strippers, Elvis impersonators, and tourists playfully engages with clichéd imaginations of Las Vegas' debauchery. Its main action is set six years after the escape of a zombie—Zeus—from a military convoy in the Nevada desert, which has transformed Las Vegas into the epicenter of the zombie pandemic, now walled-off by stacked shipping containers and surrounded by heavily patrolled quarantine camps in its periphery. The film revolves around a group of mercenaries who are hired by billionaire businessman Bly Tanaka (Hiroyuki Sanada) to recover \$200 million from a vault in the middle of the fortified city. However, we learn throughout the film that the true mission is the acquisition of one of the heads of one of the zombies to explore the potential of using zombies for the sinister purposes of the military-industrial complex. The team is led by former Las Vegas resident and hero of the zombie war, Scott Ward (Dave Bautista), whose daughter Kate (Ella Purnell) works as an NGO volunteer in one of the quarantine camps and helps them to enter the sealed-off city with the assistance of "The Coyote," Lilly (Nora Arnezeder). Encountering a sentient and socially organized type of zombie, the team is picked off one by one as they make their way to the vault, leaving Kate and the likable 'badass' Vanderohe (Omari Hardwick) as the only confirmed survivors of the heist and the tactical nuclear strike eventually deployed on the city by the U.S. military. Yet, as the final scene suggests, Vanderohe's survival is elusive, too. Having chartered a private plane, he discovers a bite mark on his arm just as the pilot announces their descent onto Mexico City. If other zombie narratives and the consecutive expansion of the outbreak in franchises such as 28

## Apocalyptic

### No 2 / 2023

Espinoza Garrido: Apocalyptic Borderscapes, Topographies of Exception, and Regulating Survival in Zack Snyder's *Army of the Dead* (2021)

*Days Later* or *The Last of Us* are any indication, the film's planned sequel might well confirm that his fate is sealed and that sealing off Las Vegas will not suspend the global zombie apocalypse forever.

Despite this final breach of the quarantine, however, *Army of the Dead* is primarily invested in depicting an apocalypse that is indeed locally contained. The multiple borders in the form of containers, fences, gates, and quarantine camps, erected in concentric circles around Las Vegas, seem to have created intricate structures of control and restriction through which the outbreak temporarily remains a locally specific occurrence. In so doing, the film's apocalypse deviates significantly from popular (mis)conceptions and imaginations of the 'end of the world': while the apocalypse has often been framed as a 'singular and universal' event, Jessica Hurley and Dan Sinykin suggest that apocalypses, in the multiple, are more productively understood as "plural and particular" (2018, 453). They argue that "we must ask not only *when*, but—because it is, among other times, now—*where* is it happening, and to whom, and by whom? We must ask, with regard to the apocalypse, questions posed by slow violence, structural violence, environmental violence, and colonial violence" (Hurley and Sinykin 2018, 453–454; my emphasis). These spatio-temporal dimensions of the plural and particular apocalypse and their relation to structures of violence will be a guiding principle for my analysis. In *Army of the Dead*, the zombie apocalypse is, on the one hand, particular in that it is strictly limited to the city space of Las Vegas. On the other hand, various clues in the film suggest that the characters are caught in a time loop in which the apocalypse and their fight for survival are repeated endlessly.

Taking these considerations as my starting point in this article, I will focus on the film's plural and particular apocalypses to make visible the territorial dimension of the border as a recurring instrument of bio- and necropolitical control that regulates and structures survival. In particular, I will argue that *Army of the Dead's* depiction of a spatially contained and temporally repeating apocalypse foregrounds both locally, and thus particular, practices of necropolitical bordering as well as the structural, and thus plural, pervasiveness of states of exception as a discursive paradigm which allows for the systemic marginalization of certain populations. In other words, the film's depiction of (endless) encampment and bordering exposes the underlying mechanisms that continue to normalize the unequal distribution of vulnerabilities, life, and death. In light of this pervasiveness and given the film's open ending and its intimation of a transnational trajectory that potentially extends the outreach of the apocalypse into Mexico, Vanderohé's provisional survival, then, is crucial: it is not only a marker of the fragility of bordering's false promise of containment and

## Apocalyptica

### No 2 / 2023

Espinoza Garrido: Apocalyptic Borderscapes, Topographies of Exception, and Regulating Survival in Zack Snyder's *Army of the Dead* (2021)

security but also of the consequences of structural violence that is not contained but hegemonically displaced onto other(ed) populations. In the following, I am particularly interested in the role that “topographies of exception” play in the production of this violence through their delineation of seemingly clear boundaries between inside and outside, death and survival, and apocalyptic and non-apocalyptic space.

## Apocalyptic

No 2 / 2023

Espinoza Garrido: Apocalyptic Borderscapes, Topographies of Exception, and Regulating Survival in Zack Snyder's *Army of the Dead* (2021)

