UNTHINKABLE EXTINCTION

CINEMATIC TIME AND THE PANORAMA OF HISTORY

CLAIRE COLEBROOK

1. Cinematic Time

In 1907 Henri Bergson claimed that everyday perception tended to be cinematic. In order to manage the complexity of the world we take the flux of time and cut it into sections, which we then recompose in order to have a coherent and manageable *world.* Before the advent of cinema as a technology there is, Bergson claims, something cinematic about the way we synthesize the intense difference of time into a coherent and action-enabling world of things. Bergson's claim that everyday perception reduces appearance to a mechanistic series is unique; no one else had defined consciousness as cinematic, as cutting the flow of time up and piecing it together in order to experience a world as something we can master. It was also not until the twentieth century that the concept of *world* became so entwined with the synthesizing power of consciousness. Twentieth-century phenomenology took up a tradition going back to Kant, where what we experience as the world is *not* the thing in itself, but always a world *for* a consciousness that retains the past and anticipates the future. What phenomenology added to Kant was two-fold: first, it makes no sense to distinguish between things in themselves and the world as it is for consciousness. Consciousness or subjectivity is the origin of the world; *the world* is nothing more than the synthesized horizon of sense and purposiveness as it appears *for* someone. This is why Heidegger would claim that the stone has no world, and why he would also object to

using the language of consciousness or man, and instead speak of *Da-sein:* rather than mind *and* world, there is a single horizon of unfolding purposive connectedness. Although I have opened this essay by recalling two philosophical concepts from the early twentieth century – world and the cinematic nature of consciousness – I want to argue that both concepts can help us understand the ways in which twenty-first-century cultural production continues a modern tradition of thinking about the world cinematically. This cinematic conception of world includes both the temporality of composing sections into a manageable unity, *and* framing that composed whole with a sense of human purposiveness. One could strike a contrast between a sense of the *cosmos* – that one exists as a fragment of a universe well beyond one's ken – and a sense of the *world*, where everything that exists emerges from a composed and ultimately human horizon of purpose. There are many ways in which this distinction between cosmos and world can be theorized. Michel Foucault argued that pre-modern thought understood human events and forms of knowledge to be expressions or signs of a universe of resemblances and analogies; modern thought, by contrast, includes all knowledge, meaning and order *within* human understanding. Even though human existence is never fully transparent to itself, the only world we know is given through the life of 'man.' Rather than existing among forces of which he would form an insignificant aspect, 'man' becomes the horizon or lifeworld within which everything is given, including other worlds. In addition to the historical distinction between a cosmos and the world, one might also tie the sense of world to a specifically Western and humanist imperialism, where others are encountered as cultural

variants of a single ideal of reason and recognition. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro has marked a distinction between an anthropologist's sense of encountering others whose worlds are translated back into a general human rationality, and an indigenous way of relating to others where one encounters and negotiates radically divergent modes of encountering, different ways in which relations are experienced. The *world* in the specific modern sense is, I would argue, already cinematic and already bound up with a conception of the end of the world. Even though Foucault never theorized the ways in which the ongoing study of 'man,' and world was tied to cinema, he did tie it to a specific comportment of looking. One imagines a point of view from which the whole might be surveyed and comprehended. Viveiros de Castro tied this comportment of Western humanism to a conception of *the human,* and *the world* that formed the ground for all relations. Rather than say, with Bergson, that it is the *intellect* that operates cinematically -- cutting into the world and recomposing its sections into a manageable whole – it would be more accurate to tie this regard to a modern project of Western humanism. The humanism of cinematic temporality comes to the fore most explicitly in fictions and figures of the end of the world. Once the world is defined as a single horizon of purposive sense, it becomes bound up with the flourishing of reason. Once the sense of things is dependent on a specific world-surveying rationality, it is always possible that rationality may suffer any number of possible catastrophes. This is why, prior to climate change and the Anthropocene, and prior to post-apocalyptic fictions philosophy has already theorized the end of the world as the end of a world surveying cinematic temporality. If

consciousness does not organize its experiences into a coherent and meaningful order, an order that one assumes to be true for any subject whatever, then there is no longer a world in any meaningful sense. Kant articulated this idea in his first *Critique* in terms of the horizon of experience; without the coherence of a causally ordered universe there could be no world, no clear distinction between what is experienced and the subject who experiences:

