

Katrin Isabel Schmitt

Beginning after the End

Trauma and Narrative in Twenty-First Century
North American Post-Apocalyptic Fiction

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Now, let us hope the real apocalypse holds off for a little while longer.

Konstanz, March 2025

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is November 2023, and the world is in turmoil, grappling with a myriad of challenges on a global scale. The “Center for Disaster Philanthropy,” a US American charity organization, offers an overview of these current developments on its homepage. The twenty-first century has witnessed a surge in natural disasters, such as earthquakes, wildfires, and floods, a worldwide pandemic-related disruption, refugee crises, and numerous violent conflicts. A succession of catastrophes defines the present era, and we therefore find ourselves well-acquainted with the traumatic disruptions that shape our reality in the twenty-first century. Amidst these persistent feelings of crisis, the term “apocalypse” has gained immense popularity and is frequently employed. This trend becomes evident when examining articles from the past two years in the American newspaper *The Washington Post*, where references to “the apocalypse” are pervasive. It is invoked in multifarious discussions such as about the campaigning strategies of the Democratic Party leading up to the midterm election 2022 (Abutaleb, “Apocalypse Now: Democrats Embrace a Dark Midterm Message”), the snowboarding venue at the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing (Kilgore, “At Beijing’s Big Air Venue, the Setting is Post-Apocalyptic and the Jump is ‘Perfect’”), college students exploring the risks of Artificial Intelligence (Tiku, “How Elite Schools Like Stanford Became Fixated on the AI Apocalypse”), natural disasters (Dance, “Argentina Wildfires Create Apocalyptic Scene of Blazes at City’s Edge”), and even the damaging impact of tourists on poppy fields (Sampson, “To Avert ‘Poppy Apocalypse,’ California City Closes Canyon to Visitors”). This shows that “apocalypse” has become an integral part of everyday vocabulary. Likewise, there has been a significant increase in apocalyptic works in the twenty-first century across various mediums – from literature, to film, TV series, music, and video games (DiTommaso, “Apocalypticism and Popular Culture” 473).

However, the apocalypse is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, the “end of the world is one of mankind’s most ancient fantasies. It marks a moment of ultimate futurity, an end of history and human existence, often depicted in strident, highly symbolic imagery” (Horn, “The Last Man” 55). Significantly, apocalyptic representations do not statically repeat the same narrative but are adapted to and influenced by their contemporaneous situation. Depending on its historical context, each era constructs its individual apocalyptic narratives, which often take shape during moments of significant change (Zamora, *Writing the Apocalypse* 11). That is why the apocalypse must “primarily be seen as a story that can make sense of an otherwise chaotic and possibly hopeless present” (Bender 49).

In the twenty-first century, references to apocalyptic narratives are prevalent and extensive, as highlighted by theologian Lorenzo DiTommaso:

It transcends nearly every boundary—religious, cultural, linguistic, political, social, or economic. It is neither low culture nor high culture. Apocalypticism can be espoused by the young and the old, by sectarians and centrists, by conservatives and liberals, by com-

munists and capitalists, and by the religious and the irreligious. In a very real sense, it has mass appeal. (“Apocalypticism and Popular Culture” 476)

The apocalyptic narrative permeates various frameworks, disciplines, and contexts. Its pervasive influence is also reflected in current scholarship. Over the past two years, numerous monographs have explored the apocalypse, including the edited collection *The Environmental Apocalypse: Interdisciplinary Reflections on the Climate Crisis* (2022), curated by Jakub Kowalewski, historian John Jeffries Martin’s monograph *A Beautiful Ending: The Apocalyptic Imagination and the Making of the Modern World* (2022), media scientist David Venditto’s study *Whiteness at the End of the World: Race in Post-Apocalyptic Cinema* (2022), historian Donald Akenson’s *The Americanization of the Apocalypse: Creating America’s Own Bible* (2023), and humanities scholar MaryKate Messimer’s exploration in *Apocalyptic California: Gender in Climate Fiction* (2023). Accordingly, the apocalyptic narrative is important for different research fields and inspires interdisciplinary approaches. The “Käte Hamburger Kolleg für Apokalyptische und Postapokalyptische Studien” (CAPAS) also acknowledges these manifold dimensions. Since 2021, this research cluster at the University of Heidelberg has been granted funding by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research for a continuous twelve-year period. The funding line of the “Käte Hamburger Kollegs” aims to support innovative social sciences and humanities research fostering transdisciplinary exchange, international collaboration, and visibility of critical research topics. The establishment of CAPAS exemplifies the contemporary relevance and prestige of studies centered around apocalyptic themes, especially within the humanities.

Literary scholar Lawrence Buell, renowned for his contributions to the Environmental Humanities, explains the appeal of apocalyptic narratives by emphasizing their ability to translate indistinct fears of individuals and society into tangible imagery of disaster (285). Consequently, there exists a compelling narrative dimension to both recounting and experiencing catastrophe. Cultural studies scholar Eva Horn stresses that “literary disasters do not present ‘facts’ about catastrophes but rather make transparent the schematics through which we perceive disasters or in which potential disasters can be *imagined*” (*The Future as Catastrophe* 16). That is why apocalyptic narratives construct an imaginary space in which, in one way or another, the end of humanity is portrayed. Given that humanity has not faced eradication, Valerie Mosca describes the apocalypse as an “entirely discursive phenomenon,” highlighting that “the only possible referents for end-of-the-world narratives are other narratives” (43). Therefore, studies of the apocalypse are intricately connected to and distinctly influenced by narrative tradition.

Apocalyptic literature is a genre that captivates both readers and researchers. Frank Kermode explains its allure in his seminal work *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), where he emphasizes humanity’s fascination with and yearning for endings in their provision of a sense of order. He stresses that there is a desire to position oneself “in the midst” (29), between a beginning and an end. This fosters the perception of a per-