

1-1-2013

Après Nous, le Déluge

Gerry Canavan

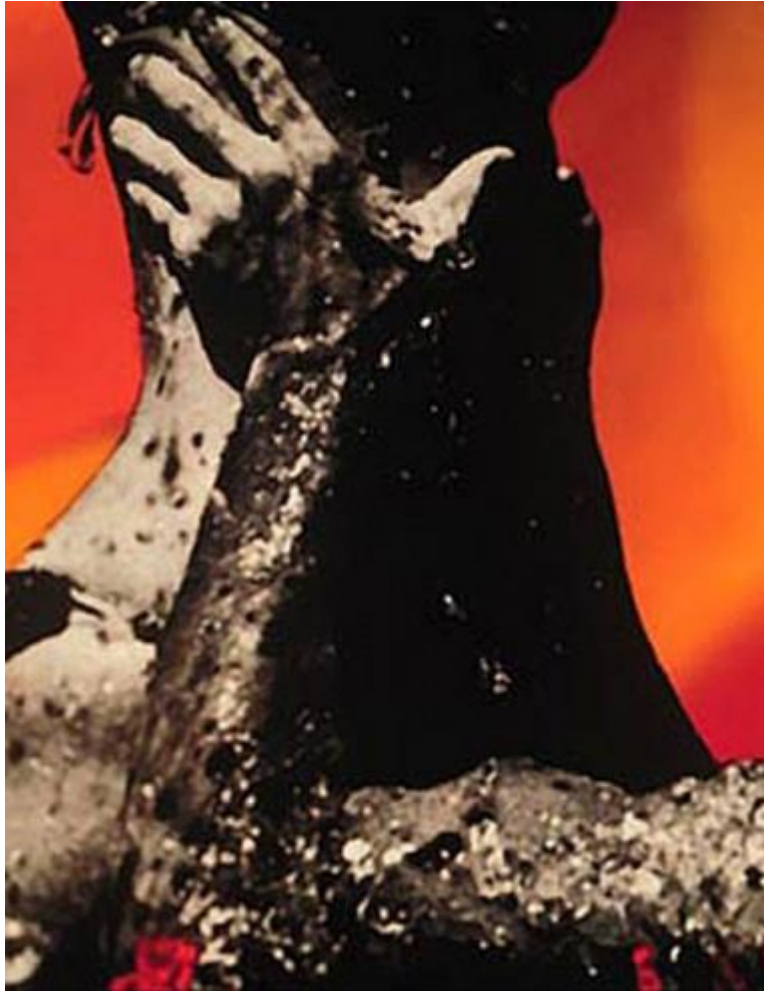
Marquette University, gerard.canavan@marquette.edu

Published version. *Essays and Review*, The New Inquiry (January 2013).

<http://thenewinquiry.com/>. [Publisher Link](#). © The New Inquiry 2013. Used with permission.

Après Nous, le Déluge

By: Gerry Canavan, Marquette University



Richard Prince, Untitled (Sunset), 1981, 1

From our stories, you'd think we were ending the world

Anyone who has studied creative writing has probably come across the pathetic fallacy, the prohibition against reflecting your character's emotional state in his or her surroundings. (*Our hero, devastated by the breakup, walks home alone in the dark, as lightning cracks, and it begins to rain...*) The pathetic fallacy is strictly forbidden. It's cheap, even if it was good enough for Shakespeare; in these enlightened times we know how absolutely indifferent the world is to our feelings and our petty struggles. Indeed, the unflinching recognition of this indifference is arguably the defining characteristic of the modern age: We have physical mechanisms and automatic natural processes where earlier ages had ritual sacrifice, angry gods, and sympathetic magic. "All violent feelings have the same effect," writes John Ruskin, who coined the term *pathetic fallacy* in his 1856 *Modern Painters*; "They produce in us a falseness in all our

impressions of external things.” The truth, of course, is that the external world doesn’t care if we’re happy or sad. It doesn’t care about us at all.

So when the mad king is deviled by the storm in Act III of *King Lear*, we call it plot contrivance. And when the Northeast is crushed by the second hundred-year-flood in two years, we call it a remarkable coincidence. And when scientists tell us that this sort of thing is going to keep happening more and more, as a direct result of ongoing human activity, we call it science fiction. “Let the great gods / That keep this dreadful pudder o’er our heads / Find out their enemies now. Tremble, thou wretch / That hast within thee undivulgèd crimes / Unwhipped of justice.” That’s fine for an old play, or some summer popcorn movie—but of course we know the world can’t really take our sins and give them form.

