Essay

The trouble with apocalyptic fictions

Why imagining the end of the world is easier than imaging saving it

By Rebecca Tamás

As a teenager, one of my favourite films was the schlocky 2004 Hollywood eco-thriller The Day After Tomorrow directed by Roland Emmerich. The film follows a brave (and hunky) paleoclimatologist Jack Hall, played by Dennis Quaid, as he tries to warn the government that climate change could bring about a global ice age.

No one wants to listen to brave and hunky Jack, so the powers that be do nothing to avert disaster. As Jack predicts, a massive storm system develops in the northern hemisphere, splitting into three superstorms above Canada, Scotland and Siberia. The storms pull frozen air from the upper troposphere into their centre, flash-freezing anything caught in their eyes with temperatures below minus 101C.

A new ice age begins in a matter of hours. In the meantime, we follow Jack's brave (and hunky) son Sam, played by Jake Gyllenhaal, as he and his friends try to survive the sudden freezing temperatures and surging tides hitting New York.

I was 15 years old in 2004. Considering the film now, I finally understand why a production full of bad dialogue, ridiculous science and underpowered action scenes captivated me. What The Day After Tomorrow offered to an environmentally committed teenager already terrified of global warming was a fantasy of completion.

As storms rip through the world of the film, there are only two outcomes for the characters: die or survive. Many are lost, but for those who make it, there is no climate crisis left to worry about. Climate change is "done". The audience may weep as waves overtake a familiar-looking world. But by the end of a 124-minute movie, the threat is over. The sun shines brighter than before.

Apocalyptic climate fantasies often reveal a deep desire to simply get it over with. We can imagine the end of the world much more easily than we can imagine saving it. In this kind of fiction, the inequalities of human society, the plant and animal extinctions, the cruelties and complications that define our real climate crisis, disappear. Such narratives satisfy our craving to wipe the slate clean, to begin from zero, without all the mess and suffering and personal sacrifice that climate action will demand of us.

As a young, earnest environmentalist, I found myself obsessed by stories of climate apocalypse. I remember sitting cross-legged on the floor of the sitting room after school, as my mum explained a news segment to me about the hole in the ozone layer and how it had been caused by man-made chemicals that were polluting the atmosphere and that the world was now urgently phasing them out. Until then, I had always thought of nature as something eternal, something endlessly resilient and cyclical. The realisation that it was vulnerable, that we as human beings could put it at risk, made my stomach lurch.

It was this dawning sense of responsibility and terror that made stories like The Day After Tomorrow attractive as I grew up. As ecological problems multiplied, I hoped that by imagining the worst fate possible for the planet, people might be scared into changing their behaviour.

However, over time, as the boom in apocalyptic films, TV shows, and novels accelerated, tales of environmental woe began to dispirit me. I felt limp and hopeless. I found none of the energy or creativity I might need to challenge, or think deeply about, the crisis engulfing our world. As a teenager I struggled with depression. Like most mental illness, it was caused by multiple factors, but it was, I think, exacerbated by the sense of bleak apocalypse in the

stories I sought out. Novels such as JG Ballard's unsettling The Drowned World and Maggie Gee's devastating The Ice People, where the collapse has already happened, and people try to survive in the ruins of the world that was. There was without doubt bravery and resilience to be found in these narratives, but there was also a sense that destruction was unavoidable, inescapable. The stories I engaged with, which I thought might help spur me towards action, were actually severing my connection to hope.

