

# The Apocalypse Is Now

by *Stéphanie Posthumus*

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**Literature and cinema have long played with the idea of the end of the world. As Jean-Paul Engélibert explains, these narratives, which imagine the forms of life or society that will emerge from the apocalypse, must be seen primarily as a critique of the present.**

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About: Jean-Paul Engélibert, *Fabuler la fin du monde. La puissance critique des fictions d'apocalypse*. Paris, La Découverte, 2019. 239 pp., €20.

Since the industrial revolution in the 19th century, Western literature has been imagining an apocalypse brought on by humans and not (only) by gods or other supernatural beings. Inspired by the technological developments of their era, works such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The New Adam and Eve* (1843) and Richard Jefferies' novel *After London* (1885) present the idea that humans might one day become extinct as a result of their own progress. In the 20th century, new threats such as nuclear war and climate change loomed on the horizon, which reignited the apocalyptic imagination on a global scale. Hollywood blockbusters such as *The Day After Tomorrow* and *2012* exploit and feed people's sense of a catastrophic and imminent end, while the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists' "Doomsday Clock" depicts humanity "at 100 seconds to midnight." Is there really no time to lose?

Jean-Paul Engélibert invites us to reflect on imaginings of the end in his study on apocalyptic fictions. This researcher in comparative literature looks at a wide range of written productions (novels ranging from *The Last Man* [1805] by Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville to Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy [2003-13]) and cultural productions (three films, a television series and an animated film). What these fictions have in common is that they do not reduce the destruction of the planet to a spectacle,

but instead offer an alternative way of thinking about the present while shunning the vision of a hopeless future. For Engélibert, herein lies their critical power.

## Breaking Away from Presentism

As the “Doomsday Clock” example shows, the apocalyptic imagination often posits time as a linear and inevitable development from the present to the future. Apocalyptic fiction, meanwhile, is situated in other temporalities, which go beyond this chronology. Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood states loud and clear: “I am not a prophet. Science fiction is really about now”.<sup>1</sup> In *Fabuler le monde*, Engélibert argues that apocalyptic fictions open up a breach in the present by placing the action during or after the catastrophe. For example, Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy tells the story of life before and after a pandemic that wipes out most of the human population. Thus, the novel creates a pure event, a *kairos*, as opposed to the continuous time of reality, *chronos*. Furthermore, Atwood is not trying to predict a devastating pandemic; she uses this idea to show that we are already living through a kind of apocalypse. This is one of the most eloquent theories of Engélibert’s book: the apocalypse is not imminent, but rather immanent. We experience it from day to day, but we pretend not to see it. This is very literally illustrated in José Saramago’s novel *Blindness*, which depicts a population that is gradually going blind. The catastrophic event here allows Saramago to ponder the tragedies of the 20th century without adhering to a fatalistic vision of the present (pp. 84-6).

In his choice of apocalyptic films, Engélibert reinforces the idea of a new perspective on time in order to emerge “from the regime of presentist historicity” (p. 12). By focusing on films such as *Melancholia* (2011) by Lars Von Trier, *On the Beach* (1959) by Stanley Kramer and *4:44 Last Day on Earth* (2011) by Abel Ferrara, Engélibert shows that it is the expectation of the apocalypse that creates meaning, allowing people to build bonds of friendship and love while facing the inevitability of the end. Images of destruction and action are replaced by the experience of a time delay that permeates every moment, not to tire out the viewer but to interrupt the flow of time conceived as progress. This observation about time reveals the promise of something else, be it a place of refuge (*Melancholia*) or the possibility of love (*4:44*).

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<sup>1</sup> Allardice, Alice. Interview with Atwood in *The Guardian*, 20th January 2018; consulted 8th June 2020.)

## Releasing the Energy of Despair

The obsession with apocalyptic scenarios can lead to a form of nihilism, a paralysing refusal that suppresses all political creativity. When it comes to climate change, environmentalist discourse has often been criticised for the sense of powerlessness it creates in the face of a problem that seems inevitable and unavoidably catastrophic. Rather than opposing such fatalism with naïve optimism, Engélibert takes up the idea of the “energy of despair” developed by the French poet and philosopher Michel Deguy. For Deguy, environmental awareness can lead to a new engagement with the here and now. Literature becomes a way not to “save” us from the climate crisis or to go “beyond,” but to redefine the conditions of literature as representation.

To show how this “energy of despair” works, Engélibert looks at three novels in particular: *Minor Angels* by Antoine Volodine, *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy and *Le Dernier Monde* (“The Last World”) by Céline Ménéard. In each novel, the end of the world serves as a springboard from which to rebound into another (im)possible world. In Volodine’s story, human survivors wander through a hostile post-apocalyptic world, but the work does not feed on nihilism. On the contrary, it cultivates the linguistic inventiveness and literary power of ambiguity and the political (im)passes of the apocalypse. As Engélibert explains, “Fiction must not sustain any hope; that is how it will give the dreamer the energy to survive, or at least not take it away from him” (p. 72).