In the 19th century, when Ruskin was warning against such false impressions of external things, science fiction authors primarily reacted to the radical indifference of the natural world through an overarching mood of existential dread. In part this is attributable to the difference between Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment science: Where Enlightenment figures tended to explore the well-ordered regularity of nature, the post-Enlightenment instead discovers nature’s fragility, its flux. The catastrophism and mass extinctions at the heart of Darwinian evolutionary theory, in particular, produce the unhappy possibility that this fate will someday be visited upon human life as well—and the discovery of entropy, the propensity of all thermodynamic systems on all scales to run down over time, actually makes this final apocalypse a scientific certainty. Regardless of anything we say, do, think, or feel, someday the universe will grow cold, the stars will go out, and everything that has ever or will ever live will be long dead.

Lumping science fiction, horror, and fantasy literatures into a single hybrid genre he calls *fantastika*, John Clute writes of how discoveries ranging from evolution and entropy (in the 19th century) to relativity, ecology, and quantum mechanics (in the 20th) have recast the human race not as the privileged children of God but rather “a species clinging to a ball that may one day spin us off.” This is what Clute calls “the world storm”: the unceasing, vertiginous pulse of a planetary history propelling us faster and faster towards inevitable final ruin. For Clute, horror is the most vital form of *fantastika*, because the feeling at *fantastika*’s core is always precisely the horror of recognition: “It is the task of modern horror to rend the veil of illusion, to awaken us. Horror (or Terror) is sight. Horror (or Terror) is what happens when you find out the future is true.”

Which brings us back to the weather. People forget that H.G. Wells’s *War of the Worlds*, published in 1898, is already a climate change story; the Martians invade Earth because their planet has already begun to grow cool while ours is still lush and warm. But the entropic disaster they face will be our fate, too; the climate crisis that threatens their civilization is only an anticipatory version of the “secular cooling that must someday overtake our planet” as well. This chilly vision of the end of the world—echoing the cold twilight of the earth in the farthest-flung future of Wells’s own *Time Machine*—is repeated in dozens of stories in the pulp era of science fiction. These are bleak attempts to resign ourselves to the indifference of the universe: an almost neurotic recitation of hyperbolic spatial and temporal scales that dwarf the human lifetime and reduce us to a miniscule footnote on a footnote on a footnote.

In John W. Campbell's brutally entropic "Night," from a 1935 issue of *Astounding Stories*, the word 'millions' is repeated over and over again on a single page, in a kind of obsessive compulsive rehearsal of cosmic scale: "the million million million that had been born and lived and died in the countless ages before I was born"; "a thousand billion years before"; "the magnificent, proudly sprawling universe I had known, that flung itself across a million million light years, that flung radiant energy through space by the millions of millions of tons was—gone." In Nat Schachner's "As the Sun Dies," published in the same magazine that same year, the bleary-eyed last survivors of the human race find themselves "buried forever under millions of tons of ice, attached irresistibly to a whirling, frozen orb, doomed to circle eternally around a small dim star through depthless space." One can find the same hopeless, frozen future portrayed in Henry Kirkham's "The End of Time," G. Peyton Wertenbaker's "The Coming of the Ice," Amelia Long Reynolds's "Omega," and many more besides—and this is just the ice ages, before we even come to the planetary collisions, supernovae, superviruses, and extradimensional cosmic accidents that wipe out humanity in dozens more.

In this respect the mad, hopeless predicament inaugurated by the development of the atom bomb comes as something of a perverse relief; if nothing else, it returns to the human race agency over its own destruction. In the famous final scene of 1968's *Planet of the Apes* we find Charlton Heston's astronaut-hero, thousands of years in the future, discovering a half-sunk Statue of Liberty in the desert: "We finally really did it. You maniacs! You blew it up!" Watching the film today one thinks not of nuclear war but of climate change. And what has happened, in fact, is exactly climate change: the implied nuclear war of Apes has transformed the biome, turning New York City into a desert. As John Beck notes of the scene: "Part of the disorientating effect [is] having the quintessential icon of New York City planted in what is clearly a Pacific environment. . . . The West functions in the film as a vision of the post-catastrophe East: after the apocalypse, New York will look like Arizona and California—the East will look like the West *already* looks: blasted, inhospitable, and inhabited by the grotesque after-effects of a horrible but unfathomable history." In the sequel, unbelievably, things get even worse; an even more embittered Heston, mortally wounded and having lost everything, discovers an intact nuclear superweapon capable of destroying the entire planet—and *he* decides to activate it. The planet explodes; everything dies; the franchise goes on for three more films.

