

Ewa Niedziałek

Faculty of "Artes Liberales", University of Warsaw, Warsaw
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3786-4246>
eniedzialek@gmail.com

The Sense of an Ending and the Imagination of the End: Apocalypse, Disaster and Messianic Time

Abstract

Apocalyptic visions go beyond Christian eschatology and permeate our present imagination. Not so much with already bygone symbolism or the terror of bloody carnage, as with the vague sense of an ending, fuelled by historical conditions – the Holocaust, the nuclear crisis, or the more contemporary global threats of a viral pandemic or climate change.

The 11th issue of *Colloquia Humanistica* is devoted to various understandings of the end, introduced by the topics of apocalypse, disaster and messianic time. The articles gathered in the volume may be read separately as examples of analysis of several end-time-directed narratives, but they also constitute a whole that may indicate the specific features of thinking about the end.

Keywords: end of the world, apocalypse, disaster, messianic time.

The present volume of *Colloquia Humanistica* is dedicated to the topic of the end in a broad sense. Apocalypse, disaster and messianic time, all introduce the notion of ultimate termination that goes beyond an individual world. It is unquestionable that those three concepts

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are ingrained in extensively different traditions, thus conveying a different image of end time. While apocalyptic and messianic imagery is strongly connected with Jewish and Christian theology, disaster evokes a more secular vision, related to wars, cataclysms or environmental degradation. Yet, the very claim of the issue is that they may all possess inherent common features, rooted not so much in tradition or particular social circumstances, but in the more general paradoxicality of thinking about the end of everything. Thus, the end may be considered not only through particular images but also as a specific sense of an ending that permeates thoughts, writings, culture and lives.

In the present volume, we may trace three major dimensions causing the essential perplexity of end-directed thought and influencing its structure: time disruption, language peculiarity, and worldliness. The first one is devoted to the very presence of the end in the now. Apocalyptic or catastrophic thinking always feeds on some kind of event that disrupts the very perception of time. Thus, the end is not only something that is about to come, but rather a quality or change that one can already sense in the present. It is as true for the messianic time of St Paul (Agamben, 2000) as for the ecological catastrophism of today. Environmental devastation, new technology, the Holocaust, Holodomor, or the fall of Dubrovnik appear in the articles of this issue as signs of a different future that encroaches upon today, breaking the continuity with the past. In all of the cases, the catastrophe is already present, even if its final effect will appear years from now.

The sensed presence of the end imposes a kind of moral obligation on humans to act in the contemporary time. A sense of an end is accompanied by the urgency to speak, hence the variety of apocalyptic discourses, mirrored also by the content of this volume. Although there is no single scheme, code or strategy that unites the language of disaster, the apocalyptic tone shares the endeavour to reveal or communicate some kind of truth (Derrida, 1984). Hence the specific performative, but also the peculiar structure of the apocalyptic language – it portrays the catastrophe, but in order to delay or even cancel it. What may be surprising in the present volume is the search for hope and justice permeating the end-directed discourses. Seeking communication and power, they inhabit the known language but also renew it. The narratives analysed by the authors often extensively use the tradition of imagining the final end, sometimes mirroring not only particular motifs but also its very structure. What can also be noted is the incredible flexibility of reusing tradition, not only in a different social context but also through new technology and media.

Finally, through the articles gathered in the present volume, we may observe the specific worldliness of end-directed thinking. While apocalyptic discourses are extremely collective and claim the whole (Deleuze, 1997), they also embrace what is local or individual. A catastrophe seen through a particular perspective is easier to grasp and portray. However, the faith of the individual always and at the same time incarnates that of everyone, and the fall of a city equals the fall of the World. The apocalyptic perspective works not as a simple repetition or example, but through the inherent connectedness of everything. That is the very source of terrifying and unbelievable aspects of the end; yet, as shown by the articles, it can also become an active organising principle of collective thinking and consolidation.

Collecting different kinds of apocalyptic and catastrophic approaches within one framework and confronting various perspectives reveals the underlying threads that permeate and connect them, at the same time showing the great variety and adaptability inherent to end-directed discourses. Thus, the articles in the issue can be read separately as examples of apocalyptic or catastrophic narratives, but they also constitute a whole that may indicate the specific features of thinking about the end.

