

Narratives of the Apocalypse: An Introduction

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Ideas of the apocalypse have long consumed the popular imagination. For as long as individuals have imagined the Earth's beginnings, so, too, have they imagined its end. Contemporary culture popularized the belief that the world would end in December 2012, supposedly following the Mesoamerican Long Count calendar used by ancient Mayan civilizations. Religions the world over boast eschatologies that feature a prophet's return, the resurrection of the dead, and a final judgment. These imaginaries, however, proliferate beyond the theological in cultural artifacts such as literature, art, film, and music. Their secular appeal, more than bookending history for the faithful, reveals the ways in which the apocalypse helps us make sense of the world. Apocalyptic narratives, Frank Kermode explains in his seminal work *The Sense of an Ending* (1966), allow us to organize time in a way that is transformative and concordant. Such models of time help ease existential anxieties: stories of *the end* operate as a kind of surrogate for the story of *one's own end*, over which one has control.

Apocalyptic imaginaries have gained a real foothold in the collective consciousness since the dawn of the twenty-first century, with first the Y2K panic, then growing concern over climate change, and most recently the COVID-19 pandemic. A far cry from its religious origins, contemporary notions of the apocalypse articulate fears and negotiate anxieties that have resulted from the project of modernity. Progress, Monica Germanà and Aris Mousoutzanis contend in their volume *Apocalyptic Discourse in Contemporary Culture: Post-Millennial Perspectives on the End of the World* (2014), brings with it its attendant horsemen—imperialism, industrialization, globalization, and environmental degradation, to name a few. The apocalypse we imagine today is not necessarily the end of an immoral human race, but perhaps the fall of modernity as we know

it, as Heather J. Hicks proposes in *The Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Twenty-First Century: Modernity beyond Salvage* (2016).

Advancements in telecommunications brought on by the digital age have made the world smaller, so to speak, forging what John Tomlinson calls “global communities.” In this way, tragedies that may be geographically distant, such as the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, the 2019 fires in the Amazon rain forest, or the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, may add to the perceived reality of an individual’s own world. Conversely, in an era marked by crisis and catastrophe, it can often be difficult to distinguish between the end of *the* world and the end of *a* world. Traumatic events in the lives of individuals or individual communities—a recurring theme in the articles of this issue—can assume the catastrophic, disorienting, and disruptive qualities of the apocalypse, marking the end of an era, a personal denouement, or a loss felt at epic proportions.

The apocalypse is not always the end of the world or a world, but often the beginning of a new one. The postapocalyptic may recuperate the utopian by staging redemption or salvation, or it might focus on the dystopian by interrogating disaster and disorder. Together, the apocalyptic and the postapocalyptic reveal themselves as fertile imaginative ground from which to excavate stories of the world and stories of humanity.

Apocalyptic anxieties and experiences have also traversed a rich terrain in different parts of the Lusophone world across centuries. Think, for example, of sixteenth-century shoemaker Gonçalves Annes Bandarra, whose prophecies about the return of King Sebastião and the arrival of the Fifth Empire also implied the end of that world—of Portugal’s subjugation to Spain and persecution of a Jewish population forcefully converted to Christianity. In the nineteenth century, such prophecies resonated in Brazil’s northeastern inland areas, or *sertões*, through a range of millenarian movements. The most famous is without a doubt the one led by Antonio Conselheiro that established the town of Canudos, barbarously destroyed by the national army in 1896–97. “O sertão vai virar mar e o mar virar sertão”: some of the sayings attributed to Conselheiro remained present in the cultural imaginary of Brazilian popular movements throughout the twentieth century and were immortalized, in the case of the prophecy above, by Glauber Rocha’s Cinema Novo classic *Deus e o diabo na terra do sol* (1964).¹ Often

¹ This saying is a variation of the prophecy Euclides da Cunha attributed to Conselheiro in *Os sertões* (1902): “o certão virará praia e a praia virará certão” (162).

inspired by a heterogeneous range of sources and events, these and other examples invite us to reconsider apocalyptic tropes from transcultural perspectives that reframe contemporary figurations of the apocalypse in light of broader historical patterns.