Our superweapons threatened to unpredictably detonate at any moment in the future, destroying all we have, and transforming the planet into a radioactive, desertified cinder. Thus the urgent need, expressed by so much leftist science fiction of the Cold War period, to oppose more bombs, more wars. But, as Timothy Morton has noted, the temporality of climate change, the quintessential planetary apocalypse of our moment, is rather different: "Global warming is like a very slow nuclear explosion that nobody even notices is happening. . . . That's the horrifying thing about it: it's like my childhood nightmares came true, even before I was born." In the unhappy geological epoch of the Anthropocene—the name scientists have proposed for the moment human activities begin to be recognizable in the Earth's geological record, the moment visiting aliens or the future's *Cockroach sapiens* will be able to see scrawled in their studies of ice cores and tree rings that *humanity wuz here*—the climate has always already been changed.

The current, massive disruptions in global climate have been caused by the cumulative carbon release of generations of people who were long dead before the problem was even identified, as

well as by ongoing release from the immense networks of energy, production, and distribution that were built and developed in the open landscape of free and unrestricted carbon release—the networks on which contemporary civilization now undeniably depends, but which nobody yet has any idea how to replicate in the absence of carbon burning fossil fuels. Benjamin Kunkel said it best: “The nightmare, in good nightmare fashion, has something absurd and nearly inescapable about it: either we will begin running out of oil, or we won’t.” That is: either we have Peak Oil, and the entire world suffers a tumultuous, uncontrolled transition to post-cheap-oil economics, or else there’s still plenty of fossil fuels left for us to permanently destroy the global climate through continued excess carbon emissions.

Few cultural documents depict this moment of confrontation with ecological disaster more vividly than the opening sequence of the 1973 overpopulation disaster film *Soylent Green*, which depicts a miniature history of America. We begin with a quiet classical piano score over a sepia-tinted montage depicting 19th century settlement of the American West, in which the wide-open natural spaces of the frontier seem to dwarf their human inhabitants. But soon something begins to change. Suddenly there are too many people in the frame, then far too many people; cars and then airplanes begin to appear; cities grow huge. New instruments enter the musical track: trumpets, trombones, saxophones; the cacophony begins to speed. Now humans are dwarfed not by nature but by the ceaseless replication of their own consumer goods—replicating the logic of the assembly line, the screen becomes filled with countless identical cars. We see jammed highways, overflowing landfills, smog-emitting power plants, flashes of war, riots, pollution, and graves. The sequence goes on and on, using vertical pans to give the sense of terrible accumulation, of a pile climbing higher and higher. Finally we reach the end—the music slows back to its original piano score, combined with an out-of-harmony synthesizer, over a few sepia-tinted images of that same natural world in ruin, filled with trash. The end of the sequence locates this site of ruin in the future; New York, 2022, population 40,000,000. But of course these nightmarish images are all photographs from the film’s present: the disaster had already happened, even decades ago, it was already too late.

As the narrative begins, we see the world this crisis has created. A loudspeaker announcing which fraction of the city’s residents will be allowed to use the streets for the next hour, while on the tiny TV in the apartment of (again!) Charlton Heston they announce that free consumer choice has been replaced with “Soylent Green,” which is a food in such short supply that it can only be distributed on Tuesdays—capitalism’s free-market economy ultimately generating its dialectical opposite, central planning. One character explains why Soylent Green is necessary:

You know, when I was a kid, food was food! Until our scientists polluted the soil... decimated plant and animal life. Why, you could buy meat anywhere. Eggs, they had. Real butter. Fresh lettuce in the stores! How can anything survive in a climate like this? A heat wave all year long! The greenhouse effect! Everything is burning up!