The opening article serves as a great example of simultaneous continuity and reinvention of the apocalyptic tradition. **Chiara Carmen Scordari** analyses the thought of rabbi and modern Jewish philosopher Joseph Soloveitchik, showing the process of the creation of new *midrashim* for biblical stories, more aligned with contemporary times and rooted in the worldliness of the time after the Holocaust. The author points to the concept of the “personal Messiah” – a deeply human and individual interpretation of messianism, yet created through biblical “cryptic figures”. In Soloveitchik’s writings, Abraham, Esther, Mordecai, Tamar and Ruth in a way become eschatological and metahistorical models of human moral resistance and creative power. Thus, the author claims that the messianic impulse is strongly anthropological, situated inside a person, in his or her internal forces. Nevertheless, these are still aligned with the fate of the whole nation and the world. Scordari’s analysis shows how the messianic narrative can be reframed in a way enabling hope to be situated not in passive waiting for the time of redemption, as many apocalyptic narratives suggest (Rosen, 2008), but in the process of self-knowledge and self-redemption. The “personal Messiah” figure is meant to be charismatic and endowed with anarchic, freedom-loving, anti-authoritarian features. Thus, messianism can be a source of civil disobedience and moral resistance in the face of the catastrophe of a totalitarian regime.

The next three articles bring closer observation of how social and political changes influence the narrative adaptation of certain apocalyptic and eschatological imagery. **Damian Kubik** examines selected testimonies of the fall of the Dubrovnik Republic at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Drawing on the historical concepts of Lujo Vojnović, the author shows the seizure of the city by French and Russian forces between 1806–1809 – “the second death of Dubrovnik” – in a broad context. Thus, this was not only the fall of the city and the end of the republic, but a great disruption of tradition and history, marking the end of the known world. The author analyses a variety of narratives and reactions to the catastrophe – from poetic images of hyperbolised suffering to historiosophical analyses endowed with apocalyptic imagery. They show both the narrative struggle of writing about disaster and the characteristic use of the repository of common symbols and representations of the end day. Kubik claims that the images of the fall of Dubrovnik have been forgotten because of the dominant status of earlier idyllic images of the city. Yet, it may also be added that the memory of Dubrovnik as an oasis of freedom and culture inhibiting contemporary consciousness is also a product of the end of the republic, which gives the past a nostalgic and utopian glow and makes future revival claims possible.

The next article, by **Francine Rochford**, analyses a very different kind of narrative, yet one also drawing strongly on a local perspective. The author discusses a particular Australian case of litigation involving climate change, in which a group of children sued the Australian Federal Government over the expansion of the Whitehaven coal mine. Rochford finds that certain strings of argumentation used in the case resemble eschatological narratives. In particular, she reflects on the notion of fault, harm and responsibility, and the theology of hope. The analysis reveals one of the key paradoxes of apocalyptic narrative, which is its temporal entanglement. In the case of environmental jurisprudence, it is the anticipation of harm that replaces the harm itself, the future catastrophe enters into the now through a certain solastalgia. Moreover, Rochford’s analysis reveals the inherent collision between the global dimension of climate change and its local manifestations.

The same clash is also visible in the article by **Stephen Ogheneruro Okpadah**, but by the use of the example of environmental degradation in the Niger Delta. The author builds his argument by analysing examples of contemporary documentary cinema devoted to the region. Just like in the aforementioned case of climate change jurisprudence, the film narrative examined by Okpadah becomes a source of hope and a quest for the revelation of the apocalyptic dimension hidden in the local context. As the

author points out, documentaries show the “small man” somehow living at the same time in the world’s periphery and the very centre of its catastrophe. It is worth noting that the analysed films themselves represent an external and West-oriented look upon the Niger Delta, as the filmmakers came from outside the region. Yet, the article offers an interesting change of perspective as the author himself reveals his origination from the region.

