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Post-Human Aesthetics of Apocalypse

Abstract: This paper aims to illustrate the transformation of point of view in apocalyptic/dystopian genre films, abandoning the lamenting tone in favor of other species. It also intends to exhibit the aesthetic strategies conforming to the shifting tone of these genre films towards a post-human stance. It can be argued that the conjuncture which is shaped by several coinciding narratives of crisis from the Anthropocene to the more recent political crisis of rising Populism led Posthumanist discourse gain prevalence. The paper will try to link the shifting tone of genre films with the lineages of Posthumanist discourse and contemporary collective anxieties. Through analyzing the voice of narrative and its visual language, this paper will attempt to layout significant characteristics of post-human aesthetics in apocalyptic/dystopian genre films.

Keyword: post-human; genre cinema; dystopian films; apocalyptic films; eschatological narratives.

In times of crisis, eschatological narratives tend to proliferate and flare like symptoms during allergy season. In the form of dystopias, horrors, catastrophic or apocalyptic films, these narratives on the ultimate destiny of humanity or the end of the world reflect our contemporary anxieties, fears, and concerns. In the face of an acute and inevitable struggle of life and death with a tangible foe, and a prospect for better days ahead, moral narratives accommodating rightful heroes help us confront our anxieties. However, uncertain, pervasive and chronic crises, lacking a certain nemesis and accompanying pessimistic future projections, lead to despair and cynicism.

While we are experiencing a simultaneous political-economic crisis, ecological crisis and a deeper existential crisis, our apocalyptic narratives and dystopias are deviating from an anthropocentric point of view. On one hand, feeding on sores of global capitalism, social inequalities, migration waves, and rising reactionary populism, a crisis of democracy is sprawling, and it is leading to illiberal or authoritarian regimes, and to one-man rules trivializing democratic institutions and civil rights. On the other hand, a moral and existential crisis is unfolding in the face of ecological crisis, natural

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catastrophes, and sustainability problems. The unpredictable outcomes of biogenetic revolution, the advancements in artificial intelligence, and raising awareness of animal rights are increasingly habituating us to the idea that humans are just another biological species living on Earth. In this conjuncture setting, apocalyptic/dystopian genre films are growing indifferent to the catastrophe of humanity, and even celebrating its extinction, as an opportunity for a new beginning.

This shift is very symptomatic in terms of marking a Posthumanist turn in popular culture. Posthumanism is an epistemological critique of the modernist definition of humanity and humanist ideologies, and an ontological reconsideration of the very definition of human. It has inherited the critique of the Enlightenment and modernity which traces back to the post-war era when the critical thinkers Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer coined the term "dialectic of enlightenment". According to critical thinkers, the Enlightenment and its call for a universal idea of humanity was bound to be totalitarian and its rationality was unavoidably self-destructive.[1] Thus, Fascism was not a deviation but a possible trajectory of Western rationality. Through the same logic, Walter Benjamin concluded that "there is not a document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."[2]

It was Michel Foucault, who distilled the critique of the Enlightenment and modernity to achieve an epistemological critique of the concept of humanity. According to him, the idea of universal humanity – although subject to change during the course of history – was suppressing plurality and ignoring heterogeneity in favor of a totalitarian definition of humanity.[3] Foucault, in *The Order of Things* reminded us that "man is an invention of recent date" and he warned, or rather heralded that perhaps humanity as a concept or a category is nearing its end: "Man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea."[4] Doubtlessly, after Foucault, the idea of universal humanity has come under fire for being normative, totalitarian, colonialist, sexist, speciesist and bearing other forms of exclusivism.

While a critique of modernity in critical theory and later in postmodernist thought laid the theoretical ground for Posthumanist turn, thanks to apprehensions concerning technological advancements in biogenetics and artificial intelligence, ontological reconsiderations of human grew gradually. Being prone to diseases, having limited intellectual, physical, emotional skills or a limited life-span, humankind has biological inadequacies, therefore it is bound to be displaced by its own creations of supermen; biologically enhanced humans, machine-human hybrids, or cyborgs.

Furthermore, signs of ecological crisis and problems of 'sustainability' – a term defining our relationship with nature in business management terminology – supported

[1] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 4.

[2] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the philosophy of history," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hanna Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York. Schocken Books, 2007), 256.

[3] Michael Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 32–50.