> If cinnabar were now red, now black, now light, now heavy, if a human being were now changed into this animal shape, now into that one, if on the longest day the land were covered now with fruits, now with ice and snow, then my empirical imagination would never even get the opportunity to think of heavy cinnabar on the occasion of the representation of the color red; or if a certain word were attributed now to this thing, now to that, or if one and the same thing were sometimes called this, sometimes that, without the governance of a certain rule to which the appearances are already subjected in themselves, then no empirical synthesis of reproduction could take place.
>
> There must therefore be something that itself makes possible this reproduction of the appearances by being the a priori ground of a necessary synthetic unity of them. One soon comes upon this if one recalls that appearances are not things in themselves, but rather the mere play of our representations, which in the end come down to determinations of the inner sense (Kant 228-29 [A101-102]).

It is the subject who generates the world both in a practical and moral sense; one must not only assume that the world will continue in the same harmonious manner for me, but that others experience the same seemingly natural order. One must *also* act as if one were not bound up with this world,

but capable of giving a law to oneself that would apply to all others, as members of the kingdom of ends. In this move one is no longer a part of a cosmos, but its divine legislator capable of viewing the world as if it were one artfully composed whole. The world, the human and the capacity to regard the world cinematically – as if one were responsible for forming its very order – are all intertwined in the temporality of modernity. Oddly, despite a supposed growing awareness of deep time and geological forces, cinematic time and its accompanying humanism has intensified. The cinematic experience of the end of the world, far from being attuned to planetary catastrophe, reinforces the modern tradition of including the world within human and managerial temporality.

It might seem that extinction is the most timely of concepts, and that the emergence of a cluster of conceptualizations of extinction in academic, para-academic and popular culture marks a break with Western anthropocentrism (Kolbert 2014). We are living in end times (Zizek 2011), finally coming to terms with what it might be to contemplate a world without us (Weisman 2008). This might seem to be evident in the mania for 'end of world' cinema epics, along with the post-apocalyptic tone that pervades what were once non-apocalyptic film franchises. The most recent instalment of the *Avengers* series, *Endgame* (2019), opens with a universe in ruins, a decimated biosphere, and a narrative drive to restore order to the world. Even films that are not explicitly about the end of the world assume it as the unquestioned backdrop of the future. While the *Mad Max* franchise may have always been post-apocalyptic, always opening onto a wasteland littered by destroyed and destroying motor vehicles and disparate humans, the most recent

instalment is manifestly about resource depletion and climate change, with the desert landscape now governed by water and oil-hoarding elites. So assumed is the affect of end times that the events leading up to a world without order no longer need to be explained, and so unremarkable is the notion that the world we live in is imperiled that blockbuster cinema has seized upon the task of saving the world as its default plotline. Facing peril is now one of pop culture's great fascinations and pleasures, but it is not confined to Hollywood cinema. Cambridge University's Centre for Climate Repair and Oxford University's Future of Humanity Institute – as their titles imply – task themselves with maintaining and enhancing humanity as it is, maximizing intelligence, and deploying the very technomanagerial ethos that destroyed the planet to secure the future (including re-freezing the melting ice caps, whitening arctic clouds, and re-greening surface areas).[i] The ways in which these tasks are presented assume the prima facie and absolute value of saving *this* world. On the one hand the sense of peril and damage creates future-directed urgency; on the other hand, and at the same time, the world that is on the edge of extinction is so all encompassing that it is simply too big to fail.

Once we are no longer blithely allowing conquered and exploited worlds to disappear but imagine the loss of *the* world, world-endings become both pressing and unthinkable. In fact, 'the world' as it was constituted in modernity was at one and the same time the most robust, and most fragile of complex wholes. The world of global interconnectedness and presumed prosperity and felicity was defined as a break away from 'our' lesser tendencies, constituted through a narrative drive that was *always* about saving the future while repairing

or overcoming the past. To name just one example one might think of Kant's rational cosmopolitanism, where the human tendency towards laziness in thinking, to allow others or various illusions to guide our decisions, is progressively overcome, requiring us to act *as if* – despite all historical evidence – humanity were on the path to peace and harmony. This conception of history, where the barbarism of the past is so intense that there simply must be a redeemed future is neither confined to Kant and the eighteenth century, nor to philosophy and technocracy, but has become dominant in the very concepts of world and humanity. The reason why, today, there are so many 'end of world' and saving the 'world' dramas, is because what has been formed as 'humanity,' has more often than not been oriented to narrative conceptions of end times.