The other film analysis presented in the volume follows a different line of apocalyptic thinking, situated “on the other side” of the environmental and human catastrophe. **Cringuta Irina Pelea** discusses how cultural fears are mirrored in the blockbuster film *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* directed by Steven Spielberg, focusing on the world in the midst of and after an expected global catastrophe. The author claims that the picture in question is strongly embedded in the social nexus of contemporary America, showing its cinematic obsession with apocalyptic imminence. Yet, it also echoes more general anxieties about the future of humanity in the technological age, thus viewers from different cultural backgrounds can easily trace popular dystopian motifs of pop culture. As one may conclude from Pelea’s analysis, *A.I.* depicts a double-edged relationship with apocalyptic imagery. It becomes a source of fascination and spectacular fabular dramatisation of the end, at the same time catalysing fears underlying the Anthropocene and imposing a moral duty on humans. Portraying the catastrophe of the future in cinema may then have the particular power inherent to past narratives of revelation.

The final two texts of the thematic issue focus on the East, presenting yet another way that apocalyptic imagination evolves through different times and media. **Magda Dolińska-Rydzek** traces the connections between eschatology and Russian conspiracy theories. She examines three particular cases of conspiracy narratives – the theory about the existence of the Elders of Zion, the idea of the invisible Khazaria, and the conviction that the world is controlled by a supercomputer named Beast, located in Brussels. The parallel elaborated by Dolińska-Rydzek works not so much at the level of representation but in the very structure and aim of the two types of narratives. Both are to be characterised by the assumption of a hidden reality that is already accompanying our world but remains concealed. What is more, conspiracy theories similar to eschatological imagination, while seemingly fixed on what needs to be unveiled for a better future, work rather in the present – serving as a tool for consolidating the community, healing anxieties and changing the status quo. Again, then, the power of those kinds of discourses may appear revolutionary.

The last article of the thematic section focuses on a different kind of juxtaposition of past and present, but also here, apocalyptic narratives seem to serve a similar aim of consolation and community building. **Tetiana Brovarets** analyses the re-actualisation of Ukrainian embroidered towels from the late 19th and first half of the 20th century (*rushnyks*) featuring inscriptions connected with apocalyptic motifs. The embroidered towels presented by the author are in fact pictures shared and commented on by various users of social media. Thus, with the use of new media, memorisation is accompanied by group consolidation around the catastrophic past of Holodomor (the Ukrainian Famine Genocide of 1932–1933) and the eschatological future of the upcoming resurrection. Brovarets frames the cases of re-actualisation of traditional material culture with the more general features of the folklorisation process, claiming that one of its major principles is in fact permanent transformation and variation. However, it may be added that these can just as well be the features of end-time narratives in a broad sense.

As the final conclusion, one might say that, above all, the articles shared in this issue show the current relevance of end-directed thought. Apocalyptic and disaster narratives not only are re-enacted through different media but also adapt to the changing scenarios of contemporary images of catastrophe. The volume was developed and prepared during the time of Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine, which not only influenced its content but also gave the main topic an even more sombre tinge. Yet, the articles gathered in the volume actually appear to look at the issue of the end from a different angle – instead of waiting for impending disaster, they propose active intellectual participation in creating a future. I am grateful to all the authors and everyone who helped produce this thematic issue.

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Poczucie i wyobrażenia końca: apokalipsa, katastrofa i czas mesjański

Współczesne wizje apokaliptyczne wykraczają poza chrześcijańską eschatologię. Wiążą się nie tyle już z biblijnym lękiem przed sądem ostatecznym, ile z niejasnym poczuciem końca, które podsycane jest przez wydarzenia takie jak Holokaust, kryzys nuklearny, globalna pandemia czy zmiany klimatyczne. Jedenasty numer *Colloquia Humanistica* poświęcony jest różnym pojęciom końca, związanym z apokalipsą, myśleniem katastroficznym lub też czasem mesjańskim. Artykuły zgromadzone w tomie można czytać osobno, jako analizy poszczególnych narracji poświęconych tematyce końca świata, stanowią one jednak także pewną całość, która ujawniać może wspólne cechy myślenia o końcu.

Słowa kluczowe: koniec świata, apokalipsa, katastrofa, czas mesjański.

Note

Ewa Niedziałek, Faculty of “Artes Liberales”, University of Warsaw, Warsaw
eniedzialek@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3786-4246>

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