### Producing Topographies of Exception in the Apocalyptic Borderland

As Stefanie Fishel and Lauren Wilcox explain, “[b]ecause zombies become forms of not-life to be managed and exterminated outside of the bounds of ‘normal life’ and law in apocalyptic settings, they provide a way into thinking through the common adoption of ‘bare life’ produced in a state of exception” (2017, 343). With *Army of the Dead*, I understand this production of ‘bare life’ as entangled with spatial practices and questions of territoriality. This entanglement of territoriality and the law—or rather, the suspension of the law for certain subjects based on territorialized identity and notions of (non-)belonging during allegedly exceptional moments of crisis—can productively be understood through the lens of what Sylvia Mieszkowski, Birgit Spengler, Julia Wewior, and I have called “topographies of exception” (Espinoza Garrido, *et al.* 2021, 244). These “specific sites of literal or metaphorical inclusive exclusion” (2021, 244) describe the spatial dimension of ‘bare life’ politics, which Giorgio Agamben defines in *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998). For Agamben, what is “inside” the sphere of law, i.e., *bios* as the qualified form of life led by a member of the *polis* or a citizen, is always constituted in relation to the sphere “outside” of the law, i.e., “bare life” (cf. Agamben 1998, 1). In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben draws upon the eponymous figure of Roman law, who is banned from the *polis* and may thus be killed by anybody but who may not be sacrificed in a religious ritual, as the personification of bare life (cf. 1998, 1). While Agamben distinguishes between what is inside the sphere of the law and an outside from which the law withdraws, the territoriality of the law transcends this supposedly clear-cut dichotomy since the *homo sacer* still maintains an exceptional relation to the law precisely by being excluded from it. Agamben describes this mechanism as an “inclusive exclusion” (1998, 8), and a “relation of exception” (1998, 18), which he defines as “the extreme form of relation by which something is included solely through its exclusion” (1998, 18). Such a relation can manifest in different forms, either by denoting what is included in or excluded from a political community

such as a nation-state or by denoting a suspension of the law that occurs *within* a community but that applies only to a part of its population. As a spatial imaginary, topographies of exception draw attention to the ways in which such structures of violence are linked to spatial practices: drawing and enforcing borders, claiming territory, and regulating access to spaces. While we often think about these practices in the context of territorial nation-states, topographies of exception are matters of life and death not only for many undocumented migrants attempting to cross these borders but also for marginalized populations within these states.

Not least since his infamous condemnation of the far-reaching measures taken by many governments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic as an “invention of an epidemic” (Agamben 2020), however, Agamben’s work has triggered a wide range of scholarly criticism.<sup>2</sup> In the context of this article, it is not only Agamben’s trivialization of the pandemic but also his relative neglect of race and the legacies of colonialism for the conceptualization of bare life that demands careful attention. As Alexander Weheliye contends, “the concepts of bare life and biopolitics [...] are in dire need of recalibration if we want to understand the workings of and abolish our extremely uneven global power structures defined by the intersections of neoliberal capitalism, racism, settler colonialism, immigration, and imperialism, which interact in the creation and maintenance of systems of domination; and dispossession, criminalization, expropriation, exploitation, and violence that are predicated upon hierarchies of racialized, gendered, sexualized, economized, and nationalized social existence” (2014, 1). While I agree with this critique and particularly value Weheliye’s notion of “racializing assemblages” (2014, 1) that he puts forward as an important addition to and necessary re-framing of Agamben’s work, I find that Agamben’s implicit and explicit focus on space and spatiality is productive for my analysis as it draws attention to the spatial and territorial dynamics of the nation-state.

Against this backdrop, it is crucial that *Army of the Dead* does not depict the fortification of ‘national’ borders in response to the fictional apocalypse depicted in the film. Instead, it focuses on the establishment of borders *within* the current geographical territory of the United States. The film’s primary setting, the McCarran quarantine zone, is situated in the heart of the Mojave Desert in Nevada, enclosing the sealed-off city of Las Vegas. This zone is introduced to the audience through a sign that reads “Warning: Now Entering Quarantine Zone. U.S. Constitutional Law not in effect” as Ward and his team of mercenaries pass a heavily armed military guard with a tank along the roadside on their way to Las Vegas (41:40 min). Both the sign and the familiar military presence at this newly

## Apocalyptica

### No 2 / 2023

Espinoza Garrido: Apocalyptic Borderscapes, Topographies of Exception, and Regulating Survival in Zack Snyder’s *Army of the Dead* (2021)

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Agamben’s neglect of race and colonialism as well as the Orientalizing tendencies in his works, see Amarasinghe and Rajhans (2020); Basevich (2012); Bignall and Svirsky (2012); Reynolds (2017); Rifkin (2012); Sundberg (2015); Schueller (2009).

established border seem to imply a sense of clarity and definitiveness—a distinct division between inside and outside, and thus between legal protection and its absence. However, the placement of the tank and the sign appears arbitrary. As revealed by the extreme long shot in this scene, they occupy a seemingly random location in the middle of nowhere. There are no visible alterations in the environment that would account for their positioning. Here, the film underscores that the spatial relationship of this border to the land is not enacted due to a preexisting notion of territory bound by a national imagination. On the contrary, the border is drawn to distinguish the U.S. from its imagined ‘Other,’ which exists—like the *homo sacer*—only in relation to its exclusion. The function of this mismatch between the border and its location is thus twofold: on the one hand, it draws attention to the invisibility of crises that may necessitate the creation of new borders as a means of protection. While the physical consequences of an infection with the zombie virus are clearly visible on the infected human body, the virus itself is not. Hence, the location of the border may seem arbitrary, but may be based on elaborate considerations to ensure human survival. It is geared towards protecting human populations from an invisible threat as it demarcates a specific distance to the quarantined zone that is deemed medically secure. Infection, *Army of the Dead* indicates, is then essentially a crisis of spatial proportions, and survival a spatial operation.

On the other hand, the border in this scene makes visible the fluidity of legal thresholds, highlighting the suspension of the law as a feature of topographies of exception that are, however, not limited to specific geographical limits. The radical suspension of U.S. constitutional law in response to the zombie outbreak portrayed in the film challenges the alleged universality of law and the protection it provides. It is the interpretation of ‘reality’ and the political designation of legal and extra-legal frameworks in attempts to enforce it, which create topographies of exception in the first place. The drastic transition from supposedly lawful U.S. territory towards a sphere beyond the law—a ‘bare life’ area if you will—achieved by simply delineating a new border, then, suggests that the regime of ‘inclusive exclusion’ has existed within the original territorial boundaries of the U.S. from the outset. Where territorial and legal belonging to the nation-state and the survival of its citizens depends on the state’s definition of exceptional circumstances, in *Army of the Dead*, the overall U.S. American territorial integrity is portrayed as precarious and provisional at best.