2. Narrative and Anthropodicy

In Peter Brooks's classic account of narrative desire there is a pleasure principle at work in plot lines, where an initial state of unfulfillment or incompletion must arrive at resolution, but do so with just enough delay to make the suspension between desire and gratification enjoyable (Brooks 1984). The end of narrative is not the self-loss of jouissance – an influx of forces so intense that the initial disorder is utterly swept away – but a more conservative return to quiescence. Narratives are driven by the pleasure principle, and not the death drive. Narrative, in this form, works against apocalypse – not the sweeping away of the world but its restoration. In classic romance plots one arrives at

marriage and domestic harmony, and not an achievement of desire so intense that all difference, distance and tension would be eliminated. With the exception of Lars Von Trier's 2011 *Melancholia,* end of world narratives are more often than not driven by the conservative mode of the pleasure principle, arriving at the restoration of order. Post-apocalyptic ends are *post*-apocalyptic precisely because they do not aim towards the end of *jouissance* -- an infusion of force so intense and disruptive that the initial mildly disordered state loses all sense of boundedness and world. We are living in post-apocalyptic times. Despite the flourishing of end of world industries – from disaster porn and prepper subcultures to Anthropocene studies and research centres devoted to saving humanity – the end of the world has become unthinkable. If pre-modern and non-Western cultures maintain a sense of existence taking place within a cosmos that far exceeds human sense, modernity has reduced all sense and value to the world. Even though earth system science and the Gaia hypothesis do not reduce the planet and life upon it to a bounded organic whole (Latour and Lenton 2019), the discourses of saving, ending and sustaining the world operate with a highly organicist conception of the whole. The world, in its twentieth-century and contemporary sense mirrors the image of the organism in the pleasure principle: a complex system that manages difference and disequilibrium for the sake of maintaining itself as a dynamic and open whole.

The pleasure principle that drives narrative and our conception of the world as a complex living system takes on an increased burden and significance in the Anthropocene. First, Anthropocene discourse is more often than not anything but a dire warning and death knell for humanity. As with

disaster cinema, the conceptualization of the Anthropocene – with its notion of a single imperiled Anthropos -- intensifies imperatives for saving the world. Now that we recognize 'humanity,' as a geological force it becomes ever more urgent to act to save the future. Second, Anthropocene discourse does not simply, by chance, mirror the narrative drives of post-apocalyptic cinema; rather, post-apocalyptic cinema and the Anthropo-*scene* sustain an already cinematic conception of history that enables the anthropodicy of modernity. Only by having a sense of *the world* as the single horizon of life and species history does it become possible and necessary to demand some sense of justification (rather than radical transformation) of human history. It is not surprising that the concept of world – of a single horizon of life and sense, with a universal history – is bound up with projects of historical and moral justification. Well before the twenty-first century's seemingly singular discourses of the Anthropocene, climate change, and impending sixth mass extinction, *and* before Kant's attempt to locate the sense of world order and harmony within the human imagination, poetic and philosophical attempts had been made to make sense of the supposed reason and value of human existence, in a world that appears to be anything but a kingdom of ends.

Manifestly, works such as Leibniz's theodicy or Milton's *Paradise Lost* were justifications of 'the ways God to man'; but God only requires justification if we start to think that the barbarism and evil of this world demand explanation and redemption. It is the history of humanity, and its trajectory of seeming self-harm that is an affront to reason. As soon as one broadens one's gaze to think about *the world* – generating a cinematic gaze that reassembles history from on

high – the trail of wreckage offers a semblance of promise. Leibniz's solution to the seeming problem of the brutality of the world was an expanded perception; if we could see events as part of a larger composed whole, with each aspect of the world bearing some relation to the whole, we would recognize that for all its defects this is the best of all possible worlds. Such recognition is as much practical as it is rational, allowing us to live with a sense of the justice of existence. Theodicy requires a highly specific sense of the concept of *world,* and one that would take on increasing importance in the twentieth century with phenomenology, and later with twenty-first century 'end of world' culture. Edmund Husserl referred back to Leibniz's concept of the monad when he formulated his conception of the world as the lifeworld (or *Lebenswelt*). For Leibniz the world is composed of monads, each aspect of the world perceiving the whole in its own way, with the monad's individuation constituted through the singularity of its perceptions. In this tradition that runs from Leibniz, through Husserl and on to Deleuze, the world is the composed and harmonious totality that is unfolded in the unique and individuated perceptions that make up the whole.

