American Apocalypses Galore

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In *Daemonomania*, the second installment of his magisterial and yet largely unrecognized *Aegypt* tetralogy, John Crowley writes: "when the world ends, it ends somewhat differently for each soul then alive to see it; the end doesn't come all at once but passes and repasses over the world like the shivers that pass over a horse's skin" (17). Elsewhere, Jacques Derrida saw apocalypses happening around us all the time and yet masking themselves from our view and ongoing—endings without ends. There is something truthful about these perspectives, different as they may be, and their intimate optic rings very true for many people as they struggle with cathartic events: personal tragedies, decline of communities, environmental degradation, loss of values and spiritualities, and economic precarity. Many of these world-endings seem to be connected—somewhat paradoxically, perhaps—to the knowledge and perception of the increasing complexity of the world. Over a quarter of a century ago, writing about the connections between spirituality and digital technologies, Eric Davis poetically described this condition as follows: "as global flows of information, products, peoples, and simulacra gush into our immediate lifeworlds, they chip away at our sense of standing on solid ground, of being rooted in a particular time and place" (278). The fact that such personal apocalypses do not necessarily result in absolute physical annihilation and often spell out the arrival of something else is, needless to say, more than appropriate given the original meaning of the word 'apocalypse.'

And yet, many American apocalypses are far more communal, total, and spectacular, even if the actual scales may vary widely. Some of them have—seemingly—always been present in American culture. Puritan brimstone theologies. Survivalist communities. End-of-times cults. Collective mournings of every single loss of innocence mentioned in Teresa Nielsen Hayden's blog post "Loss of

innocence redux," published a mere month after 9/11. But nowhere else has apocalypse—as well as its close sibling post-apocalypse—become more of a mainstay than in contemporary cultural production, particularly in its areas previously known as 'popular culture.' Here, we do not simply have individual titles. We have entire bodies of texts conceived around apocalyptic moments and tropes. The 1970s catastrophic cinema and its revival in the 1990s. Cyberpunk's invisible ecological catastrophes that have rendered the world technological. "Human Extinction Porn" (cf. Bradshaw) unveiled primarily in the form of big-budget Hollywood productions, such as *Armageddon* (1998), *Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *Don't Look Up* (2021), *Deep Impact* (1998), and *Greenland* (2020). (And that does not even include the entire subgenre of alien invasion narratives dating back to the 1950s.) Zombie narratives across high-visibility media: film, television, and video games, gleefully replicating libertarian wet dreams of the world without institutions but with most resources intact. The semi-documentary sub-genre of the world-after-people speculations, exemplified by Allan Weisman's *The World Without Us* (2007) and History Channel's *Life After People* (2008-10). Each of these, and a few more, conventions have their own narrative grooves and aesthetic strategies but what they all share is the singular obsession with the end of life as we know it, which may range from the collapse of American-style middle-class Global-North (sub)urban living to the species' extinction. Common to them is also what Morton Paley dubbed "the apocalyptic sublime," although he used the term for a literary and cultural discussion different from the texts namechecked here. But true to the nature of sublimity, the images of many contemporary apocalypses, particularly those in audiovisual media, overflow with revelous glee of ecstatic extreme long shots of mayhem and destruction, aestheticized and rendered in hi-rez.

Of course, these terminal yearnings are universal and there are at least several frameworks that can account for them, including the Freudian death drive, but Americans seem to score very high when it comes to expecting the world to end during their lifetime (cf. Roberts). Even more importantly, the American culture industries seem to be particularly invested in perpetuating and broadcasting such visions to the rest of the world, often to highly profitable effect. This naturally begs the question about what it is in the American cultural DNA that maintains this terrible love affair with the end.

One immediate response is that, in a true American manner, such terminal stories often provide narrative conditions for the showcasing of resilient individualism interlaced with the fetishization of the savior complex. In that, apocalyptic texts only continue the storytelling traditions that began with pioneer tales and westerns. Another possible explanation that, I think, I find even more compelling is that the entire history of what the white Europeans called America is sandwiched between two grand apocalypses. The originary one is the Native

American annihilation, whose terrifying totality can only be matched by the depths of collective repression, so strong that, for a very long time, it was not even conceived of as an apocalypse. Bookending the American history on our end is the climate catastrophe, which—while inescapably global—seems to have imprinted itself deeply on the American culture and whose contours we are only now slowly beginning to comprehend, even if that comprehension is not yet universal. Its imminence and inevitability seem to be a good guarantee of narrative pitches. And so, 'American Apocalypses Galore.'

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