Such volatility affects the film’s depiction of governmentality as well. As the government’s watchdog, Martin (Garrett Dillahunt), suggests in Las

## Apocalyptic

### No 2 / 2023

Espinoza Garrido: Apocalyptic Borderscapes, Topographies of Exception, and Regulating Survival in Zack Snyder’s *Army of the Dead* (2021)

Vegas, “it’s not a free country. We’re not in America anymore. Haven’t you heard?” Ward then ironically challenges him by pointing out that this “technically makes it an even freer country, right?” (59:54–59:58 min). Resonating distinctly with legal suspensions across territories such as Puerto Rico, Guam, or Guantanamo Bay, which are exempt from many of the U.S.’ legal provisions but not its exercise of military, imperial and (settler-) colonial power, Ward points to the ‘technical’ function of border provisions that can be deployed or withheld. As Mireille Rosello and Stephen F. Wolfe contend, with reference to the works of Chiara Brambilla (2010) and Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-War (2007), each “borderscape is the result of processes of differentiation that are continuously challenged by human interaction [...]. These processes of bordering produce spatial effects that do not begin or end at demarcation lines drawn on maps” (2019, 7). These processes, *Army of the Dead* implies, are directly imbricated with lived experiences, both as a structuring device and as an instrument of biopower and necropower. If the border “appears as the intersection between politics and death, as it distinguishes between valuable and disposable lives” (Stümer 2018, 21), Ward’s insistence that this distinction to the U.S. government is only ‘technically’ of concern not only contests the notion of the U.S. as the epitome of freedom but also implicitly raises questions concerning the universality of freedom within the U.S. as well: how do we define freedom? To whom does it apply? Under which circumstances and at which cost? The apocalyptic scenario in *Army of the Dead* brings these questions to the fore without resolving them.

Instead, the film depicts how the government in the fictional diegesis moves the territorial boundaries of the U.S. to legalize the exception, i.e., the suspension of the law, in response to the crisis that the zombie outbreak constitutes. In so doing, it draws attention to borders not as stable entities or fixed lines of demarcation but as practice and performance that can be re-structured and re-negotiated based on the ‘perception’ of emergencies and threats to public safety. As such, the apocalyptic borderscape in *Army of the Dead* highlights that topographies of exception and mechanisms of inclusive exclusion are not primarily connected to fixed notions of territoriality but to social and political discourses that govern how processes of territorialization are structured. Despite its relational, contested status, however, the movie also emphasizes the border’s consequential impact on (humanity’s) survival. Hence, in *Army of the Dead*, the border is a site of exclusion where subjects are not only excluded from a specific territory or the sphere of the law but also, more importantly, from the sphere of the living. In the following, I will analyze narrative, aesthetic, and cinematic strategies that *Army of the Dead* employs to shed

## Apocalyptic

### No 2 / 2023

Espinoza Garrido: Apocalyptic Borderscapes, Topographies of Exception, and Regulating Survival in Zack Snyder’s *Army of the Dead* (2021)



light on this necropolitical dimension of the border and the ways in which this dimension is intertwined with the imaginary of survival in and of the apocalypse.

### **Regulating Survival: The Necropolitics of the Border**

Michel Foucault's notion of "biopower," which he introduced in *The History of Sexuality*, is perhaps one of the most influential concepts that scholars have used to describe the workings of governmentality in the modern nation-state. According to Foucault, the introduction of a set of "techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations" (1990, 140) in the eighteenth century marks the beginning of an era of biopower, and thus of new forms of regulating bodies and (political) subjects. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri explain, biopower "refers to a situation in which what is directly at stake in power is the production and reproduction of life itself" (2001, 24). While "biopolitics and biopolitical concerns play into all aspects of the functions of a state" (Byers and Stapleton 2015, 2), their workings are particularly visible at the border as the threshold between different bodies of populations. The border as a biopolitical instrument, then, not only regulates the movement of people but also their survival.

This regulation of life and death can best be understood through Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics. Building upon but also challenging Foucault's conceptualization of biopower, Mbembe has proposed "the notion of necropolitics, or necropower, to account for the various ways in which [...] vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*" (2019, 92).<sup>3</sup> In line with Mbembe's argument, the unspoken function of the border is to determine who survives by assigning value to human life. It repeats what Stümer calls the "symbolic, imaginary, and psychological boundaries that stage spectacular forms of sovereignty and division, firmly anchored in practices of racialization and concerned with the unnerving regulation of life and death" (Stümer 2018, 21). In *Army of the Dead*, this necropolitical dimension of the border as a site where survival is regulated becomes tangible through the encounter with another form of the "*living dead*" (Mbembe 2019, 92): the zombie. As Stefanie Fishel and Lauren Wilcox suggest, zombies can "materialise as racialised objects of extermination and management, subject to biopolitical and necropolitical violence" (2017, 343). The movie parallels these forms of biopolitical and necropolitical violence which not only materialize in the figure of the zombie but also in the

#### **Apocalyptica**

##### **No 2 / 2023**

Espinoza Garrido: Apocalyptic Borderscapes, Topographies of Exception, and Regulating Survival in Zack Snyder's *Army of the Dead* (2021)

<sup>3</sup> I am following Ariadna Estévez's (2018) argument that biopolitics and necropolitics are not mutually exclusive but interlinked concepts.

apocalyptic borderscapes and their negotiation in the film. Before moving to these borderscapes, I briefly want to trace how the film's sentient Zombies are already inherently self-reflexive specimen, bridging any clear distinction between the living and the dead, the human and the nonhuman by default.