> … there occurs a universal super-addition of sense to my primordial world, whereby the latter becomes the appearance "*of*" a determinate "*Objective*" world, as the identical world for everyone, myself included. … [A]n Ego-community, which includes me, becomes constituted (in my sphere of ownness, naturally) as a community of Egos existing with each other and for each other ultimately a community of monads, which, moreover, (in its communalized intentionality) constitutes the one identical world. In this world all Egos again present

> themselves, but in an Objectivating apperception with the sense "men" or "psychophysical men as worldly Objects". …[T]ranscendental intersubjectivity has an intersubjective sphere of ownness, in which it constitutes the Objective world; and thus, as the transcendental "We", it is a subjectivity for this world and also for the world of men, which is the form in which it has made itself Objectively actual. If, however, intersubjective sphere of ownness and Objective world are to be distinguished here, nevertheless, when I as ego take my stand on the basis of the intersubjectivity constituted from sources within my own essence, I can recognize that the Objective world does not, in the proper sense, transcend that sphere or that sphere's own intersubjective essence, but rather inheres in it as an "immanent" transcendency. Stated more precisely: The Objective world as an idea, the ideal correlate of an intersubjective (intersubjectively communalized) experience, which ideally can be and is carried on as constantly harmonious is essentially related to intersubjectivity (itself constituted as having the ideality of endless openness), whose component particular subjects are equipped with mutually corresponding and harmonious constitutive systems. Consequently the constitution of the world essentially involves a "harmony" of the monads: precisely this harmony among particular constitutions in the particular monads; and accordingly it involves also a harmonious generation that goes on in each particular monad (Husserl 106-07).

It would follow that the end of the world would be the collapse of this harmonious unity, and it would also follow that if one did not have a world --- a sense of the whole – one could not truly be said to be a subject in any significant sense.

In both Leibniz and Kant, despite their differences, perception is necessarily never simply of this event here and now, but always of the present in relation to a harmonious whole. There is a necessary orientation towards the justification of the world in one's perceptions. More specifically, before we get to today's narrative of saving the world, before we get to the Anthropo-scene, where looking back on the brutality of the past propels us forward to a day of redemption, there had been a series of philosophical and literary articulations of the immanent and necessary progress of human history. The disasters that we look back upon demand that things be otherwise, but rather than another world taking the place of this world – which would be no redemption at all – this world itself must be saved.

For Leibniz the world – grasped as a whole – is justifiable because we can recognize that God (being God) would have chosen the best of all possible worlds. For Kant the justice of the whole is practical; we must act as if, despite what we happen to know about the wreckage of history, the world were progressing towards peace, towards a rational cosmopolitanism. As a rational subject, I must perceive each event as part of a harmonious whole, and I must be able to imagine the present as a fragment of a broader whole moving towards felicity. The concept of *world*, then, is bound up with a narrative drive towards some sense of final harmony. This is as true of early modern philosophy as it is of post-apocalyptic culture. Kant insisted that in order to know the world, we not only need to assume that it operates as if it were created in accord with the laws of reason, we also have to assume that future knowers will operate with the same conception of ideal harmony. Edmund Husserl, like Heidegger

after him, emphasized the necessarily futural and anticipatory conception of the world: to perceive something as true and present in the here and now, presupposes that it would have been there for others, and would be true into the future for any subject whatever. Derrida will comment on this 'silent presupposed we' in his essay on Husserl, but will also intensify this sense of world as a horizon of expectation with his claim that the death of an other person is the end of the world (Derrida 1978; Naas 2015). In part Derrida is destroying the world by arguing that there is no general horizon of sense; there is only the singular and never fully shared world of each self.

What Derrida does *not* question is whether there might be forms of existence that are not captured by the concept of world – of a horizon of futurity and potentiality that relies on retaining the past, *and* of realizing that the future is uniquely one's own. That is, one mighty question the claim of Heidegger's *Being and Time* that one's being toward death is radically individuating and that no one can die for any other. If, for example, one imagined one's self not as defined by the series of singularizing decisions that compose one's self and world but as a fragment of a broader composition that may (or may not) survive beyond one's time, one might think of death *not* as the end of the world but as the beginning of the cosmos. Could one live not with a being towards death, as though one's own life could be this here and now and no other, but with a positive sense of the end of the world? To think beyond the world – the composed and synthesized whole that grants our lives value – might not only be an opening to other worlds, but might also generate a sense beyond all worlds. The *world* is not simply the space in which we happen

to live, but a specific comportment towards time and other persons.