[4] Michael Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon, 1971), 387.

a contemporary crisis narrative where human beings are a doomed species. Tightly linked with a new morality raised on animal rights awareness and veganism, this narrative had created a reactionary stance with a certain misanthropic tone. Questioning the central role of humanity in the universe in favor of other species – this narrative is in a way surpassing the Foucauldian questioning of universal humanity. But it also lays the blames of global capitalism and its late neoliberal mode on the entirety of humankind. Accordingly, we are a greedy species, exhausting and contaminating the Earth. No wonder if the apocalypse is near; and possible extinction of humanity would be an auspicious beginning for the rest of the universe.

Slavoj Žižek attempts to link this apocalyptic narrative to the global capitalist system instead of a formerly-denied universal conception of humanity. As the repercussions of global capitalism, he mentions "the ecological crisis, the consequences of the biogenetic revolution, the imbalances within the system itself and the explosions of social divisions and exclusions".[5] Then he uses the Kübler-Ross model which is popularly known as the 'five stages of grief'.[6] Accordingly, society's first reaction to these repercussions is "ideological denial, then explosions of anger at the injustices of the new world order, attempts at bargaining, and when this fails, depression and withdrawal set in. Finally, after passing through this zero-point we no longer perceive it as a threat, but as the chance for a new beginning."[7]

Some recent apocalyptic films abandoning the pessimistic tones of dystopian narratives and embracing the apocalypse as a new beginning call to mind that we already passed beyond the zero-point. *The Girl with All the Gifts* (Dir. Colm McCarthy, 2016) cherishes an apocalyptic story with a utopian discourse and aesthetics. With a hazy atmosphere and warm filter colors, it portrays a blazing apocalypse where a mysterious fungal disease eradicates humanity as we know it. Airborne fungal spores transform human beings into flesh-eating 'hungries' who are stripped from reason, emotions and the notion of language. A small group of hybrid children however, born to diseased mothers, crave human flesh but they still retain the ability to think, feel and communicate. In this dystopic environment where airborne fungal spores forbid humans to exist, only those hybrids immune to disease have the ability to survive. The heroine of the story, a little girl named Melanie (portrayed by Sennia Nanua) is not only a hybrid of human and 'hungry', but also European and the migrant – civilization and 'the barbarians'. With all the gifts and abilities she possesses, she embodies the hope of a posthuman life on earth.

On one hand, we are disturbed and worried by the idea that liberal democracy, national and international institutions, and civilization, which we owe to the legacy of the Enlightenment and modernity may come to an end. On the other hand, we are convinced that because of the flaws of the way humanity has organized itself, and the way humans interact with their environment, it ought to happen already. That's why,

[5] Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2011), x.

[6] Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (London, New York: Routledge, 1973).

[7] Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, xi, xii.

in the film, we spurn the overzealous attempts of the scientist, and her means (cruel experiments on hybrid children) to save humanity. Throughout the story, Melanie comes to terms with herself and moves from being a lesser being, a mongrel which fails to meet what requires to be fully human (in this case, being able to curb one's appetite to eat other humans), to self-realization as a different species, a non-human, which has more capacity, which is more fit to survive. Instead of consenting to the humans, self-consciousness leads Melanie to act for herself and her kind (*für sich,* in Hegelian/Marxist terminology), as a conscious actor in history. Why then would she loyally sacrifice herself for the continuation of another – weaker – species?

The assumed audience is also convinced that Melanie should not be handed over to the selfishly humanist doctor. We resent the scientist's indifference to the right of a hybrid girl to live. She should be saved from being dissected by the scientist, even though the only cure to save the human race from absolute extinction is dependent on the vaccine to be produced through her sacrifice. The readiness of the assumed audience here, to accept non-humans' rights to live at the expense of the entire human race is stunning. This is an eschatological narrative with an assumed audience entirely disregarding the extinction of human beings.

Here the vaccine works as a key plot device utilized as a means of humanity's salvation and Melanie's self-realization. Taking into account the alarmingly growing skepticism about vaccination and modern medicine, this device works perfectly to persuade the audience that the scientist is the villain in the story. After all, we do not obediently listen to scientists anymore. The anti-vaccine movement is gaining momentum, along with a wider, anti-intellectualist populist trend, and a new fundamentalism which deploys a vulgarized Foucauldian critique of modernism, particularly through the notions of 'power/knowledge' and 'disciplining of the body' as an entrenching tool to defend a reactionary skepticism about science and modern medicine.