The collective experience of how worlds end is inexorably tied to the histories of colonialism, slavery, and Indigenous genocide that shaped the areas today known as the Lusophone world, during and after Portuguese colonial rule in America, Africa, and Asia. The Kalunga line, or the death-like encounter with the absolute unknown, was the term employed in the Kikongo language to describe the end of a world experienced by the millions of Africans forced to cross the Atlantic to face a future of enslavement in the Americas. In parallel, the genocide of Indigenous populations in the Americas has caused many ends of worlds. The creative resistance of those who found physical and existential ways to survive may provide, as Ailton Krenak proposes, ideas about how to postpone the end of the world as it is contemporarily imagined in Western cultures. In fact, the prospect of facing an end of the world is embedded in numerous Amerindian cosmologies, such as a sky that may fall again after having already fallen in the beginning of times, as in Davi Kopenawa's masterful retelling of the Yanomami cosmology in *The Falling Sky*. On a related note, Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, in one of the most insightful contemporary meditations on apocalypse, raise the question, inspired by Amerindian thought, of the extent to which the end of the world is the end of humans—and more fundamentally, ask what we're talking about when we talk about humans. According to the authors, the world is consubstantial with an expanded notion of humankind in Amerindian thought, so the end of one means the end of the other. These and other works offer alternative ways of approaching the apocalypse that put the broader experience of repressed and dispossessed populations at the heart of contemporary apocalyptic anxieties.

If there is one major way in which these chapters of Lusophone history matter to our contemporary understanding of the apocalypse, it is probably through this repeated reenactment of the end of these many worlds that, to a certain extent, continues in the present. In this sense, such events invite us to focus not so much on the end of the world in spectacular terms as on the end of a world, of multiple worlds. Many of the articles included in this special issue take this path: they provide powerful reflections on what it means to face the end of a certain reality,

be it in Indigenous villages in Brazil or in an urbanizing rural Portugal, among others.

Apocalyptic Imaginaries in Portuguese opens with a variety of approaches to the end of the world from those who have been traditionally marginalized and excluded from grand narratives of modernization. Luz Horne launches the issue with a reassessment of the promise of a prosperous future, which has been so prevalent in Brazil's socioeconomic imagination over the past century, as it clashes with narratives of catastrophe, whether histories of the repression of Indigenous populations or Brazilian contemporary apocalyptic fiction. Emanuelle Oliveira-Monte explores the possibilities of Afrofuturism in Brazil through an analysis of Lu Ain-Zaila's postapocalyptic fiction, including her incorporation of Akan philosophy as a way of challenging Western perspectives and imagining a Black utopia of social justice. Shifting the focus to East Africa and to the symbolic significance of the Island of Mozambique, Yuan Wang explores the postapocalyptic dimension of José Eduardo Agualusa's recent fiction. Through Agualusa's intertextual dialogue with Luís de Camões and Friedrich Nietzsche, Wang discusses how African literary voices may emerge and be heard. Dora Nunes Gago explores the apocalyptic dimension of Lídia Jorge's *Estuário* (2018) by connecting it to the experience of war, mutilation, and trauma, in which the realization of the apocalypse and the act of writing converge. Finally, Benjamin Burt investigates what the end of capitalism would entail in two contemporary novels, by Pepetela and Luiz Bras, that closely follow the conventions of postapocalyptic fiction, in which the persistence of unequal structures clashes with the possibilities of a societal rebirth.

Interrogations of capitalism are resumed in the following series of articles that study agribusiness and rural decadence as fodder for apocalyptic imaginings. Leila Lehnen explores themes of toxicity and contamination in the collaborative novelistic project *Corpos secos* (2020), reading a zombie apocalypse brought on by soy pesticides as a metaphor for the catastrophic effects of human intervention, fueled by greed, in nature. Toxicity reemerges in Eduardo Leão's article comparing novels from Brazil and Argentina. Leão probes practices of care that appear in these narratives as a foil to the predatory and rapacious relationship between humans and the natural environment. Finally, Peter Haysom examines "o fim do mundo rural," contemplating ideas of loss, nostalgia, and survival in twenty-first-century rural Portuguese communities.

This special issue closes with two articles that analyze music and sound through an apocalyptic framework. Luís Branco proposes a comparative study of the singer-composers António Variações and David Bowie, showing how both artists explore apocalyptic characterizations of themselves via their lyrics, in conjunction with queer sexualities and the emergence of glam rock. Finally, André Malhado's contribution underscores the sonic potential of the apocalyptic undertones present in contemporary Lusophone cyberpunk. Through analyses of a range of materials, including films, a video game, and a TV series, Malhado shows how the figure of the cyborg may negotiate sonic continuities between nature and technology.

With this dossier we explore the end of the world from a Lusophone perspective, seeking to disrupt a hermeneutic landscape that has long been dominated by Western and Anglophone imaginings. The articles that follow plumb the apocalyptic imagination from the Portuguese-speaking world, scrutinizing the catastrophic practices of imperialism and capitalism, reflecting on experiences of trauma and loss, foregrounding marginalized communities, and making connections across borders. In a world threatened by climate change, technological fallout, and viral calamity, exploring apocalyptic imaginaries feels not only timely but imperative. We hope that this special issue draws attention to multifaceted ways the apocalypse is imagined in the Portuguese language, and that it might offer hope or allow us to contemplate solutions to a planet in crisis.

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