The ad claims Soylent Green (looking like a bright green tofu cube) is a revolutionary foodstuff “harvested from plankton from the oceans of the world,” but—as anyone who has ever heard of

this film knows—the true horror is that Soylent Green is really made of people. American consumerism is forced in the end to eat even itself.

In contemporary ecological science fiction we find a sense that there is nothing left to do but somehow accommodate ourselves as best we can to ongoing and effectively permanent catastrophe. In *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, a widely loved ecological anime from Japanese filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki, the eras of both green forests and global capitalism are in the distant past, lost in the mists of thousands of years. The legacy of a final war called the Seven Days of Fire is a snarl of toxic jungles and mutant insects, in the gaps of which scattered human beings still struggle to survive. Paolo Bacigalupi's stories of the future see their quasi-human and non-human protagonists exploring polluted landscapes in search of new types of beauty (if any are possible) in a world where unchecked capitalism has completely destabilized nature. In *Daybreakers*, a literally vampiric capitalism has run almost completely out of blood; in *Avatar Earth's* last and only hope is magic rocks. And in John Brunner's utterly apocalyptic *The Sheep Look Up*—arguably the best of these texts, if only because it so unflinchingly shows us the worst—even this bare consolation is denied us as a parade of ever-worsening environmental horrors poisons every aspect of our lives, and yet nothing ever changes.

The logical endpoint of such narratives generates again that final position on the spectrum of apocalyptic possibility: the Quiet Earth, a planet that is devoid of human life entirely. The negative charge of the Quiet Earth is the elegiac fantasy of an entirely dead planet—now, a murdered planet—in which the human species has left behind nothing but death before finally killing even itself. We watch such shows for entertainment: *Life After People*, *The World Without Us*, *Aftermath*, *The Future Is Wild*. Both Terry Gilliam's *Twelve Monkeys* and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* see humanity deliberately murdered by mad scientists in the name of saving the rest of the planet before it is too late; in *WALL-E*—a movie marketed to children!—the world capitalism makes is a total loss, best left for the cockroaches and the robots; These blighted visions of ruined, empty worlds recall—and transform—Percy Bysshe Shelley's 1818 poem "Ozymandias" as an anticipatory memory of Earth's barren, ruined future. In the desert of a "distant land" stands the toppled monument to the arrogant king of a lost civilization that believed both he and it to be immortal. But only the head and legs remain, half-sunk in the desert, like Apes's Liberty; all else has turned to dust. The "lone and level sands" that "round the decay of that colossal wreck," once the thriving cities and once-verdant landscapes of Ozymandias's empire, have been erased by totalizing desertification that, in the present moment, now inevitably suggests to us the bleak endpoint of global climate change. But of course, climate change is the total package, giving us not just deserts but all our fantastic imagined weather apocalypses simultaneously: floods for the coasts, deserts for the breadbaskets, wildfires for the forests, ice for a post-Gulf Stream Europe. Look upon our works, ye Pathetic Fallacy, and despair. Tell me again the external world doesn't notice us.

"When we contemplate ruins," Christopher Woodward has said, "we contemplate our own future." The apocalypse is thereby transformed into a memory, an event which is yet to come but which has also somehow, paradoxically, already happened. Behind the endless, neurotic rehearsal of the debate over whether or not climate change is "real" lurks the much more depressed sense that it doesn't even matter either way—even in the increasingly unlikely event there's time, we still won't act to save ourselves. Three months after Hurricane Sandy, eight

years after Hurricane Katrina, 25 years after James Hansen testified before Congress, 40 years after the development of a scientific consensus around global warming in the 1970s, 70 years after climate models in the 1950s first began to point to the problem, 107 years after Svante Arrhenius first modeled the greenhouse effect in 1896, we still sit and wait to see what happens. It's as if we've been practicing the end of everything for so long we're relieved, or even exhilarated, to see it finally become real. The market has spoken, and the media, and the voters: we'll continue to do nothing, eagerly surrender to our collective death drive, freely author our own collapse. Perhaps Lear would have thought it all a bit too on-the-nose—but now our suicidal urges and our selfishness and our sickening disregard for the future come back to us as hurricanes and heat-waves. Let a thousand science fictional panoramas bloom: the Statue of Liberty frozen over, toppled in the sand, neck-deep in water. Hollywood on fire. Texas cracked with drought. Hundred-year storms every other year. *Après nous, la glace, le feu, le désert, le déluge.*