The sentient zombies in the film pay homage to Richard Matheson's viral vampires in his novel *I Am Legend* (1954), which helped to popularize the imagination of a global apocalypse caused by the outbreak of a disease. In the novel's later film adaptations, *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), *The Omega Man* (1971), and *I Am Legend* (2007), these vampires become ever more zombie-like but are often depicted as social beings whose community is organized hierarchically but also through kinship structures. Other texts in which we encounter such sentient and occasionally even social zombies are M. R. Carey's novel *The Girl with All the Gifts* (2014) and its 2016 movie adaptation, the comic book series *iZombie* (2010–2012) and its TV show adaptation (2015–2019), or George Romero's *Land of the Dead* (2005), in which the formerly mindless zombies in Romero's 'Dead Series' are shown to have evolved into more organized and socially developed beings. While the variations of sentient zombies on page and screen are countless,<sup>4</sup> they often have in common that they complicate the already complex relation of the liminal zombie figure to questions of identity and Otherness. In the context of the apocalypse, they also offer the potential to imagine "a planet free from violent anthropocentrism" (Hamilton 2021, 290) and negotiate the implications of humanity's (non-)survival in these new interspecies constellations. In his analysis of *The Girl with All the Gifts*, Hamilton introduces the term "anthropocalypse" to describe how such imaginations can expose "the hubris of the phrase 'the end of the world,' typically employed to examine potential apocalypse scenarios. The anthropocalypse is the end of the human elitism as the dominant organism on earth, either through complete eradication or as a casualty of evolution, or a combination of both" (291).

The border as the barrier between life and death, then, is established throughout *Army of the Dead* as the structuring principle, both within the figure of the sentient Zombie, but also spatially and aesthetically. Fences and barriers of all kinds are not only visible as markers of shifting lines of social, political, and geographical demarcation in various scenes. Already in the opening scene, the visual aesthetics of the border are dominant. The very first sentences we hear in the film are a crackling radio message: "Gatekeeper, this is Mothership. The Four Horsemen are on the gallop. You are a go to open the stable door" (00:18–00:25min). The foreshadowing reference to the biblical horsemen brings forth the cataclysm of the

## Apocalyptic

### No 2 / 2023

Espinoza Garrido: Apocalyptic Borderscapes, Topographies of Exception, and Regulating Survival in Zack Snyder's *Army of the Dead* (2021)

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion of the history and development of the sentient zombie, see also Gardner (2020).

apocalypse in Christian belief. But it is paired not only with the notion of gatekeeping but also with the aesthetics of the border: the first frame we see is the image of a heavily armed soldier with barbed wire and a fence in the blurry background, followed by more barbed wire, boom gates, a watch post, multiple “restricted area” and “no trespassing” signs as well as more heavily armed guards. This familiar aesthetics of the increasingly militarized border and the knowledge viewers bring with them about the genre conventions of zombie movies—secret high-security government facilities hardly remain secret or secure—draw attention to the invisible threat and the apocalyptic potential that seems to be lurking in this scene. Hence, even before we know anything about the (un)deadly cargo of the military convoy that is about to embark from this facility in the infamous Area 51, both audio and visuals instill the tension between spatial borders and the threat of the apocalypse as the overarching impetus of the film. “If there is an allegorical relation at play between [apocalyptic zombie] movies and their historical conditions, it isn’t as stand-ins for the limit-case of what already is the case,” as Evan Calder Williams suggests. Rather, he argues, these movies “are the closest articulation we can get of the structures of totality underpinning this. Not a mirror but a busy prism” (2011, 214–215). *Army of the Dead’s* foregrounding of the inextricable link between the border as a structuring principle of the film and the cultural imaginaries of the apocalypse, thus, tasks us with examining the systemic structures that underpin the necropolitical workings of border regimes.

According to Scott Schaffer, “underlying and undergirding the necropolitical system described by Mbembe is a *necroethics*, a set of ethical orientations and social relations that empower some individuals in our society to expose others—Others—to death” (2021, 44). This ethical dimension of necropower is represented in *Army of the Dead’s* depiction of the border’s material establishment as part of the film’s exposition. The long montage following the opening scene depicts the unfolding of the zombie apocalypse in the city of Las Vegas after the predictable escape of the convoy’s zombie. In what seems like a conventional post-2000 Hollywood-style exposition, the film introduces us to its main characters and offers a brief visual summary of key events to prepare the film’s setting. Among these events is the emotional reunion story of a mother (Danielle Burgio) and her child. While we do not learn anything about the character or her background—as her telling, yet impersonal name “Soccer Mom” indicates—within a few seconds, fast cuts between different scenes show how she heroically fights her way through various zombie hordes all the while searching for her daughter. Viewers are not only invited to become emotionally involved with the fate of these characters but are

## Apocalyptica

No 2 / 2023

Espinoza Garrido: Apocalyptic Borderscapes, Topographies of Exception, and Regulating Survival in Zack Snyder’s *Army of the Dead* (2021)

led to believe that we meet one of the film's protagonists whose fight for survival will set the tone for her role in the story. Yet, Soccer Mom is stopped only centimeters from the safe zone after being reunited with her child. Trying to escape the city of Las Vegas, we see her approaching the last gap in the newly erected makeshift border wall made out of shipping containers. While it is zombies that attack the mother and thus stop her from moving forward, it is the operator of the crane—the quite literally faceless arm of the Las Vegas border regime—that ultimately decides her and her daughter's fate. The camera briefly zooms in on the mother's and daughter's desperate faces as the over-the-shoulder shot shows the crane operator's hands dropping the deadly containers onto them, and thus closing the last remaining gap in the border wall which seals off the zombified city. Focused entirely on closing the border, he does not differentiate between zombies, humans, or even the child who has not been attacked by the zombies yet. It is obvious that this scene is primarily meant as a playful yet morbid take on the conventional introduction of main characters through montage by misleading us into believing that it introduces one of the film's protagonists. The use of a cover of Elvis Presley's "Viva Las Vegas" which is playing while mother and child are being crushed suggests as much.

