

**DRAFT**

## *Chapter Eight*

# **Eco-Apocalypse**

*Environmentalism, Political Alienation, and  
Therapeutic Agency*

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*If apocalypse is an event the script of which is already written, in what sense do human beings participate in apocalypse?*<sup>1</sup>

For some analysts, today's representations of apocalypse are simply the latest version of a "pervasive sense of doom" that has characterized human civilization for millennia.<sup>2</sup> For others, in the context of current environmental problems, a sense of impending disaster expresses a scientifically supported assessment of today's "risk society." Anthony Giddens argues that "[d]oomsday is no longer a religious concept, a day of spiritual reckoning, but a possibility imminent in our society and economy."<sup>3</sup> Our argument is that the current fascination with the end of the world is best understood neither as a near-timeless feature of human culture nor as a reasoned response to objective environmental problems. Rather it is driven by unconscious fantasy; the symbolic expression of an alienation from political subjectivity, characteristic of a historically specific period in the life of post-Cold War societies. With the script of the real apocalypse already written through scientific projections, how do environmental discourse and popular culture represent people? We will first consider recent critiques of the use of apocalypticism in environmental discourse, then examine elite uses of eco-apocalypse in political discourse, and finally discuss two films that envisage a world destroyed by catastrophic climate change: *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *The Age of Stupid* (2009).

## ENVIRONMENTAL APOCAPHILIA AND ITS CRITICS

Apocalyptic thinking is seen as useful by some environmentalists<sup>4</sup> but is also often viewed as problematic for various reasons. Sometimes it is rejected simply because it is inaccurate, as in Ian Lovelock's acknowledgment that he was too alarmist about "Gaia's revenge."<sup>5</sup> More often what the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) think tank describes as an "alarmist repertoire," characterized by an "inflated or extreme lexicon," an "urgent tone and cinematic codes," and a "quasi-religious register of death and doom," is seen as ineffective or even counterproductive since it offers only a "counsel of despair."<sup>6</sup> This is not to say, of course, that apocalyptic constructions of climate change no longer feature prominently in public discourse: as the IPPR suggests, the "sensationalism and connection with the unreality of Hollywood films" that such apocalypticism involves may be "secretly thrilling," a form of "climate porn."<sup>7</sup> Unlike religious conceptions of apocalypse, the environmentalist version involves no moment of transcendence or redemption. Pascal Bruckner argues:

The Christian Apocalypse presented itself as a revelation, a passage in to another temporal order, whereas this apocalypse reveals nothing, it issues the final judgment: pure apocalypse. No promise of redemption, just an ideal for survivors, an "epidemic of remorse."<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, contrasting the Judeo-Christian tradition with what he calls the "Hollywood-informed formula" of eco-apocalypse, Mark Levene notes that the latter "provides an uncanny reflection of the workings of our 'normative' Western state and societal organization."<sup>9</sup> [AQ: Please provide a page number for this quote.] While some (scientific) elite may be cast as saviors, "the role available to the majority of humanity is nothing more than as passive onlookers."<sup>9</sup> The apocalypse ushers in nondemocratic social transformation.

In this sense, as Erik Swyngedouw argues, environmentalism can be understood as postpolitical, reinforcing "processes of depoliticization and the socio-political status quo."<sup>10</sup> Rather than offering any historic transformation or metaphysical salvation, environmental apocalypticism is "an expression of the current post-political and post-democratic condition," in which "ideological or dissensual contestation and struggles are replaced by techno-managerial planning, expert management and administration."<sup>11</sup> One might think of the way that international climate summits purport to decide "the future we want,"<sup>12</sup> outside of any democratic debate about or mechanism of accountability for that future, as confirming the accuracy of this account. An antipathy to what Swyngedouw calls "the properly political"<sup>13</sup> is not an accidental or superficial aspect of contemporary environmentalism: in its insistence that

the future human society must be guided by (the science of) climate change, it perforce closes off any space for democratic debate or disagreement.