3. Cinema at the End of the World

By the time blockbuster cinema stages one near-apocalypse after another, what is revealed is simply this: so encompassing is *the world* that the possibility of its end is unthinkable. To flirt with the end of the world is to flirt with the end of narrative possibility. The *worlds* that end in post-apocalyptic cinema are sometimes expendable; often grand scale catastrophes sweep away a series of cultures before a heroic and valiant effort saves *the world.* To take one example: *I am Legend* (2007) sees a zombie virus destroy most of humanity, while leaving the seeds of a new world in a surviving pocket of New Hampshire. Even if most worlds have been lost, *the world* has been saved, cleansed and redeemed. A common post-apocalyptic motif sees a central command control room watching the unfolding of the end; country after country falls away until the world is saved. We see panning shots of the globe, all succumbing to the virus or catastrophe, and yet by the end of the narrative 'humanity' triumphs, and we – who are too big to fail – will survive. *I am Legend* like so many post-apocalyptic dramas takes place in Manhattan; other post-apocalyptic dramas – such as *Independence Day* (1996) broaden their staging of the end of the world to the US presidency and military, who lead the world in fighting off alien invasion. In *2012* (2009) the construction of a series of arks will save humanity from the planet's destruction and overheating; most of the persons on

the planet, and most of their worlds will be annihilated, but *the world* is saved – again centred in the technologically elevated US. As with the earlier alien invasion disaster, *Independence Day*, the management of the end of the world, and saving the world, sees the USA as a geo-political panopticon, looking at various countries fall into the abyss of an end they could not see coming. There is a centred world that purveys, manages and saves the whole, and as long as *this* world survives it is able to dismiss the losses it views as collateral damage. In the more recent *Arrival* (2016) an alien invasion that appears to threaten the world summons the attention of a collection of experts from around the globe, including a linguist from the US. Where the Chinese interpreters can only regard the alien visitors in combative terms, mistakenly approaching the aliens' attempts at communication as warlike, the US linguist discovers that they are offering a global language that will save the world. Setting up a moral binary between the divisive Chinese and the world-saving US, *Arrival* reinforces a cinematic temporality and ideology that has allowed 'America' to stand for the world. When John Locke claimed that 'in the beginning all the world was America,' he recognized the sense in which one part of the globe could typify a sense that 'the world' in modernity is always the 'new world,' a place where humanity can reinvent and compose itself. What *Arrival* typifies is the highly parochial nature of the world that is at risk in end of world thinking: what must be saved is not the planet or the species or life in general, but the capacity to view every other as a member of one single and unified virtual humanity. This world is *the world* because it has a sense of the whole and a sense of humanity.

One might tie Kant's seemingly isolated ethical claim that one should imagine oneself as a 'member of the kingdom of ends' with what becomes ever more urgent in end of world and Anthropocene culture: what must not be lost is that mode of humanity that recognizes and affirms itself as universal – not a universality of sameness, but a universality that is aware of every-varying difference that understands every other as one more instance of expression of the whole. The Anthropo-scenic notion that 'we' now recognize ourselves not as a simple natural kind but as a unity formed by a common predicament and planet-transforming past was anticipated in modern humanisms that situated the present as a moment that would allow for the redemption of the past. Whatever we may have been, a focus on future transformation and beatitude creates a felicity of the commons. Both the Anthropocene and the virtual humanity of modern redemptive history deploy a cinematic temporality and narrative arc: we are able to look back on the past as a series of vignettes that grants the present the unquestionable right to take hold of the future. It is because we have been so catastrophic that we must survive and save the world.