In scenes like this, *Army of the Dead* engages most explicitly with zombie narratives' potential to negotiate structures of (hyper)capitalism and their entanglement with histories of racial and colonial exploitation, juxtaposing the flow of goods and capital and the flow of human bodies.<sup>5</sup> By encouraging us to feel empathy and thus eliciting an affective response to the characters' fate, *Army of the Dead* highlights the violence of the border from its start. The film here explicitly uses the trope of the white, innocent child, a powerful tool in hegemonic social, political, and media discourse particularly in a post-9/11 era. As Elizabeth Anker argues in her discussion of literary and political reactions to 9/11 and its aftermath, the innocence of the child stands in as a "metonym for that of the nation" (5). In novels such as Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), or Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and its Hollywood adaptation (2009), the trope of the innocent, and decidedly white child becomes a central figure in imagining the trauma of the nation as it offers ample potential for empathy within the racialized affective economy of the U.S. Within this economy, the white, innocent child is perhaps one of the most poignant examples of a life that is framed as a "grievable life" in Judith Butler's sense. *Army of the Dead* utilizes these connotations to break with Hollywood conventions and to challenge the necroethics of the border. In so doing, it prompts

## Apocalyptic

### No 2 / 2023

Espinoza Garrido: Apocalyptic Borderscapes, Topographies of Exception, and Regulating Survival in Zack Snyder's *Army of the Dead* (2021)

<sup>5</sup> For the use of the zombie as a metaphor for capitalist critique, see, for example, Lauro and Embry (2008); Bang Larsen (2017); Vint (2017); Giroux (2011), or McNally (2011).

us to re-think why border regimes can “empower” (Schaffer 2021, 44) some individuals to determine the survival of other humans. While border regimes in fact disproportionately affect people of color, here, our affective engagement with the white, innocent child is used to exemplify the brutality of the border as well as to expose the necropolitical dimension inherent in the erection of (all) borders.

Throughout the film and, in fact, the whole franchise, this investment in depicting borders as a matter of life and death is continued. As an integral part of the *Army of the Dead*'s heist plot, the penetration of borders that stand between the team and the vault not only drives its action but constantly marks access to (more secure) spaces as a prerequisite for survival. In particular, the necropolitical dimension of impenetrable borders either grants or revokes the possibility of survival. In *Army of the Dead*, for instance, Martin intentionally locks Chambers (Samantha Win) in with a zombie horde, effectively killing her, whereas Vanderohe only survives (for now) because Dieter (Matthias Schweighöfer) sacrifices his own life and locks Vanderohe in the vault to protect him from the oncoming zombies. By contrast, in *Army of Thieves* (2022), the designer of the safes, Hans Wagner, dies precisely because he locks himself in his final creation, an impenetrable safe called *Götterdämmerung*. He chooses his own death through his own containment. While the function of the border is thus shifting throughout the franchise—either ensuring or revoking the possibility of survival—all of these texts establish a close connection between borders and their necropolitical function. Resonating deeply with the paradoxical function of spatial boundaries in the COVID-19 pandemic and contemporary border regimes, the film thus highlights the centrality of borders as a site where protectedness, vulnerability, and survival are regulated by those who control them.

All of this is set against the backdrop of *Army of the Dead*'s allusions to a time loop in which different versions of the movie's *particular* apocalypse are unfolding again and again. When the team members enter the vault, they find a group of skeletons dressed in similar clothes and with similar facial features. Starting to wonder about the significance of these skeletons, Vanderohe suggests that they look like (previous) versions of themselves who have attempted to complete the mission before but failed. While we never find out whether this suggestion bears any truth, the film indulges in Vanderohe's fantasy for a moment, when a brief montage shows the previous versions and their deaths. This implied repetition not only of their deaths but also of the zombie apocalypse for all of Las Vegas is accompanied by frequent intertextual references to Richard Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* which also hint at an eternally repeating and

## Apocalyptic

### No 2 / 2023

Espinoza Garrido: Apocalyptic Borderscapes, Topographies of Exception, and Regulating Survival in Zack Snyder's *Army of the Dead* (2021)

thus plural apocalypse. *Götterdämmerung* (“Twilight of the Gods”) is the last part of Wagner’s cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, which is structured around the concept of cyclic time. The story begins with the creation of the magic ring forged by the dwarf Alberich out of gold stolen from the Rhine and ends with the destruction of the gods and the return of the ring to the Rhine. This cyclical narrative structure is mirrored in the predictions of the so-called Norns in the prologue. These mythical figures, similar to the witches in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, foresee the impending doom and the return of the ring to the Rhine as a cataclysmic event that signifies the end of the divine order. Amid this apocalyptic narrative, the story also offers the possibility of redemption and renewal: at the end of the story, Valhalla, the kingdom of the Gods is destroyed, and Brünnhilde, one of the opera’s central characters, not only immolates herself but also returns the ring to the Rhine, thereby breaking the cycle of greed and corruption associated with it. Her death and the ensuing apocalypse hold the promise of a new beginning where renewal can take place against the backdrop of destruction. It is in this paradoxical nexus of apocalyptic potentiality that the film’s negotiation of human survival takes place. As a gesture to the plurality of apocalypses currently unfolding outside of the fictional story world—the eco-apocalypse (e.g. Heise 2020), Capitalocene (e.g. Moore 2016), the Plantationocene (e.g. Haraway 2015), the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000)—the time loop and its implied warning against greed and consumption show that the potential for survival is deeply entangled with the responsibility some humans hold for creating these apocalypses in the first place. Yet, by highlighting the potential for transformation within these cycles of violence and destruction, the film’s apocalyptic imaginary also challenges us to rethink what post-apocalyptic futures might look like outside of them.