By referring to readers as “dreamers,” Engélibert evokes their reception of the book, which in his view is part of the process of activating the poetic energy of despair. Without instrumentalising apocalyptic fiction, we might wish to ask Engélibert about the ways in which such energy circulates. How is it transferred to the reader? How is the latter “affected,” in the literal sense, i.e. emotionally and psychologically disturbed? The theoretical framework of literary pragmatism, which conceives of the literary text as an agent endowed with a real affective capacity, could have served as a starting point for answering such questions.<sup>2</sup> This perspective would make it possible to examine more closely the *in situ* reactions of readers and spectators to

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<sup>2</sup> See for example *Explore : Investigations littéraires* (2017) by Florent Coste and “Literature and Ecology. An Experiment in Ecocriticism” (1978) by William Rueckert). <https://laviedesidees.fr/La-litterature-pour-quoi-faire.html>

apocalyptic fiction and would be in line with Engélibert's project, which seeks to multiply the diversity of possible responses to such fictions.

## Forming New Human and Non-Human Collectives

After the catastrophic event (whether or not it is represented in the apocalyptic narrative), the representation of alternative worlds often gives way to forms of unprecedented and extreme violence. What interests Engélibert is the point in the story when a character turns the violence against himself or herself, performing a sacrificial act that ends the vicious circle of gratuitous violence and leads to a new promise of life. For example, after cutting off all of his fingers, Leonardo, the protagonist in Davide Longo's *The Last Man Standing*, is able to save his pregnant daughter from the ultra-violent post-apocalyptic society in which she was tortured and raped. According to Engélibert, such forms of violence must be placed in the context of a necessary and (im)possible exit from post-modernity, in the context of a "civilisational catastrophe," to use Jean-Luc Nancy's expression (p. 146). In *The Road*, McCarthy tries to express the priceless loss of the beauty and fragility of the natural world brought on by such violence, while at the same time evoking the potential legacy of the young son who becomes part of a new family after his father dies.<sup>3</sup>

In apocalyptic fictions, violent acts can wipe out societies dominated by progress and capital, enabling the (re)composition of human and non-human societies (this is just one example of the influence of sociologist and philosopher Bruno Latour on Engélibert, who often cites Latour in the text). The nuclear holocaust in Robert Merle's *Malevil* creates the conditions for a state of nature in which a group of survivors attempt to build an egalitarian society willy-nilly. The television series *The Leftovers* instead shows an intolerant society made up of sub-groups each seeking in its own way to make sense of the sudden loss of two percent of the human population. However, these two examples of social reconstruction are anthropocentric, explains Engélibert, unlike the Atwood trilogy and the animated film *Ghost in the Shell*, which illustrate the work of negotiation and translation at the heart of heterogeneous human-

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<sup>3</sup> The two chapters in the section of Engelbert's book entitled "Repeupler le monde" ("Repopulating the world") seem to take up some of the ideas of the ideology of "reproductive futurism" criticised by Lee Edelman in his book *No Future. Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). According to Edelman, the child embodies the hope of the human species, which reinforces institutions such as the family and heterosexuality while denying the validity of queer relationships. (See also the collection *Making Kin Not Population* edited by Adele E. Clarke and Donna Haraway (2018)).

animal-biotechnology collectives. In these narratives, the model of the autonomous human subject gives way to the idea that life is necessarily woven of links of interdependence and vulnerability. By ending his analysis with the question of the post-human, Engélibert shows both the continuity of apocalyptic narratives (ever since Grainville's critique of progress and the philosophy of enlightenment) and their multiple ruptures, which make them elusive to any simple or linear historicity. On account of their political diversity, apocalyptic narratives reject "the discourses that make the anthropocene the result of the universal and spontaneous tendencies of *anthropos*" (p. 225).

## A Minor Critique

Engélibert handles his corpus with great originality and finesse. Having said that, one might regret the lack of transitions from one chapter to the next, which would allow the reader to better understand the specificity of the genres in question. Admittedly, Engélibert is proposing to replace generic identification with a "minor critique" which is intended to be deterritorialising, collective and focused on "politics in the individual" (p. 19). Still, this minor critique would benefit from focusing in particular on the way in which a crisis such as climate change fits into the narrative differently compared with other crises (nuclear, pandemic, etc.) Without isolating specific literary genres, it is regrettable that Engélibert does not participate in the rich critical discussion on climate fiction.<sup>4</sup> Finally, one might want the minor critique to pay more attention to the cultural and linguistic context of each narrative in the corpus, which mixes American, French, Canadian, English and Portuguese fiction, among others. Would diversifying cultural specificities not be another way of "distinguishing within the human species one people, one group, one individual from another" (p. 225)? This would also help to advance the discussion on the holocausts already experienced by indigenous, native and ethnic minorities in the history of Western civilisation.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* by Amitav Ghosh (who introduced the issue of climate fiction in his article "Where is the Fiction about Climate Change?", *The Guardian*, 28<sup>th</sup> October 2016, consulted on 8<sup>th</sup> June 2020 at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/28/amitav-ghosh-where-is-the-fiction-about-climate-change>). In French, see the discussion by Enki Bilal, Cyril Dion and Anne-Catherine Prévot, "Les fictions climatiques vont-elles sauver la planète ?" during the programme "La grande table des idées" on *France Culture* (18<sup>th</sup> January 2018, <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/la-grande-table-2eme-partie/les-fictions-climatiques-vont-elles-sauver-la-planete>).

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