In characterizing environmentalism as a “new opium for the masses,” Swyngedouw draws on the work of Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou, both of whom make the same point.<sup>14</sup> Yet a very similar argument was made more than thirty years previously by Jean Baudrillard, who argued in 1970 that environmentalism was “a new ‘opium of the people’.”<sup>15</sup> Baudrillard put forward a traditionally Marxist ideology-critique in which he compared environmentalism to a “witch-hunt” in that it attempted to unite antagonistic social classes in a “new crusade” against a mystified threat by “shouting apocalypse.” “Nothing better than a touch of ecology and catastrophe to unite the social classes,” he remarked caustically. **[AQ: Please provide a source/page number for this quote.]** It is a powerful critique—perhaps even more compelling than more recent iterations of the argument. Yet it no longer seems accurate to think of visions of eco-apocalypse as papering over political divisions that threaten to burst through at any moment, nor to think of this as an elite strategy to silence dissent and suppress demands for social change (as sometimes implied by Swyngedouw and Žižek).

Whereas Baudrillard was probably correct, in 1970, to argue that environmentalism was a “therapeutic mythology” that masked real “social contradictions,” we claim that today environmentalism draws on an individuated, therapeutic ethos to provide a “solution” for the loss of modernist political agency. Since the end of the Cold War, Western societies have increasingly made use of therapeutically derived understandings of the self in order to understand and communicate with each other,<sup>16</sup> giving expression to Pascal Bruckner’s “epidemic of remorse.” For example, the psycho-social scholar Paul Hoggett identifies redemptive and survivalist variants to apocalyptic narrative, which he claims are different manic attempts for fending off despair, manifested in the split and simplified polarization of the two opposing sides in the environmentalist debate.<sup>17</sup> In making this argument, we seek to highlight the profound changes that are entailed in the collapse of modernist left/right politics at the end of the 1980s.<sup>18</sup> In particular, the absence of this long-established political framework has led to the future being viewed with uncertainty and fear since there is no readily available structure of meaning through which to make sense of change. It provides fertile ground for a discourse of fear<sup>19</sup> or risk consciousness.<sup>20</sup> Shaped by this discourse, environmentalism provides a potential magical “solution” to the problem of cohering a constituency in the present for elite and other political actors by therapeutically speaking on behalf of future generations and nonhuman nature as being at risk from catastrophic harm. In these circumstances, it is not so much that an ideology holds back some latent movement for collective social change but rather that we are deeply alienated from our own political

agency, the sphere of action limited to intra- and interpersonal relations and survival.

As a response, eco-apocalypse first offers a sense of purpose or mission in the absence of political visions of the future and second, provides a fetish for the loss of modernist political subjectivity. The following sections elaborate each of these claims first with an illustration of how mainstream political leaders have attempted to use the scientific projection of environmental catastrophe and second, with a discussion of apocalyptic cinematic narratives that use therapeutic discourse.

### POSTPOLITICAL GREEN MEANING

The official film made to publicize the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen provides a telling illustration of the way that elites view themselves in relation to the issue of climate change.<sup>21</sup> Produced by the Danish Foreign Ministry and screened at the opening of the summit, the video depicts a nightmare scenario of environmental apocalypse: it features a young girl having a bad dream about the cataclysmic destruction of an apparently depopulated earth in a rapid series of natural disasters—drought and desertification, earthquake, tornado, and flooding. Her nightmare is induced by watching television news stories about the impacts of climate change before she goes to bed. After she wakes up screaming in terror, she relates the dream to her father, who comforts her by going online and showing her the official Copenhagen summit website, which offers reassurance that international leaders are aware of the problem. Inspired by the site, the girl borrows her father's camcorder and runs up to the roof of their apartment building, where she films herself saying, "Please help the world." The phrase, which is also the title of the film, is then reiterated by other children from around the world, their successive images zooming away to form the summit's globe logo, accompanied by the slogan "We have the power to save the world. Now." The video provides a striking insight into the official mindset: what appears, at first glance, to be a campaigning film about people putting pressure on world leaders is really an elite wish-fulfillment fantasy in which child-citizens across the globe put their faith in parent-politicians engaged in an heroic, planet-saving mission. While activists are apt to think of themselves as taking a principled stand and putting pressure on compromised politicians, leaders actually seem delighted by the authority that such "pressure" bestows on them. If public pressure is not forthcoming, they go out of their way to encourage and, if necessary, to simulate it through popular culture and the medium of film.

