

Dystopian Worlds: The end or beginning of time?

Intro

We are living in dystopian times. The global COVID-19 pandemic has transformed speculative apocalyptic [fiction novels](#) into a stark reality. It has been a year of [reckonings](#), as the pandemic has painfully laid bare the interconnectedness of the world as well as the socio-economic, racial and structural inequalities underlying the disproportionate impact around the globe. In the meantime, nature has been running its own course, leaving traces of dystopian destruction. Sustained [Arctic melting](#), unprecedented bushfires in Australia and [apocalyptic wildfires](#) in The United States; and record wildfires in the Amazon have prompted a group of scientists to call for action: "[Fire in Paradise: a Declaration of World Scientists](#)". On top of lockdown, famine, floods or drought, millions of farmers in Asia and Africa witnessed swarms of desert locust decimating farmlands, invoking Biblical prophecies. Amidst political chaos, pestilence and environmental disasters, we ask ourselves: what have we done wrong? Times of societal and environmental crises give rise to end-of-time tales and stories of moral failure, but they may also foster ideas about new beginnings and brighter futures.

Morality & Nature

There is a universal tendency to appreciate Mother Nature as a moral arbiter of human behaviour, desirable or undesirable (Douglas 1992; Rayner 2003: 278) yet the ways in which we make sense of environmental crises varies vastly across the world (Hulme 2009). And eschatological anxieties are neither new nor solely bound to the religious realm. To paraphrase semiologist and novelist Umberto Eco:

The idea of the end of times is nowadays more characteristic of the secular world that pretends to ignore it, but is in the meantime obsessed by it. Within a religious worldview, the end of time becomes a topic for meditation and is viewed as an episode, a rite of passage that leads to a heavenly world. Within a secular worldview, it is the end of everything, hence the tendency to suppress it. Every period of social unrest produces its own illusions of destruction (Eco 1998: 9, 23).

Secular & scientific endings

From the nuclear threat, to climate 'tipping points', to ['zombie fires'](#) in the Arctic region, heat shocks, super storms, climate deadlines and so on; popular and academic language that is used to describe our contemporary environmental condition invokes apocalyptic allegories, emotions and visions. In addition to the emergence of [catastrophe journalism](#), the 21st century has given rise to a flourishing body of Sci-fi (post-) apocalyptic [novels](#), in which natural disasters, zombies, global warming, nuclear war, artificial intelligence, genetic modification, alien technology and pandemics take centre stage.

Scientific discourse implicitly opened up the idea of the *ultimate fate of the universe* when scientists began to estimate the age of the earth, and develop the notion of deep time in the 18th century (big bang theory). The question of a finite or infinite universe became a valid question in physical cosmology. Reflecting on beginnings, palaeontologist, Stephen Jay Gould (1998) says:

The end of the world has already happened many times!

at the end of *Ordovician* 438 million years ago;

at the end of *Devonian* 367 million years ago;

at the end of *Permian* 250 million years ago (the worst: 95% of life was wiped out)

and 65 million years ago, when the dinosaurs went extinct.

Evolution is not a long, tranquil stream, but based on contingency and interrupted by unpredictable disasters (p. 93-94).

Cultural & religious endings

How we think about endings *culturally*, largely depends on our conception of time in relation to a society's future trend. Historian of religion Jean Delumeau (1998) reminds us that the idea of 'the end of time' – with a beginning and an end – stems directly from the Bible, which belongs to a linear understanding of time that has influenced Western thought until the most profane realms. The *Four horsemen of the Apocalypse* that appear as God's punishment and foretell the end of time ("sword, famine, wild beast and plague"), speak about transformation and redemption, which will ultimately lead to a heavenly world. However, this idea of linear progress is absent in Greek and Eastern philosophy and in non-Abrahamic religions that rather contemplate patterns of decay, redemption and rebirth. *Kaliyuga* in Hinduism forms part of a cyclical time and refers to a period of destruction, after which a new world order will arise, only to precede destruction again. Buddha predicted that his teachings will be forgotten in approximately 5000 years after his passing, including knowledge of Dharma, heralding a period of turmoil that will be followed by a golden age.

