

Florian Mussnug Affordances
of Apocalyptic
Environmentalism:
Reviewing *The
Environmental
Apocalypse* (2023)

Thirty years ago, pioneering ecocritic Lawrence Buell observed that apocalypse is “the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (Buell 1995, 285). Since then, apocalyptic environmentalism has come under repeated and multipronged attack, not only from climate change sceptics, but also from environmentalists, who have questioned the political efficacy of eschatological thinking. Inquiries into the behavioural and psychological effects of proleptic fear have suggested that apocalyptic framings of climate change produce apathy and hopelessness (Fagan 2017). Cultural theorists have queried the appeal of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives, in literature, film and popular culture (Morton 2018; Benedetti 2021). Narratologists have argued that apocalyptic storytelling is hampered by a shortfall of the human imagination and by an inability to conceive and represent non-anthropocentric geological and climactic timescales (Bracke 2018; Caracciolo 2021). Posthumanists have critiqued the politics of “a flourishing genre of popular culture that imagines that the world could end, and yet ‘we’ would survive and emerge as better and truer versions of ourselves” (Colebrook 2023, 4). This ‘anti-apocalyptic turn’ in the environmental arts and humanities has left researchers in a seemingly paradoxical situation. On the one hand, fears over planetary inhabitability, mass extinction, and civilizational collapse have taken a firm hold of scholarly debates across national and disciplinary boundaries. On the other hand, apocalypticism is widely perceived as an obstacle to emancipatory political

movements that seek to disrupt humanistic and anthropocentric perspectives. In the words of historian of consciousness Donna J. Haraway, “there is a fine line between acknowledging the extent and seriousness of the troubles and succumbing to abstract futurism and its affects of sublime despair and its politics of sublime indifference” (Haraway 2016, 4). Hence, discussions about the role of the arts on a heating planet have become both apprehensive and curiously repetitive: a routinization of apocalyptic demeanour, by writers who seem reluctant to reflect on their habitual disposition towards apocalyptic despair. According to political theorist Mathias Thaler, the “two horns of the dilemma—lazy inaction and nervous fatalism—expose that the apocalyptic imaginary has manoeuvred itself into a dead end” (Thaler 2022, 229–230).

A recent edited collection, *The Environmental Apocalypse: Interdisciplinary Reflections on the Climate Crisis* (2023), offers a fresh perspective on this dilemma and has the potential to move debates in a more productive direction. As the editor, Jakub Kowalewski, makes clear in his introduction, apocalyptic thinking has come to dominate the environmental humanities, in a manner that calls for robust theoretical analysis. We live in an age of apocalyptic apprehension, writes Kowalewski. In affluent communities, lifestyles that would have seemed normal and unproblematic twenty years ago are beginning to look untenable. Social arrangements that were taken for granted by earlier generations appear insufficient, inadequate, or unsustainable. In many parts of the world, growing numbers of people live in irrational fear of hidden, dark forces that operate conspiratorially, and whose indestructible tentacles, for them, appear to extend everywhere. Apocalypse—the “ancient script that has somehow not exhausted itself, even after century upon century of false end time predictions” (Keller 2021, 3)—resonates powerfully in our post-secular lives. It would be misleading, however, to read this widespread fascination with apocalypse as a sign of universal political or affective alignment. Kowalewski remarks that “the concept of environmental apocalypse [...] is not fixed” and that “the polysemy of the term ‘climate apocalypse’” constitutes “the only adequate way of grasping the complexity of the eco-apocalyptic situation” (Kowalewski 2023, xvii). In other words, *The Environmental Apocalypse* argues that references to apocalypse have functioned, in the environmental humanities, as what anthropologist Marilyn Strathern calls an ‘attractor’: they remain underdetermined and, for this reason, can engage other terms and concepts, draw in values, and disseminate feelings “exactly as though everyone knew what was meant” (Strathern 2020, 2).

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Kowalewski explores eschatology as a rich plurality of diverse political, cognitive, aesthetic, and affective orientations. His programmatic interest in plurality finds expression in the structure of the volume, which consists of fifteen chapters by scholars with related but distinct disciplinary backgrounds: political and environmental history, religious studies, visual culture, philosophy, theology, and literary studies. Instead of championing a single idea of apocalypse, the contributors emphasize the positive ambivalence of the concept and the interdependence of arguments, attitudes, and styles that are at play. They write with attention to different research objects and methodologies, but agree on some key assumptions. First, all contributors affirm the vital importance of political urgency in the arts and humanities. As Stefan Skrimshire puts it in his contribution, arguments about apocalyptic culture “matter a great deal when considering our very real concerns of catastrophic climate change [and] can be the basis of our moral deliberation” (Skrimshire 2023, 176). Secondly, all chapters highlight the irreducible complexity of political, social, and cultural situations that will not be settled by neat solutions or by a single, definitive understanding of apocalypse. Such attention to situated knowledge practice is underpinned by Kowalewski’s background as a scholar of phenomenology and ethics, and is motivated by his current interest in political theology. Moreover, Kowalewski’s understanding of apocalypse bears significant similarities with the work of Biblical scholars Catherine Keller, Judith Kovacs, Christopher Rowland, and John J. Collins, who have similarly argued that apocalyptic thinking coheres around a set of recurrent and recognisable motifs, but cannot be reduced to a single cultural expression or political expectation. Apocalyptic thinkers, according to Keller, urge us to see the world as a transient precursor to a different, more meaningful reality. In this way, they invite us to imagine afresh what it means to be human and encourage us to re-think all aspects of our public and private lives, in anticipation of a promised reversal of *all* current circumstances (Keller 1996). For Keller, this emphasis on rupture and renewal is historically rooted in John of Patmos’s discursive resistance against Empire. Politically and aesthetically, it can take a variety of different forms: evangelical Christianity, ethnonationalism, far-right conspiracy belief, but also, at the other end of the political spectrum, liberation theology, anti-colonialism, radical environmentalism. Needless to say, these groups operate on the basis of different belief systems. From a philosophical or theological perspective, however, their political disagreement weighs less heavily, according to Keller, than formal similarities. In the same vein, Kovacs and Rowland have suggested that apocalyptic environmentalism (and other forms of political activism with a focus on exis-