Once the menacing scientist has been eliminated, Melanie's teacher remains as the sole specimen of the battered humanity. We see her stuck in an airproof cabin, an old mobile lab which looks like an animal cage in a zoo, or a prison cell. She cannot leave the cabin since the air is not respirable for her anymore. Behind the cabin's window, she tutors the children of the new kind. Her life will end when her limited resources run out. But the wild children will form a new society. In the final scene, we see the hybrid girl as her eyes are sparkling with hope. The camera captures her smiling, from a lower angle like in utopian and optimist early Soviets films. In response to her tutor, she confidently delivers her *double entendre*: "There'll be lots of time", enough to listen to stories from the last remnant of the antiquity and to build a new future. The sun illuminates the ruins of the city above a clear sky for the first time through the film. The haze seems to be gone, promising the upcoming hopeful days for a new society and we witness that hope exists in the absence of us.

War for the Planet of the Apes (dir. Matt Reeves, 2017) concludes in a similar manner. A viral disease increases the intelligence of apes while it kills most humans. Even in the face of total extinction, humans do not cease wars. They fight against apes

and also against each other. At the end of the skirmish between two warring parties, an avalanche triggered by the victory cheering of soldiers consumes the last remnants of humanity while apes manage to climb up to treetops and save themselves from the snow. What brings the total annihilation of human beings, the wrath of nature, as a response to the imprudent cheers after a Pyrrhic victory, deters the assumed audience from lamenting the extinction of humanity. The film does not linger on the carnage. It promptly abandons the suffocated human beings and focuses on the ape survivors. The next scene depicts an ape exodus, which brings them away from freezing winter landscape to a temperate lush valley. We watch the sun illuminating the land with warm tones, for the first time in the film, timely – as it happened in *The Girl with All the Gifts* – right after the disappearance of humans. The Planet of the Apes series is considered by critics as a liberal allegory of racial conflict which also has been built on anxieties concerning the Cold War and nuclear apocalypse. Nevertheless, what started in 1968 as a dystopian and apocalyptic film series eventually abandons the dark and pessimistic approach to an apocalypse and human downfall. It now rather embraces a utopian tone, celebrating the effort of the apes to form a new society and to claim the earth – now freed of human beings – as their home.

Conclusion

Posthumanist discourse has several loosely connected lineages. It has been established by the epistemological questioning of the universality of humanity in Western thought. Questioning the boundaries between humans and the animals,[8] the "entire field of the living, or rather to the life/death relation",[9] has added an ontological aspect to this reconsideration. The ontological questioning is frequently accompanied by the need to stress the biological inadequacies of the human, to conclude "the decentering of the human in relation to either evolutionary, ecological, or technological coordinates."[10] Y. N. Harari's recent best-seller *Sapiens,* which accounts a biological-determinist history of humanity, successfully lodges in this strain and bridges it with futuristic narratives. *Sapiens* concludes with the demise of humanity due to genetic engineering, cyborg engineering and engineering non-organic life practices, a typical motif in Posthuman literature, extending back to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Futuristic narratives depicting a post-human world in literature and popular culture constitute another Posthumanist lineage with an emphasis on hybridity through all kinds of accented humanities and particularly the cyborg figure; a hybrid of machine and organism which blurs the boundaries of what it means to be human,

[8] Étienne Balibar, "Racism and Nationalism," trans. Chris Turner, in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, ed. Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (London: Verso, 1991), 57.

[9] Jacques Derrida, "Violence against Animals," in *For What Tomorrow…: A Dialogue*, by Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004), 63.

[10] Cary Wolfe, *What is posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xvi.

and threatens the idea of "original unity"[11] or "ontological hygiene"[12] of humanity in western tradition.

These lineages of Posthumanist discourse have existed for a while now. Perhaps what's new in the landscape is a substantial and persistent crisis of global capitalism, the growing indignation it creates and an invasive populist wave absorbing the resentments like a black hole. Without the prospect of an imagined alternative to the dominant mode of production, however – be it in the form of a utopia or a political program – the critical stance itself is doomed to end in despair and grow politically sterile, cynical, nihilist and – even worse – misanthropic. In other words, it channels the anger emanated from global capitalism towards society, and eventually the entirety of humankind. In the face of systemic crisis, we are urged to discard human-centered ideologies, abandon the narrative of great humanity, and taint the humanist ideals either as naive and outmoded, or straightforwardly barbaric. Let alone lamentation, the odd celebratory tone of apocalyptic films should be related with this languish. The effectual critique of humanist ideologies took down their intrinsic hope and utopian thought, too. Fredric Jameson someone saying "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism."[13] Maybe to reverse this suggestion, we need new utopias before facing the end of the world.

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[11] Donna J. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 8.

[12] Elaine L. Graham, *Representations of the Post/Human: Monsters, aliens, and others in popular culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 20.

[13] Fredric Jameson, "Future city," *New Left Review* 21 (2003): 76.

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