



## Comparative Visions of the Apocalypse

### Call for Papers for the journal *Terrain*

It has almost become a truism to suggest that atomic weapons ushered in a new era in which, for the first time, humanity had to face the possibility of its extinction as a species (Anders 1972) – a possibility that has since magnified into something more like a probability, as the hands of the famous Doomsday clock tick ever closer to twelve. The quiet, insistent refrain of the Apocalypse has waxed into a full-blooded concerto that keeps threatening to come to its, and so to our, finale. And in a sense, such claims are true: the Apocalypse is undoubtedly part of the *Zeitgeist* (Foessel 2012 ; Hartog 2014). The undeniable appeal of its literary, cinematic and religious incarnations testifies to the contemporary vitality of the cataclysmic imaginary, which has seized hold of the unfolding ecological crisis to reimagine the means of our extinction. And the advent of the nuclear age did indeed mark the first moment since humanity had come to conceive of itself *as a species*, as One, that we disposed of the wherewithal to simply rub that species from the face of the earth. Pollyannish ideas of progress became hard to defend in the face of photographs of Hiroshima's *Ground Zero*.

Yet, though ideas of the Apocalypse and our imminent annihilation may be very much of the moment, they do of course also have a long and distinguished pedigree (Hall 2009). This is perhaps most obvious in chiliastic or eschatological strains of religious thought – viz. those that concern the Day of Judgment and its aftermath, be that here on earth or in God's kingdom (see Aubin-Boltanski & Gauthier 2014). And when we think of the Last Judgment, our minds turn almost instinctively to the Abrahamic faiths, all of which have delved deep into these imaginaries: from the Quranic *qari'ah*, where men will be scattered like moths and the mountains reduced to carded wool, to the coming of the ten-horned Beast in the Book of Revelations (*apokalypsis*) and the seven bowls of God's wrath that spill forth their blood and darkness, by way of the prophet Daniel's "abomination of desolation" that perhaps gives birth to apocalyptic thought. This imaginary is not, however, limited to the Abrahamic religions. We also find examples of it in numerous other traditions, of varying size, provenance and antiquity: for instance, the Norse Ragnarök (or twilight of the Gods), when the sun's beams grow black and one by one the deities fall; or the Daoist Divine Incantations Scripture from the cavernous abyss, which describes how troops of "epidemic ghosts" will come to put China to the sword; or the countless Amerindian myths, revelations or forecasts of the destruction of a people, tribe or way of life (e.g. Kopenawa & Albert 2013).

In some cases, the forms that these different apocalypses take show a degree of cross-contextual similarity (what, after all is the difference between a Daoist epidemic ghost warrior and a Brazilian gold-miner on Yanomami lands?), but just as often, the ways in which the world is destroyed differ radically. And this difference in the means of annihilation can be linked to differences in its *object* – that which is to be destroyed. In the classic Christian Apocalypse, it is not man qua divine creation that is destroyed, but his own creation: the city of man. Nuclear holocaust, in contrast, promises the final extinction of the species. And in the case of Amerindian prophecies, it is neither the universal city of man that is to be annihilated, nor *homo sapiens* the species, but some other social collective that represents the extent and limits of a given *world*. The native American scholar Lawrence Gross (2002), for instance, argues that Native North American communities *already* live in a post-apocalyptic era, their own world having been destroyed several hundred years since. What this comparison makes clear is that ideas of the apocalypse are always linked to a particular moral community constructed (for the purposes of its annihilation) as a necessarily *total* social and conceptual entity, and potentially subject to erasure. Each Apocalypse annihilates a different social object.

It is this relationship between moral community, or social object, and Apocalypse that we propose to explore in this special issue. Do certain forms of moral community “call for” or invite particular forms of Apocalypse? On, to the contrary, does the nature of the perceived threat help to create the threatened community qua object of thought? And, by extension, what are the potential conceptual, ethical and social uses of the Apocalypse? Does the threat of climate change, for instance, open up the possibility of dissolving the boundaries that, in classical Christian ontology, traditionally separated mankind from the rest of creation? Might the idea of a techno-Apocalypse, where humanity is exposed to the murderous violence of silicon-based intelligence, be a subtle means of reaffirming the primacy of the human in a late-modern era populated by human-machine hybrids? Can the “indigeneity” of first peoples be understood as a product of the apocalyptic roll-out of European colonisation? Can one, ultimately, find a way to “dwell” in the Apocalypse, to make a world of it?

This special issue of *Terrain* invites contributors to reflect on these questions using their own empirical material, be it ethnographic or archival, verbal or visual, in order to explore the conceptual underpinnings and social operations of apocalyptic thought.

The journal *Terrain* (<http://terrain.revues.org/>) aims to illuminate the range and diversity of societies both contemporary and modern. It favors rich ethnographic description and striking, even troubling, case-studies in order to shift conventional understandings. The journal is richly illustrated, and aims for the highest academic standards whilst remaining accessible to non-specialists thanks to clarity of presentation and writing.

The special issue welcomes academic articles (of 8000 words), as well as the newly-established genre of “portfolios” - i.e. short essays constructed around a body of images. Finally, short texts (of 4000 words), in the form of descriptive vignettes, may be used to give a feel for archival accounts or direct experience in the field.

Submissions should be addressed to the editors ([terrain.redaction@cns.fr](mailto:terrain.redaction@cns.fr)) by 15<sup>th</sup> June 2018 at the latest.

**Suggested readings:**

Anders, G. 1972. *Endzeit und Zeitenende. Gedanken über die atomare Situation*. C. H. Beck.

Aubin-Boltanski, E & Gauthier, C. (dirs.). 2014. *Penser la fin du monde*. Paris : CNRS Editions.

Foessel, M. 2012. *Après la fin du monde, Critique de la raison apocalyptique*. Paris : Le Seuil.

Gross, Lawrence W. 2002. « The Comic Vision of Anishinaabe Culture and Religion », *The American Indian Quarterly* 26(3): 436-459.

Hall, John R. 2009. *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity*. Malden, Mass.: Polity Press.

Hartog, F. 2014. « L'apocalypse, une philosophie de l'histoire ? ». *Esprit*, juin,(6), 22-32.

Kopenawa, D. & Albert, B. 2013. *The Falling Sky*. Harvard University Press.