Political elites have seized upon climate change as an issue around which they can create the appearance of purposeful activity and meaningfulness. In

the months before the Copenhagen summit, the British government attempted to represent itself as some sort of activist organization, launching the “Act on Copenhagen” campaign, which urged “Pledge your support for an ambitious global deal here!” because “We need your backing to help us negotiate.”<sup>22</sup> Behaving as if it were its own pressure group, the government urged the public to urge them to act. At the same time, it also berated its citizens for their apathy. Worrying that “there isn’t yet that feeling of urgency and drive and animation about the Copenhagen conference,” for example, David Miliband complained that “the penny hasn’t dropped that this climate change challenge is real and is happening now.”<sup>23</sup> Miliband was speaking at the October 2009 launch of the Science Museum’s “Prove It!” exhibition—another ersatz “campaign,” this time inviting people to sign up to the statement “I want the government to prove they’re serious about climate change by negotiating a strong, effective, fair deal at Copenhagen.” Yet according to the museum’s director, the exhibition was created in direct response to a briefing from the government’s Department of Energy and Climate Change when “we realized that public interest had flattened out and yet here we were approaching the most historic negotiations in human history.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, it was official concern about a lack of public interest that produced a campaign in which the public would be encouraged to put pressure on officials.

Such is the relationship between the elite and the electorate today: they urge us to be less apathetic and to urge them to act. The reason for this strange simulation of a political relationship is that environmental activism provides a vocabulary through which leaders can articulate a sense of purpose and meaning that is otherwise signally absent from today’s narrow and trivial political discourse. President Barack Obama, for example, claimed to have “renewed American leadership” at Copenhagen. Hailing the accord that he negotiated as a “meaningful and unprecedented breakthrough,” he said that the summit marked “the beginning of a new era of international action.”<sup>25</sup> In advance of the summit, the language was even more grandiose as leaders imagined how they would “change the course of history” by negotiating a reduction in carbon emissions.<sup>26</sup> It seems unlikely that, in the long run, the elite’s search for meaning in green politics will be successful. The vision it offers—of urgent regulation—is a largely negative, dystopian one, characteristic of a demoralized society for which, as one climate campaigner puts it, “the age of heroism is over.”<sup>27</sup> While the elite may continue to campaign and cajole the public about the climate, they do so precisely because of their inability to engage people in a nonapocalyptic, forward-looking project.

## THE CINEMATIC ECO-APOCALYPSE

Yet if the narrative of eco-apocalypse seems limited as a directly political resource, its continuing cinematic reiteration suggests that it has considerable popular cultural resonance. Indeed, we would suggest that cinematic eco-apocalypse is appealing to the contemporary imagination partly because it is antipolitical, allowing the frustrations and difficulties of political engagement to be swept aside. More precisely, in both *The Day After Tomorrow* and *The Age of Stupid*, we identify three themes: first, the sphere of conventional, formal politics is rejected as dysfunctional and/or negative; second, large-scale transformative agency is disavowed and instead projected into nature; and third, as a consequence, human “agency” is reduced to individualized, small-scale actions that are therapeutic in character.

