

# CLIMATE APOCALYPSE!

## Engaging with the climate crisis through apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction

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### INTRODUCTION & APPROACH TO RESEARCH

- '[T]o make sense of our lives from where we are, as it were, in the middle,' wrote Frank Kermode in the millennial epilogue to his 1966 book *The Sense of an Ending*. 'we need fictions of beginnings and fictions of ends, fictions which unite beginning and end and endow the interval between them with meaning.' As highlighted by Kermode and other writers and scholars, storytelling has always been used to mark our place in the grand scheme of time, often to impose order on the messiness of history. A perceived end, and literary interrogation of what this end means, provides narrative structure that can help us make sense of what can otherwise appear to be meaningless. Connor Pittetti writes that, 'such narratives thus evoke ideas of a coherent process of historical development in which traumatic upheavals trigger transitions between distinct world-systems.' (Pittetti 2017)
- My research project closely examines the reception of six examples of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction, dating from 1963 onwards: *Cat's Cradle*, *Mad Max 2*, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, *Parable of the Sower*, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* and *The Last of Us*. With the exception of *Nausicaä*, these are all English-language works and as a result this research is mostly confined to the Anglosphere.
- The reception of each of these works by scholars and reviewers (and, where possible, the reading public) at the time of publication and the interpretation of their apocalyptic themes in relation to contemporary concerns (such as natural disaster and the threat of nuclear war) are analysed.
- Present-day reception of these works by scholars, reviewers and readers in relation to the climate crisis is examined, specifically detailed reviews left by consumers of these works on the platforms Goodreads, Reddit and Letterboxd.
- For the purposes of this research project, a survey was designed and distributed across social media and to climate reading groups. The survey gathered both quantitative and qualitative responses from participants who had engaged with these works, investigating how they related the apocalyptic scenarios to climate breakdown and as to how 'realistic' they considered the work's apocalyptic scenario, as well as to how they personally related to the work's apocalyptic scenario. Of the 114 respondents, 52 had engaged with at least one of the works. The vast majority of respondents were Irish and between ages 18-24.
- This study, through analysis of engagement with narrative fiction that depicts climate breakdown, interrogates apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction's capacity to allow consumers to negotiate the trauma of the terrible inevitability of a warming planet, at a time which people feel impotent and powerless to effect change or preventative measures.

### CAT'S CRADLE (1963)

"After the thing went off, after it was a sure thing that America could wipe out a city with just one bomb, a scientist turned to Father and said, 'Science has now known sin.' And do you know what Father said? He said, 'What is sin?'"  
— *Cat's Cradle*, Kurt Vonnegut, (1963)

- Despite the text explicitly depicting a mass extinction event caused by climate change, many readers and critics considered this aspect secondary to what they saw as a fable of human hubris, ignorance and selfishness.
- Vonnegut described the novel as 'about an old-fashioned scientist who isn't interested in people'; a review of the novel by NYT in 1963 describes it as 'an irreverent and often highly entertaining fantasy concerning the playful irresponsibility of nuclear scientists.' (Vonnegut, 1974 & Southern, 1963)

### MAD MAX 2 (1981)

NARRATOR: ...another time...when the world was powered by the black fuel ...and the deserts sprouted great cities of pipe and steel. [...] Without fuel they were nothing. [...] Their world crumbled...  
— *Mad Max 2*, directed by George Miller, written by Terry Hayes, George Miller and Brian Hannant (1981)

- Miller has stated, on the resource wars depicted in the film, that 'the normal fabric of society can start to disintegrate when you remove something that is as essential as gas. [...] we simply postulated the kind of events that would result from removing one of the fossil fuels from the Earth.'
- Viewers referenced the film's survivalist themes and some voiced concerns that similar struggles for resources would emerge as a result of climate breakdown.

### NAUSICAA OF THE VALLEY OF THE WIND (1984)

NAUSICAA: *The soil is polluted! The soil of this valley is polluted. Why!? Who could have done this to the world ...*  
— *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki (1984), quote from English-language script, Scott Sanford version (1990)

- Miyazaki has stated that 'a major theme of this work is the manner in which people engage with the nature surrounding them and upon which they are dependent.' (Miyazaki, 2014)
- Viewers recognised and engaged with the story's overt ecological and anti-war themes, and linked the film's story to the world around them, expressing dismay at the possibility that warfare might result in a similar (though less fantastical) world.

### PARABLE OF THE SOWER (1993)

"I thought something would happen someday. I didn't know how bad it would be or when it would come. But everything was getting worse: the climate, the economy, crime, drugs, you know. I didn't believe we would be allowed to sit behind our walls, looking clean and fat and rich to the hungry, thirsty, homeless, jobless, filthy people outside."  
— *Parable of the Sower*, Octavia Butler (1993)

- Butler considered climate change a 'character' in the novel due to its role; readers, (Dash 1995). Many readers and critics have since hailed her as 'prophetic.'
- Many readers engaged with the plausibility of Butler's depiction of societal breakdown, as well as the novel's emphasis on survivalism and embracing new ways of life when the old are no longer viable.