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tential risk) may be read as ‘actualizations’ of religious apocalyptic eschatology, even where their advocates appear suspicious of religious belief systems (Kovacs and Rowland 2004, 7–11). The diversity and versatility of apocalyptic interventions has also been stressed by biblical scholar John J. Collins, who writes, in his introduction to the *Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature* (2014), that “it is perhaps unfortunate that apocalyptic literature is so often invested with theological authority, with an eye to coded messages and instructions, rather than being read as an exuberant product of the human imagination” (Collins 2014, 13).

The Environmental Apocalypse sheds light on this exuberance and describes it as a vital prerequisite for the survival and wellbeing of human and more-than-human communities. The contributors’ collective effort to unlock and explore new actualizations of apocalypse takes an impressive variety of forms, from Elizabeth Pyne’s empowered demand for queer apocalyptic mindfulness to Jonathon Catlin’s sophisticated critique of crisis optimism, and from Stefan Skrimshire’s chapter on apocalyptic time and the ethics of human extinction to Andrew Patrizio’s intriguing remarks about the immanence of planetary eco-apocalypse. The volume also includes chapters with an emphasis on different regions, languages, and genres. For example, Marita Furehaug aptly explores the similarities and differences between Christian and Islamic eschatology and considers their implications for the emergence of a planetary, eco-theological environmentalist movement. Kowalewski’s chapter challenges the broadly European focus and attention to linear time in Jacob Taubes’ *Occidental Eschatology* (1947) by exploring spiralic historiographies and decolonial methods. In a similar vein, Robert Seymour pays tribute to the environmental ethics of Hans Jonas, while Simon Thornton highlights the topicality of Søren Kierkegaard’s reflections on tragic guilt in a fossil-fuelled social world on the brink of collapse. *The Environmental Apocalypse* also considers a range of genres, including post-secular fictional rewritings of religious apocalypse as “spiritual reality” (Lindsay Atnip), literary and filmic explorations of “pre-extinction” lifeworlds (Sarah France) and, most originally, Francesca Laura Cavallo’s analysis of How-To-Guide’s as forms of apocalyptic orientation. Paleobiologist Omar Rafael Regalado Fernandez contributes with an opening chapter on the apocalyptic theme in modern scientific discourse. As a result of this broad and diverse range of perspectives, *The Environmental Apocalypse* challenges the relatively narrow geographical and linguistic focus of many internationally influential scholarly publications in the environmental humanities, i.e. their preponderant attention to anglophone texts and contexts and to particular periods and genres (English Romanticism; North American nature writing; Twenty-First

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Century anglophone Climate Fiction). By contrast, *The Environmental Apocalypse* is predicated upon a differential perspective, which considers patterns of global connectedness (of genres, markets, ecosystems, and so on), but equally acknowledges the importance of regionally-focused debates about environmental justice and sustainability.

In brief, *The Environmental Apocalypse* describes apocalyptic thinking as a transhistorically influential, situated, and contextually versatile cultural form, which ‘affords’ radical environmentalist politics. In her 2015 monograph, *Forms*, literary scholar Caroline Levine employed the concept of ‘affordance’ to define the relation between aesthetic and social arrangements. In design theory, affordance is a term that describes the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs. Similarly, Levine’s study examines cultural forms beyond mimetic representation. Patterns and shapes, she explains, are both situated and portable. They remain surprisingly stable across different historical and cultural circumstances, but are employed in response to specific conditions. For Levine, this relation between cultural form and social context can be described as a field of affordances. *The Environmental Apocalypse* ends with three contributions by Timothy Secret, Agata Bielik-Robson, and Vinita Damodara, which appear to question the affordance of eschatological thinking by shifting the focus to vitalism, reconciliation, and collective action. Despite their position, however, these final chapters are intended neither as a critique of the other parts of the volume, nor as an authoritative final word. Indeed, *The Environmental Apocalypse* resist expectations of closure. Instead of expounding a single meaning of environmental apocalypse, the volume offers an invitation to dwell, with sensitivity and judgement, on the many complicated stories and imbalances that surround us. Each contribution marks the unique efforts of a situated thinker to make sense of a world that is shot through with uncertainty and that demands to be revealed.

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