The Harvard literary critic Martin Puchner's recent book Literature for a Changing Planet argues that the stories we tell have the power to change how we respond to the crisis in the natural world. For Puchner, literature, and stories more widely, do not only respond to how we live, but also create those very forms of living.
For him, most of the world's stories, without meaning to, perpetuate an extractive form of life on earth that sees nature as a resource, merely fuel for human life that we can take at will. He goes so far as to suggest that "literature [is]… complicit with the resource extracting way of life that has accelerated in the last two hundred years". He saves particular criticism for Hollywood disaster movies, whose apocalyptic endings "seem to do nothing but induce paralysis and complacency, not action". Netflix's 2021 eco-thriller Don't Look Up seems to illustrate his arguments: offering an ending (spoiler alert) that showcases total planetary destruction via meteorite as a clunky metaphor for our inability to confront climate change. But the stories Puchner attacks aren't only disheartening. They're also unrealistically black and white, suppressing the complicated, open-ended nature of our Anthropocene epoch, where suffering is spread out unequally and reality is changing in ways we can't predict. Stories of annihilation are, for me, the most pernicious narratives of all. Their visions of suffering are so extreme that we dissociate from them, becoming numb and falling into the complacency Puchner describes. Until we can unravel the way in which our culture reverts to fantasies of apocalypse whenever climate change is mentioned, we will struggle to engage in the action that we need to change things. Narratives of the end times appear not only in our fiction, but in the wider dialogues around climate collapse. In 2019, the lauded American novelist Jonathan Franzen wrote an article in The New Yorker titled, "What If We Stopped Pretending?", arguing:

The climate apocalypse is coming. To prepare for it, we need to admit that we can't prevent it… All-out war on climate change made sense only as long as it was winnable. Once you accept that we've lost it, other kinds of action take on greater meaning. Preparing for fires and floods and refugees is a directly pertinent example.

Franzen believes that hope is a distraction from the action we could take, preparing for the effects of climate change, rather than attempting to avert it. But this kind of thinking makes no sense. It is of course perfectly possible to mitigate the effects of climate change at the same time as trying not to let it get worse, but that is a more complicated and more difficult task. "Call me a pessimist or call me a humanist, but I don't see human nature fundamentally changing anytime soon," he continues. Reading this, one might ask, "And what is human nature?" A nature that leads us to pile up plastic and exploit oil as the world burns, or a nature that leads us to risk arrest by shutting down a London road for a climate protest? Might "human nature" in fact, contain the potential for both? And might this contradictory reality be much more difficult, though more worthwhile, to reckon with than depressing, conveniently straightforward despair?

To consider real climate action and the complicated nature of climate change itself is exhausting, emotionally and mentally. It asks us to rethink not only our own daily lives, but the structures of our cultures, our societies and our politics. No wonder then that so often calls to action are replaced with simplistic images of total, and swift, annihilation. Images that are painful, yet ask little of us.

There are also darker undertones to these apocalyptic narratives. They can suggest not only the desire to simplify our problems, but a sense that perhaps this collapse is what we deserve, a punishment that will force us to rethink our corrupt and decadent natures. In their 2009 “Dark Mountain” manifesto, the British environmental writers Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine wrote:

It is, it seems, our civilisation’s turn to experience the inrush of the savage and the unseen; our turn to be brought up short by contact with untamed reality. There is a fall coming.

“Dark Mountain” rightly confronts the fact that human beings must reckon with their relationship with nature. But the project’s focus on an inevitable fall from grace that will punish us for our mistakes broadcasts something like bitter satisfaction. Kingsnorth and Hine write that “Secretly, we all think we are doomed: even the politicians think this; even the environmentalists,” as if they have some omniscient insight into the minds of all humanity. The smug assumption is that everyone has already given up, so why not you, the reader, too?

This perspective, like Franzen’s, often comes from those who are privileged – white, western, financially stable, not in the midst of flood or fire. It is very easy to accept that you’re “doomed” and that there’s no point trying to avert or disrupt climate change, when your home is not being washed away, when your children are not acutely malnourished because of drought. For many at the sharp end of environmental destruction, especially indigenous communities and those in the global south, hope is not a choice, it is a necessity. This year, 33 million people in Pakistan – about half the population of the UK – were affected by unprecedented floods that submerged large parts of their country. More than 1,600 have died, according to the Red Cross, including some 500 children. Citizens of the countries most vulnerable to climate change do not have the luxury of waiting for humanity’s final fall. They need us to work together, pressuring our governments to avert the higher global temperatures that will only increase their suffering.