4. The Beginning of the Earth

Despite this overwhelming confluence, the cinematic conception of time that makes post-apocalyptic narrative and the discourse of Anthropocene possible, has nevertheless been accompanied by a counter-temporality that would seize upon the force of the death drive, where the end of the world – the end of the bounded order that grants each body its

orientation and horizon of possibility – would herald in a new earth, but not a new world. This might be understood in a limited and also unlimited sense: one might embrace the end of the world as the end of *this* world, and the opening of a new world. One might happily embrace the end of capitalism, nationalism, humanism, frontier spirit and imperialism and – as is hinted at (but resisted) in films such as *Avatar* (2009) or *Mad Max: Fury Rd* (2015) – think about nomadic modes of existence that do not fetishize the urban hyper-consumption that is so often assumed to be what must be saved in post-apocalyptic cinema. *Avatar,* in particular, contrasts a world of exploitative and violent militarism with an indigenous ecological orientation, where all bodies are attuned and sympathetic to the life of the whole. In *Avatar* the phenomenological sense of world is heightened; to be a living body in Pandora is to have a sense of the relations of every other living body, and to move with a sense of the life of the dynamic self-regulating whole. Such non-Western modes of existence are contemplated only insofar as they can save, and be saved by, a West that redeems itself through colonized others. What cannot be contemplated by end of world culture, and by post-apocalyptic epics that fantasize about a new world, is living *without world*.

At the extreme one might think of Heidegger's stone that is without world, or the animal who is poor in world (Heidegger 1995, 195). What might it mean to abandon the fetishized sense of world futurity, where any ethics of the present is dependent upon thinking of a humanity to come? Such a question is not as abstract as it might seem in an age of contracting possibility and potentiality. Rather than thinking of acting as if for all time, where one orients

oneself to an ongoing and elevated humanity, how might one live, and what would one give, if the world could *not* (or should not necessarily) be saved? One might think of the end of the world in a genuinely apocalyptic sense as the destruction of cinematic and narrative time and the opening of non-world temporalities. Such a temporality is suggested in the poetics that breaks with humanist optimism: let us imagine that the world is not to be saved, and rather than think about sustaining ourselves think about what we might offer or give away. Rather, say, than reducing fossil fuel consumption to ensure our future, one might think of ending our attachment to this future and this world. What forms of existence *here and now* are without world, and is this absence of world really so tragically inhuman? End of world culture frequently depicts the absence of world as unquestionably horrific, but would it be so tragic to act with kindness and compassion for that which is near at hand, even if one knew that one was doing nothing to save the world? Or, thinking less in terms of ending the world, and more in terms of positive worldlessness, what forms of existence might be enabled and enhanced if one did not assume the prima facie value of being-in-the-world? One might bear more compassion and love towards beings (human and non-human) that may not enhance the ecology of the whole.

In her *Broken Earth* trilogy N.K. Jemisin writes of a world in which humans are oriented towards world-*ending* (rather than world-forming) powers of stone. The earth ends in order to enter into Seasons, with various branches of humans playing different roles in harnessing or being consumed by the mineral forces of stone. In a direct reversal of Heidegger's claim that the stone 'has no world,' Jemisin

produces a cosmos of stoniness that is larger than human worlds, and that encompasses the coming into being and passing away of human worlds. The forces of the earth are constantly being warded off, contained and redirected by the orogene/roggas (who are captured and controlled by those humans *without* such cosmic powers) in order for the various isolated worlds to have a brief moment of stability before a catastrophic world-ending Season of climate change. At one level Jemisin's work can be read as an allegory of our racially hierarchical present: a species of humans with the power to transform the earth is enslaved by other humans (stills) who operate from a central 'Fulcrum,' in order to breed and manage the empire's various castes. At another speculative level, the text can be read as an exploration of cosmic consciousness, where there is no sense of humanity in general, and where an ongoing conflict between the forces of the earth and various castes of humans generates dispersed communities (comms) within a deep time of lost worlds ('deadcivs') and mass extinctions. The central character of *The Fifth Season* is an orogene (or 'rogga' to those who want to eliminate and enslave her kind) who travels from one comm to another, gradually becoming aware of the inhuman forces of stone that are barely perceptible, even by those who are born with the extraordinary capacity to 'sess' the tremors of the earth. Rather than saving 'the' world – an empire that has enslaved and harnessed the work of earth-attuned 'roggas' – the narrative focuses on small acts of kindness, sympathy, kith-making and survival. If the stone has no world this is not because the stone is even more poor in world than the animal, but because there are forces both greater and significantly smaller than the world.

In this respect I would suggest that it is useful to think about end of world or post-apocalyptic culture *not* as a radically inhuman thought of what might exist beyond the world, but as a reaction formation that steps back from thinking life beyond worlds. It is possible to contrast the genuinely apocalyptic, inhuman and world-destroying imagination of writers like Jemisin – who dare to think cosmic forces beyond the world – with the hyper-humanism of post-apocalyptic narratives.