In *Army of the Dead*, this transformative potential of the apocalypse is paired specifically with a negotiation of the border as an instrument of necropower. As Dieter predicts when he attempts to open the safe: “If I can open it, it will be either destruction or renewal. Death or rebirth” (1:31:17–1:31:30 min). While this binary must be complicated—destruction and renewal, death and rebirth tend to co-exist or even depend on each other not only in *Götterdämmerung* but in all apocalyptic fiction—Dieter’s statement highlights that access to bordered spaces is indeed a matter of life and death. Moreover, the immediate cut after this scene to a TV broadcast announcing that the President has decided to accelerate the launch of the nuclear bomb onto the city also adds the threat of another impending apocalypse that awaits the characters if they cannot access the safe and leave the quarantine zone in time. Within the apocalyptic

## Apocalyptic

### No 2 / 2023

Espinoza Garrido: Apocalyptic Borderscapes, Topographies of Exception, and Regulating Survival in Zack Snyder’s *Army of the Dead* (2021)

borderscape of Las Vegas, they are thus confronted with two collapsing or overlapping apocalypses: the zombie apocalypse and the nuclear apocalypse. Particularly read against the backdrop of the implied cyclical structure of the film's narrative, the apocalypse then emerges here in its imagined plurality, echoing Hurley's and Sinykin's understanding of the plural and particular apocalypse as a call to interrogate its entanglement with structures of violence. Following this call, we have to conceptualize the film's particular and plural, imagined and implied apocalypses not only as a fictional exploration of the potentialities of the end of the world but also as an expression of the structural pervasiveness of the border's necropolitical violence and the unequal distribution of vulnerability it administers.

## Apocalyptica

No 2 / 2023

Espinoza Garrido: Apocalyptic Borderscapes, Topographies of Exception, and Regulating Survival in Zack Snyder's *Army of the Dead* (2021)

### **Vulnerability, Encampment, and Survival in Crisis**

If the film's suggestion of clear-cut borders is from the outset a ruse to outline how practices of bordering translate crises into necropolitical topographies that determine human survival, it follows that the materially sound container wall constructed in the opening montage is—conceptually—no less porous. The wall, as it turns out, consequently becomes the frontline in a wider quarantine zone that brings to the fore the connection to broader issues of migration, encampment, and social justice. A mere minute after Soccer Mom's demise, a fictional show on Scott Ward's TV screen draws these aspects together. In the discussion, infamous former White House Press Secretary and Communications Director under President Donald Trump, Sean Spicer (played by himself), and former Chair of the Democratic National Committee, Donna Brazile (also played by herself) debate whether the people held in the quarantine camps near Las Vegas should be allowed to leave the area. If “[s]urvivors in zombie narratives generally do not empathize with their fellow survivors” (Fhlainn 2011, 141–142), in *Army of the Dead*, survival for humanity as a whole is already secured and thus relegated to a paradoxical position as mere political talking point within the military-capitalist risk society. While Spicer argues that the quarantine camps are “essentially a government-funded health care solution” (16:54 min), Brazile claims that the inhabitants of these camps

are political prisoners, just people the government doesn't want on the streets. You know as well as I do, if you have questionable immigration status, advocate for gay rights or abortion, the next thing you know,

they have a temperature gun at your head, are dragging you out of your house or your car under the guise of public safety (17:19min).

To make her case, she thus invokes images that combine physical violence, medical equipment, as well as struggles for social justice. Although we need to be careful not to equate reasonable and necessary protective measures that governments have to take against the spread of infectious diseases with other forms of physical and state violence, her statement is useful as it draws attention to the underlying biopolitical and social aspects of regulating survival as well as to the unevenly distributed vulnerability to state and biopower that shapes the reality of many marginalized communities and undocumented migrants in particular.

As Judith Butler's work has shown, vulnerability is not an intrinsic characteristic of some human bodies but is discursively constructed and thus shaped by systemic power structures and social relations (2004, 32; see also Madarová, *et al.* 2020, 12). "We are," Butler argues, "never simply vulnerable, but always vulnerable to a situation, a person, a social structure, something upon which we rely and in relation to which we are exposed" (2020, 46). The particular vulnerability to the arbitrariness of state actors and their biopolitical instruments that Spicer and Brazile debate is depicted as closely entangled with the medical discourses and notions of encampment that pervade *Army of the Dead*. In the film, the two different facilities—the Barstow Quarantine Center and the Las Vegas McCarran Quarantine Camp and Detention Facility—emphasize that, despite their local specificity, all camps share similar characteristics as biopolitical hubs. In addition to genre staples such as heavily armed guards, barriers, boom gates, fences, cameras, and other surveillance equipment, in both camps, we also see a wealth of medical instruments, all of which are used to control and regulate the bodies of the encamped population. When we are first introduced to the McCarran Quarantine Camp in an aerial shot, it is covered in darkness, the burnt-out hotels of the Las Vegas strip towering over the perimeter of white tents, and busses rolling in and out of the facility. The depiction evokes common medializations of the border camp as a transit zone, as both a refuge and a detention site for those transgressing borders into presumably safer havens, but the ensuing PA announcements in both camps stress that the detainees' threatening transgression is not only spatial but also medical. Calling for "health clearance cards" (17:31–17:46 min), announcing "a full health inspection," or regulating access to certain areas according to a "green health-clearance sticker on your ID card," *Army of the Dead* directly connects biopolitical enforcement with contemporary politics when it also