Fascinatingly enough, abrupt apocalyptic endings appear to be far from universal. Anthropologist Walter van Beek (van Beek 2000) observes that most cultures in the world, including most African groups, do not envisage cataclysmic endings but instead adhere to a '*gentle eschatology*' which represents a slow degradation of life in which time is running down, but slowly and almost imperceptibly. This sense of gradual loss in tradition and ecology over time – which implies diminished resources but also of loss of power and knowledge – stems from the dynamics of orality (van Beek 1999). In this view, the future is always a weak echo of the past. He identifies only three major cultural traditions/ areas that speak of an abrupt apocalyptic future: Scandinavia, the Judeo-Christian and Persian Middle East, and Meso-America. Unlike the gradual eschatology that foresees a general trend of decline, most of these abrupt end-of-time tales speak indeed of new beginnings (Van Beek 2000).

How endings relate to climate change discourse

Our conceptions of time and endings are closely linked to projections about a society's future course, which largely influences how we perceive climate change. Anthropologist Peter Rudiak-Gould (2013, 2014) argues that the acceptance or rejection of climate change discourse depends upon societies' *trajectory narratives*, which are "discourses of the moral direction of society or the cosmos, with an associated sense of responsibility or blame for that trend" (2013: 11). He argues that if a society believes to go upward (progress), it is more likely to reject climate change as a reality, but when a society believes to go downward (decline), it is more likely to accept it. In other words, how we think about endings may not be trivial, yet seems to be understudied in relation to our contemporary environmental predicament.

Counter-apocalyptic currents

If apocalyptic currents are primarily social movements and revolutionary impulses (Eco 1998: 16-17), what is there to say about counter-apocalyptic movements? (We shall leave climate denial and scepticism aside for another issue). Anthropologists and other social scientists increasingly reveal that climate change as crisis/ apocalypse narrative, is not embraced everywhere. We find rejection of alarmism and counter-apocalyptic discourses and currents in the Pacific (Kempf 2017; Hermann & Kempf 2018; Fair 2018; Kirsch 2020), among Indigenous Peoples in the Americas (Whyte 2018; Rosengren 2018), in sub-Saharan Africa (de Wit 2018) and in Greenland (Eriksen 2020), to mention only a few. Also in Palawan in the Philippines (Friedrich 2018), we find that it is possible to take climate change very seriously without losing sight of other injustices and vulnerabilities. These counter-voices resist hegemonic narratives of climate-change induced vulnerability, decay and ending in favour of ideas about resilience, rebirth and resistance; or refuse climate reductionism by reminding of other injustices and vulnerabilities, like past apocalypses brought about by colonial violence (Whyte 2018) and failed development projects (Dewan 2020).

Invitation for dystopian and utopian perspectives

We devote our winter series to **the apocalypse & counter-apocalypse** in relation to weather, climate and nature and how this is lived *culturally* and *scientifically* in the past & present and imagined, desired and predicted for the future. We invite perspectives from a wide variety of disciplines (spanning the arts to the natural sciences, including palaeontology, philosophy, climate science, (environmental) history, STS, anthropology religious studies/ theology etc.) that reflect on, measure, depict or imagine dystopian worlds, end of time tales/ environmental crises, as well as contributions that contemplate new (or old) beginnings and brighter futures.

Perspectives may include (but are not limited to) socio-technical and scientific imaginaries about environmental apocalyptic futures (including climate predictions, models) or other cultural registers that express dystopian worlds like songs, poems, visuals, mythology and imagery. But we can also think of practical and experiential examples like (the aftermath of) humanitarian disasters, when communities have been confronted with loss and destruction but have managed to rebuild their lives (at times over and over again), and humanitarians who have been part of (post-) disaster response; living in a carbon neutral world etc. How do we live through and make sense of dystopian/utopian worlds?

The deadline for submissions is 31 December 2020. Perspectives should be maximum 1500 words, and we encourage contributions in a range of formats and media. Please submit at least one image that can be used as a thumbnail. Send your perspectives to our editorial team: Sara de Wit, Karl Dudman, Julio Rodríguez Stimson and Sacha Mouzin: contact.weathermatters@gmail.com

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Insights from Umberto Eco, Jean Delumeau and Stephen Jay Gould were paraphrased and very freely translated from a Dutch translation of: *Entretiens sur la fin du temps* (1998) - Translation: Conversations about the end of time. Compiled by Catherine David, Frédéric Lenoir and Jean-Philippe de Tonnac. Librairie Arthème Fayard.

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