### LEFT BEHIND (1995)

'Every inch of ground blossomed with flowers and grains, including produce never before conceivable in Israel. The Holy Land became an export capital, the envy of the world, with virtually zero unemployment. Everyone prospered. [...] Free trade and liberal passage allowed all who loved the nation to have access to it.'  
— *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days*, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins (1995)

- I did not encounter any reviews of or receptions to this novel wherein the reader connected the narrative to the climate crisis.
- The novel depicts freak climate events, but only in the context those prophesied in Revelation.

### THE LAST OF US (2013)

ELLIE: *Nothing. It's just... I've never seen anything like this, that's all.*  
JOEL: *You mean the woods?*  
ELLIE: *Yeah. Never walked through the woods. It's kinda cool.*  
— *The Last of Us*, developed by Naughty Dog Studios, created by Neil Druckman and Bruce Straley, written by Neil Druckman and Halley Gross (2013)

- Reviews of the HBO adaptation were quick to characterise the series as a metaphor for climate change. The series adds a scene which suggests the mutated *Cordyceps* infection was a result of rising temperatures—various media outlets, in the wake of the adaptation, published articles that explained the viability of such a pandemic.
- Players and critics noted the extraordinary beauty of the game's graphics, depicting a post-human, thriving natural world.

### ENDGAME?

- 'Climate endgame' is a term used to denote a scenario where climate breakdown results in global civilisational collapse and eventual human extinction.
- Catastrophic climate change scenarios are a 'dangerously underexplored topic,' with the vast majority of research focusing on the impacts of a rise in temperature of between 1.5°C and 2°C. (Kemp et al, 2022)
- Research suggests the current trajectory of anthropogenic GHG emissions will result in a temperature rise between 2.1°C and 3.9°C by 2100., without considering worst-case scenarios. (Liu & Raftery, 2021)
- A 2018 empirical study suggests that climate fiction (literature dealing with climate change, considered a trans-generic category of fiction) lead readers to associate climate change with intensely negative emotions, an affective response potentially counterproductive to efforts at environmental engagement or persuasion. (Scheider-Mayerson, 2018)

### APOCALYPTIC NARRATIVE

- Secular apocalyptic interpretations of climate catastrophe tend to be underscored by the non-secular roots of apocalypticism. Characterisations and coverage of the climate crisis often rely on tropes and conventions associated with apocalyptic literature—for instance a report exploring catastrophic climate change scenarios refers to the "'four horsemen" of climate change end game' (Kemp et al, 2022).
- There exists ongoing research investigating the use of apocalyptic vocabulary in the context of climate change on social media. (Vander Stichele, unpublished)
- It has been proposed by Frances Flannery that 'the pre-cognitive container of "apocalypse" brings along a well-entrenched referential system from the long history of Jewish and Christian apocalypticism that moves audiences to collect passivity'. (Flannery, 2024)
- A 2021 survey of climate anxiety in 10,000 young people, between the ages of 16-25, in ten countries, found 55.7% believe that 'Humanity is doomed'. (Hickman et al, 2021)
- Timothy Morton has coined the term 'hyperobject' to describe items, like styrofoam, which are 'massively distributed in time and space relative to humans'. The concept offers a means of exploring human paralysis while engaging with the climate crisis. (Morton, 2013)
- Lorenzo DiTommaso describes the primary social function of apocalyptic speculation as to 'to maintain, reinforce, and validate group identity, typically in the face of threats, internal or external.' (DiTommaso, 2020)
- Derek Dashke argues that classical apocalyptic texts effectively function in a way that produces traumatic signification as characterised by Jeffrey C. Alexander, by 'specific genres and narratives that aim to produce imaginative identification and emotional catharsis' in the aesthetic realm. (Dashke, 2014 & Alexander, 2004)

### CONCLUSION

- Different works (naturally) drew different responses from consumers, responses that depended on a variety of complex factors such as the narration style, what was perceived as the 'message' of the story, the medium, and other works the consumers had engaged with.
- My forays into Reddit, Goodreads and Letterboxd proved fruitful. Here, there were publicly available opinions and reviews from people who wanted to engage in dialogue about the themes of these works; analysis such posts helped to paint a picture of what response the works tended to provoke in consumers.
- The climate crisis is effectively a non-localised alteration of the world that is so incremental and yet so drastic, that many of us find it impossible to conceive of what it might mean for us outside of graphs and statistics. It is an intangible horror, one which we feel disempowered to confront. Narrative framework, incorporating apocalyptic motifs, can provide those of us who are currently unaffected by the climate crisis a means to better process its enormity, to better process the end of the world as we know it.



FIG: Still from *The Last of Us Remastered* (Naughty Dog, 2013, 2014), ch. Bill's Town

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my thanks to the the Laidlaw Foundation and the Laidlaw Undergraduate Research & Leadership Programme at Trinity for the funding and facilitation of this research, as well as to highlight my most sincere gratitude to the Laidlaw Team at Trinity College Dublin. I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Mark Sweetnam, for his patience and guidance as well as being an invaluable source of knowledge and know-how. Finally, I would like to thank Nathan Hutchinson-Edgar for his many helpful comments and perspectives on my work, and Róisín Dooliver for guiding me through *The Last of Us* (and for her willingness to put up with my backseat-driving every time she played the game).

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