## Apocalyptica

No 2 / 2023

Espinoza Garrido: Apocalyptic Borderscapes, Topographies of Exception, and Regulating Survival in Zack Snyder's *Army of the Dead* (2021)



designates the camp as a “zero-tolerance facility” (38:30 min). The film here mimics the Trump administration’s infamous zero-tolerance policy, which was introduced in April 2018. This deterrent-based policy legalized the detention and criminal prosecution of every migrant, asylum seeker, and refugee attempting to cross the U.S.-Mexican border anywhere other than at an official port of entry, which often resulted in the forceful separation of children from their parents or the detention of entire families. Such forceful separation of children from their parents is mirrored here in the separation of Geeta (Huma Qureshi) from her two children, which is the driving force behind Kate’s decision to enter Las Vegas with her father Scott and the other mercenaries. As such, *Army of the Dead* challenges the all too familiar legal and discursive efforts to brand migrants as criminals. The similarities between the visual and acoustic environments in the two camps moreover highlight that they are both part of an elaborate biopolitical network of different facilities that help to direct the flow of (migrant) bodies. While there are local specificities to each site, they are located not only in spatial proximity to each other but, more importantly, within the same biopolitical and discursive framework, establishing encampment as a structuring principle that helps to metastasize these camps into the U.S. American heartland.

Furthermore, the above-mentioned announcements reveal that the workings of biopower in the film function by interweaving access to mobility and space with medical discourses and questions of health as well. While biopower is always concerned with “the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life” (Foucault 1990, 40), the health-clearance card/sticker on the inhabitants’ ID cards mentioned in both announcements make the spatio-medical dimension of biopower in the film tangible. As Elizabeth Dauphinee and Cristina Masters argue, a “passport is both disciplinary power and biopower—the constant reminder of the boundary, however precarious and chimerical, between belonging and unbelonging” (2007, xiii). In *Army of the Dead*’s apocalyptic borderscape, the health-clearance card/sticker acts as a quasi-passport by fulfilling the passport’s biopolitical functions. Moreover, according to Radhika Vyas Mongia, the passport historically emerged “as a state document that purports to assign a national identity rather than a racial identity—a mechanism that would conceal race and the racist motivations for controlling mobility in the guise of a reciprocal arrangement between states described as national” (2003, 553–554; see also Salter 2003, 21). Taken together, this implies that the inclusive exclusion of U.S.-American border-scapes is tacitly underwritten by biopolitical and racializing concerns for the survival of an imaginary body politic.

## Apocalyptic

### No 2 / 2023

Espinoza Garrido: Apocalyptic Borderscapes, Topographies of Exception, and Regulating Survival in Zack Snyder’s *Army of the Dead* (2021)

As such, the film's medical crisis, in which humanity's survival is weighed against the freedom of movement in the border zone, seems vaguely familiar. Such a crisis in which "existential danger" is invoked, Joseph Masco contends,

makes a claim on being the ultimate form of crisis—a mode of collective endangerment that has historically worked in the era of nation-states to define the boundaries of the community and focus the responsibilities of government. To evoke an existential danger is to call on the full powers of the state and society in the name of self-preservation" (2017, 66).

If the invocation of existential crisis functions as "a mode of political mobilization" (Masco 2017, 65), then the political responses it mobilizes are undergirded by spatial practices and border regimes which help to delineate the limits of this (imagined) community. As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, such responses which severely restrict movement in and between a vast number of states based on distinct bio-medical markers have structurally mirrored and expanded biopolitical encampment and border regimes unto "their own" populations which have already been in place for a vast number of refugees and racialized populations around the globe. Indeed, "the coronavirus has fueled already existing debilitating economic and social inequalities" (Nanda 2021, 120) and in doing so exposed "the wildly exaggerated and grotesque disparities in how illness, death, and suffering are unevenly distributed" (De Genova 2021, 239). Border closings have played a crucial part in both amplifying but also making visible these mechanisms of structural inequality, being among the first measures adopted by a range of governments (Ramsari 2021, 102). Consequently, the medical moment of crisis has also produced "desirable subjects of rights [who] are redefined and entitled, based on legal membership in the national community" (Ramsari 2021, 102). As Michael J. Ryan argues, this has produced a form of citizenship that "has taken on an increasingly territorialized identity" (2021, 87), often drawing upon pre-existing institutional mechanisms of Othering, when threatened by a supposedly "foreign" virus whose presence reduces human beings to (potential) carriers. For many racialized communities, and undocumented migrants in particular, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified but also highlighted the continuous state of exception that governs encampment and migrancy. It is often merely a continuation and intensification of pre-existing biopolitical and racialized exclusions. In other words, as Birgit Spengler, Sylvia Mieszkowski, Julia Wewior, and I summarize, "[t]he contrast between the very visceral

## Apocalyptica

No 2 / 2023

Espinoza Garrido: Apocalyptic Borderscapes, Topographies of Exception, and Regulating Survival in Zack Snyder's *Army of the Dead* (2021)

and *exceptional* experience of crisis, which the pandemic presents for much of the population, on the one hand, and the risks to which migrant bodies are exposed *regularly*, on the other, [...] fundamentally complicates our understanding of crisis” (Spengler, *et al.* 2021, 129; my emphasis). In *Army of the Dead*, this tension is mediated via the movie’s portrayal of medically manufactured topographies of exception but also through its apocalypse that is both plural and particular. While the fictional crisis in the film—the zombie apocalypse—is spatially contained, it is also plural in its endless repetition in the time loop. It demonstrates that the seemingly exceptional (real and imagined) borderscapes are undergirded by mechanisms of exclusion and marginalization, and that equal protection by “the law,” whether national or international, has been fictitious long before the COVID-19 pandemic—and long before the apocalypse the movie imagines. The particular and plural apocalypse(s) in the film, then, expose(s) patterns of seeming exceptionalism that mask the everydayness of biopolitical exclusion and the topographies of exception they produce.