One of the basic insights of modern left-wing politics was that the problems facing humanity were social rather than natural in origin and that they could, therefore, potentially be resolved through collective social action. With large-scale social change off the political agenda in Western societies for the time being, it is much harder to hold on to the insight that our problems are social in origin and solution. Political agency is now very narrowly associated with governments and disconnected politicians, who are represented negatively in both films. *The Age of Stupid* offers reductive caricatures of politics and economics, for example, in a short animated sequence that presents the history of modernity as a series of failed “-isms” ending with “consumerism.” Political agency is also represented in the attempts of one individual to gain permission from his local council to build a wind farm. His anger and frustration with the political system is clear when his proposal is rejected through the actions of an organized group of “NIM-BY” (not in my backyard) residents.

In *The Day After Tomorrow*, a negative portrayal of formal political agency is embodied in the dismissive and belligerent Vice President Becker (a character clearly modeled on the unpopular Dick Cheney). The vice president refuses to listen to the scientific evidence presented by the film’s hero until it is too late to act. Catastrophic weather events destroy not only the physical human environment but also the prevailing social order: survivors of the US administration take refuge in Mexico. By the end of the film, a humbled and penitent vice president is forced to admit that he was wrong and, by extension, that the whole social order he represents was flawed, mistakenly believing that it could use nature’s resources without consequences.

In both *The Day After Tomorrow* and *The Age of Stupid*, then, there is a clear sense that the destruction is deserved as a kind of punishment for past sins or stupidities. As John Walliss and James Aston observe, this is characteristic of the kind of “social commentary” found in several apocalyptic

films—other examples include *Children of Men* (2006), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008), and *Knowing* (2009)—whereby the existing sociopolitical order is simply wiped out in order to allow a fresh start, and any hope for the future is vested in the innocence of childhood as against the corrupt adult world.<sup>28</sup> Alienated from a political agency characterized as wholly negative, subjectivity is projected into nature so that the climate (spectacularly represented in line with the worst-case scenario scientific projection), rather than collective humanity, becomes the active agent of change. Something similar might be said of environmentalist politics, which suffers from “climate reductionism,” whereby we give up the future to natural forces rather than understanding it as something that is potentially within human control:

[Climate reductionism] is nurtured by elements of a Western cultural pessimism which promote the pathologies of vulnerability, fatalism and fear. . . . By handing the future over to inexorable non-human powers, climate reductionism offers a rationalization, even if a poor one, of the West's loss of confidence in the future.<sup>29</sup>

Projecting social agency into nature not only represents human agency in an alienated and so diminished form, it is also politically counterproductive because natural change is represented (through the use of computer-generated imagery [CGI] and camera angles) on a vastly larger scale than historical, human actions; a scale that cannot, currently, be matched. Agency becomes an uncontrollable, destructive capacity, while humanity, alienated from institutional political agency, is reduced to a passive, at-risk, victim subjectivity.

Rather than simply an absence of redemption or salvation, it would be more accurate to say that environmental apocalyptic narratives offer a kind of “pseudo redemption”: there is a sense of individuated, small-scale, therapeutic redemption to be achieved through reparative actions in response to loss as individuals react to the power of nature. For example, the climate-scientist protagonist in *The Day After Tomorrow*, having failed in his attempts to persuade the authorities of the impending crisis, instead wages a different struggle. Battling against the elements, he goes on a quest to rescue his estranged teenage son, who is stranded with a small band of survivors in New York. While massive forces of natural destruction effect large-scale social transformation, human action is confined to mending broken interpersonal relationships. Similarly, in the semidocumentary film *The Age of Stupid*, the focus is on the real-life characters' disclosure of a range of events, directly or indirectly attributable to climate change, that have caused personal loss, pain, and suffering. The audience is first shown the imagined effects of apocalyptic climate change on iconic tourist sites that represent human civilization, and selected news footage shows the destruction caused by adverse weather

conditions. This provides the context for a personalized exploration into human loss.