The west is not immune, though it is perhaps easier, for some, to pretend we are. As Hurricane Ian raged across Florida last week, residents in some areas were unaware of, or ignored, mandatory evacuation orders. “We were expecting just tropical storm winds,” one woman told The New York Times. After her house flooded, she and her boyfriend stood on chairs on their porch, screaming for help, with an SOS sign made of cardboard. More than 80 people are known to have died as a result of the storm.

Real climate destruction is partial, patchy and ongoing, unfair and unpredictable. Most of us do not want to sit with that. It is hugely daunting to even begin to think about what facing such destruction might ask of us. For writers such as Franzen, Kingsnorth and Hine, it is easier to call time on hope and sit back and await the apocalypse, than it is to confront the unbalanced and unpredictable struggle we find ourselves in.

The favourite dystopian novel of my youth, Cormac McCarthy’s 2006 novel The Road, also followed a dispiriting pattern of inescapable doom. Many consider it the defining

environmental text of modernity. The narrative follows a father and son as they move through an ash-covered, barren America some years after an extinction event. As they travel south, away from the biting cold, they meet marauders, thieves and cannibals. The father is fiercely protective of his son, but at the end is wounded and dies, unable to protect him any longer. There is a glimmer of hope, as the boy is adopted by another family that promises to take care of him. The Road is a much more thoughtful and sophisticated work than The Day After Tomorrow, one that gives real attention to what humans have lost with the collapse of non-human nature:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow… On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again.

Despite The Road's lyrical sensitivity, it shares something important with Emmerich's film. In both, the calamity happens, then ends. Whatever disaster brought about The Road's extinction event was sudden – exploding, destroying and then completing – unlike the slow unfolding of centuries of climate change. It is a form of destruction that, horrible as it is, we can imagine, one that appeals to our desire for finality and completion.

But nature does not move at our pace. It asks us to conceive of epochs and outcomes beyond our own lifetimes. Trying to confront climate change, which is not only slow, but diffuse, and happening within multiple ecosystems and weather systems at different rates, is profoundly difficult. To do so we must engage in an act of imagination that is huge, multifaceted and non-linear. Stories of sudden apocalypse appeal to our human-scale sense of what a disaster should be – something that is devastating, but which has a clearly demarcated beginning and an end. The knotty, intricate actuality of our current disaster is much harder to make sense of.

The writer Andrew O'Hagan called The Road "the first great masterpiece of the globally warmed generation", and the ecological activist George Monbiot described the novel as "possibly the most important environmental book ever written". It remains a great work of literature. But these critics see more than brilliant writing. They see a stark warning in the book's ravaged earth, and hope its terrifying vision has the potential to shake people out of apathy.

That's exactly how I used to read the book myself, pressing it urgently into a friend's hands as an undergraduate. I now think the risk is that the exact opposite happens – terror calcifies into deadened despair. The novel leaves us with a version of environmental collapse that is bizarrely, dangerously comforting, because it seems to suggest that there is nothing left we can do, that giving up is not only the easy way out, but our only option.

The stories that obsessed my young mind indulge in maudlin and painful fantasies of rugged men (and it is usually men) facing sudden climate apocalypse, rather than making space to confront the destructive and exploitative ways we have treated non-human nature. Such fantasies avoid not only the suffering that has already been inflicted, but also the genuine hope that might come from imagining a world in which we live more equitably with the natural world. Hope is not merely about survival, but the recognition that a more balanced relationship with nature would make for a more joyful, more satisfying and more whole human experience. Hope comes from collective action; from putting pressure on governments and fossil fuel companies to change, rather than hoping they will. The hole in

the ozone layer, that spectre of my childhood, shrank after drastic, concerted action by governments around the world to curtail the use of CFCs. Climate change is in every way a more complicated challenge. But we can commit to hope by imagining new futures and telling their stories, rather than revelling solely in dreams of the end.

Rebecca Tamás is a poet and author of “Strangers: Essays on the Human and Nonhuman,” published by Makina Books.