In the broader context of the apocalypse as an exceptional moment of crisis, *Army of the Dead* addresses how crises intersect with and aggravate other forms of vulnerability and structures of marginalization and racialization. As the works of Sarah Juliet Lauro (2017), Chera Kee (2017), and many others have shown, zombie apocalypses are *per se* entangled with structures of racialization as they “repackage the violence of colonial race war” (Canavan 2010, 439). Against this backdrop, the apocalyptic borderscapes in the film also mirror the function of borders within what Ajamu Baraka calls the “racial management process” (2019, 14) of the U.S. The facts that the PA announcements in the quarantine camps are also made in Spanish, and that Burt Cumming, one of the camp security guards and the villainous personification of the state apparatus, uses Spanish phrases and Latinx stereotypes to humiliate the camp’s inhabitants, further underwrite the many allusions that the film makes to undocumented migrants from South and Central America and their precarious mobilities. Similarly, the film draws attention to the gendered vulnerabilities and the ways in which these intersect with the medical discourses and border regimes in the film. In a heated conversation between Cummings, camp inhabitant Geeta, and NGO volunteer Kate, Cummings threatens the women for challenging his behavior: “You know,” the camp guard tells them provokingly, “the first sign of infection is belligerence and actions outside of social norms” (19:36min). As the camera moves closer and closer towards the women, intensifying the sense of entrapment that this scene evokes, Cummings draws a thermometer gun—a firearm’s medical and equally phallic equivalent—to measure the women’s body temperature,

## Apocalyptica

### No 2 / 2023

Espinoza Garrido: Apocalyptic Borderscapes, Topographies of Exception, and Regulating Survival in Zack Snyder’s *Army of the Dead* (2021)

not before ‘offering’ Kate to use the rectal thermometer instead. While their body temperature is still within the normal limit, after the encounter, Geeta warns Kate that she must be more careful as the guard could easily make her disappear: “All he has to say is that you dropped a degree, and nobody would question it” (20:15–21:06 min). In this scene, Cumming’s gendered abuse of power, i.e., the gendered violence with which the medical equipment and the verbal threats penetrate the women’s physical and emotional boundaries, is presented as entangled with medical discourses. Echoing Foucault, the movie suggests that medical facts are closely intertwined with mechanisms of knowledge production and power. For the women, they are also a matter of life and death. Through its depiction of this medicalized and gendered apocalyptic borderscape, *Army of the Dead* brings these entanglements to the fore and highlights the unequal distribution of vulnerability that they engender and exacerbate. In these constellations, survival emerges as a radically contingent concept: while human survival is invoked as the ultimate goal, individual human beings are relegated to the most precarious positions by the very systems that claim to protect human lives. For the most vulnerable populations in the film, then, survival is a resource to which access is continuously denied.

### **Conclusion: Death and Rebirth?**

The sealed-off city of Las Vegas in the *Army of the Dead* is not only the epicenter of the zombie outbreak but also a metonymic microcosm that revises U.S.-American narratives of exceptional crises: It highlights that exclusionary mechanisms are not merely a response to exceptional moments of crisis but deeply engrained in the structural make-up of the U.S. By juxtaposing a spatially contained and temporally repeating apocalypse, the film exposes the particular practices of necropolitical bordering as well as the structural pervasiveness of states of exception which often obscure the everydayness of bio- and necropolitical exclusions. *Army of the Dead*’s depiction of apocalyptic borderscapes as topographies of exceptions emphasizes that the necroethical dimension of the border is linked to and facilitated by spatial practices that contribute to, normalize, and often mask the differential allocation of vulnerability among different populations far beyond this particular imagined apocalypse. As such, the film uses Las Vegas’s spatial arrangements to make visible the historical continuities of U.S. border regimes. Simultaneously, its narrative temporal continuity—the deferment of one apocalypse to the next—draws attention to how mechanisms of exclusion travel across multiple spaces,

### **Apocalyptica**

#### **No 2 / 2023**

Espinoza Garrido: Apocalyptic Borderscapes, Topographies of Exception, and Regulating Survival in Zack Snyder’s *Army of the Dead* (2021)

narrativizing them as locations of crises in which rigorous protocols of regulation are installed. *Army of the Dead's* insinuation that its numerous apocalypses will be responsive to spatially distinct forms of oppression opens up the potential to address this seemingly singular world order in its particular manifestations. The envisioned apocalypse of Mexico City evoked by Vanderohé's contingent survival, it implies, may be positioned alternatively to its Las Vegas counterpart, and might well attend to a range of different 'oppressions' that are brought to the fore via the zombie. As such, *Army of the Dead's* conceptual forward propulsion is an attempt to envision the affordances of its end-of-world mythology.

Ultimately, this continuous cross-referencing, by which cinematic time and space transparently produce each other over and over again, not only functions as a critique of contemporary border regimes but also offers a trajectory for radical change given that the apocalypse as an intellectual and aesthetic project is also endowed with transformative potential: After all, apocalypses allow us "to envision the death of the current capitalist world order—and its attendant forms of white patriarchy [and] could fast-forward radical change and provide a fresh start happening instantly (Kee 2017, 50). Hence, in its critical aesthetic potentiality, the film can encourage us to imagine and create alternative futures that break with the necropolitical regimes dominating the film's fictional—and our real—apocalyptic borderscapes today. These futures, then, could offer the prospect of renewal and rebirth in which survival is also distributed more equally.

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## Apocalyptica

### No 2 / 2023

Espinoza Garrido: Apocalyptic Borderscapes, Topographies of Exception, and Regulating Survival in Zack Snyder's *Army of the Dead* (2021)

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## Apocalyptica

### No 2 / 2023

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## Apocalyptica

### No 2 / 2023

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**Apocalyptic  
No 2 / 2023**

Espinoza Garrido: Apocalyptic Borderscapes, Topographies of Exception, and Regulating Survival in Zack Snyder's *Army of the Dead* (2021)



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## Apocalyptica

### No 2 / 2023

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