It might be assumed that this focus on the interpersonal derives from genre conventions—the need for human-interest drama in a Hollywood disaster movie like *The Day After Tomorrow* and for compelling personal stories in a hybrid drama-documentary such as *The Age of Stupid*. Yet, interestingly, the same therapeutic framework can be found in Al Gore’s campaigning documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), suggesting that this focus on personal relationships, losses, and regrets may have a deeper connection with environmentalist discourse. As Gore intersperses his scientific exposition with childhood reminiscences, stories of past personal setbacks, and emotive accounts of the loss of his sister and the near death of his son, it becomes clear that the form of change that is called for is a moral and personal one. In all three films, protagonists draw on emotionally difficult personal experiences as an interpretive framework for changing their behavior. Insofar as there is a “revelation” (the original, Greek meaning of “apocalypse”), it derives from self-reflection and remembrance of past losses; and insofar as people exercise agency, it is understood as reparative, making good the painful experiences of the past. This therapeutic rendering of the apocalypse reaches its zenith with the “psycho-apocalypse” films of 2011 (such as *Melancholia*), where no survivors remain and the apocalypse is desired as a release from a troubling world.<sup>30</sup> The therapeutic rendering of apocalypse gives rise to a sublime fascination with psychological suffering with environmental destruction as its context. Through this the frustrations of societal relatedness and political engagement are negated or revenged.

### THERAPEUTIC APOCALYPTICISM

As both Swyngedouw and we argue, visions of eco-apocalypse are symptomatic of and also reinforce a “postpolitical” outlook in which the urgency of impending climate catastrophe closes down democratic debate about possible futures. Although elites may sometimes invoke the threat of eco-apocalypse as offering a meaningful framework for political engagement, this does not so far appear to have been very effective. Instead, as we have argued, the result is a kind of pseudopolitics, a simulated form of activism through film in which unenthusiastic citizens are harangued by political leaders attempting to establish some point of connection with the public. Cinematic versions of eco-apocalypticism perhaps help to explain why it seems to be of limited use as a political resource for elites. Although such films often have a more or less overt campaigning tone and intent, they also tend to be dismissive of current political processes and institutions, and it may be that part of their popular appeal lies precisely in their antipolitical outlook. If audiences enjoy



imagining the current sociopolitical order being cut down or even entirely obliterated, this seems to speak to a fundamentally antipolitical sentiment rather than offering any basis for renewed political engagement.

Ultimately, though, it is not the apocalyptic event itself that is most salient about these films but how human experience and agency are now formulated *in relation to it*, through a therapeutic ethos. These apocalyptic narratives represent an ethically compelling response, by drawing on therapeutic culture to represent subjectivity, which is reduced to a therapeutic consideration of how people should conduct themselves in relation to the environment and their loved ones. In the eco-therapeutic apocalypse, nature is malevolent, coming back at us in a paranoid<sup>31</sup> and alienated form, compelling a process of psychological change. Knowing that the apocalypse is imminent generates a fear of loss, producing guilt and regret about one's personal actions, which becomes the driving force for reparative actions.

Therapeutic-apocalyptic narratives symbolize an alienated relationship to history: there are no political choices in intra- and interpersonal relationships, only emotional and ethical ones. This is why we argue that eco-therapeutic apocalyptic narratives give indirect expression to the loss of modernist political subjectivity. If we are to overcome our current failure of historical imagination, it does us little good to assume that ready-made political constituencies are waiting in the wings, held back by a depoliticizing environmentalism. Rather we will need to address directly the failure of modernist politics and confront the disavowal of recent socioeconomic and political experience. Doing so may better enable us to understand the state of contemporary politics and entertainment media culture and to create a space for imagining nonapocalyptic, human futures.

## NOTES

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## FILMS

- The Age of Stupid*. Directed by Franny Armstrong. United Kingdom, 2009.
- Children of Men*. Directed by Alfonso Cuarón. United States/United Kingdom, 2006.
- The Day After Tomorrow*. Directed by Roland Emmerich. United States, 2004.
- The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Directed by Scott Derrickson. United States, 2008.
- An Inconvenient Truth*. Directed by Davis Guggenheim. United States, 2006.
- Melancholia*. Directed by Lars von Trier. Denmark, 2011.