The latest installment of *Blade Runner* – a series to do with humanity timidly confronting its non-exceptional nature – is situated in a post-apocalyptic wasteland of resource depletion, where the end of the world that is threatened by climate change has been averted thanks to bio-capitalism. Here, though, is where a certain hyper-humanism comes to the fore. The *Blade Runner* motif of the soaring spirit set against the corporate machine becomes less formal (to do with resistance per se) and instead parceled out according to the 'miracle' of reproduction. In *Blade Runner 2049* it is no longer the uncanny capacity of humanity in the form of mind to be replicated that drives the struggle of the central character, but the quite different human capacity for reproduction. From *Blade Runner* (1982) to *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), the conundrum of our species' specialness shifts from our capacity to think to our capacity to reproduce by way of birth. Suddenly the miracle of our existence is not the creative drive of thinking/feeling but instead simply being born *naturally*; we are who we are by way of natality. It is not simply narrative laziness that fails to explain how replicants managed to gain the 'miracle' of reproduction; by *not* offering some science fiction explanation, the emergence

of reproduction appears as miraculous, and allows for a sentimental, familial and vital conception of the human to emerge as a value in a world of artificial life. This marks a shift from *Blade Runner*'s audacious exploration of artificial intelligence, where being human might have been replicated according to algorithms of memory and response, to a fetishized attachment to human *life*, where the distinguishing factor is one of origins.

5. Anthropodicy

Why is this important? What happens when the mark of being human shifts from a formal (immaterial, algorithmic, virtual) capacity to an actual condition of embodiment? Why does natality become so significant? I would suggest that it is because of the contemporary impossibility of anthropodicy. It is no longer possible to silence the thought that what has called itself humanity counts as the only justifiable world. The only thing that can justify saving the world is the parochial sentimentality of saving one's own kind. The long tradition of thinking that saving the world as it is would generate the realization of justice and a humanity to come gives way to the less ambitious drive to simply continue one's kind, to keep on keeping on simply because of an attachment to who we are. It's possible to chart a line from at least Milton's *Paradise Lost* to *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951 and 2008), where humanity as it has been is accused of having no right to life; instead it is what humanity ought to be and what it may become that justifies saving the world. Milton refers to his *Paradise Lost* as a theodicy, a justification of

the 'ways of God to man,' but it is more accurately an anthropodicy: how can we affirm the value and worthiness of human history given the barbarism of the past? For Milton, as for so many after him, it is our proper future that enables a sense and demand of the right to life. For Milton saving the world will take the form of turning the soul towards reason, for only man's journey of reason will allow the fallenness of human history to appear as all the better for having been. More in keeping with secular modernity, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) requires turning to the child – a fragment of the present that promises a future that will differ from the same dull round of historic violence. As both Lee Edelman and Rebekah Sheldon have argued, the figure of the child at once appears to grant the future openness and innocence, at the same time as it restricts the beatitude of futurity to the rebirth of *this* world (Edelman 2004; Sheldon 2016). Birth and natality, saving one's own kind, imagining this world starting anew, allowing other worlds to fall away as one strives to save *the world*: these motifs of post-apocalyptic culture extend and intensify a modern humanism that encompassed and constituted the world.

By *Blade Runner 2049* it is not an idea of what humanity might become that makes the world worth saving but instead an idea of the past, a return to a childhood of handmade toys, and miraculous birth. Not only is the replicant in the film rendered human by way of possessing childhood memories, the 'humanity' of replicants will be gauged according to whether they may give birth (without the technologies of IVF, hormones, surrogacy, or ultrasound that typically assist twenty-first-century Western reproduction). The future that must be saved is marked out and rendered valuable by what we

have already lost. Just as *Blade Runner 2049* depicts the central character's remembered childhood as centered around a small clay horse, *Oblivion* (2013) sees its central character holding onto humanity by playing a vinyl record of 'Whiter Shade of Pale' while cherishing a souvenir baseball cap. 'End of world' culture is rarely about the future, but instead imagines saving a world already lost, as though apocalypse is a sweeping away of the present for the sake of saving what we imagine we once were. The narrative crux of *Blade Runner 2049* – humanity as defined through the miracle of reproduction rather than mind – indicates that twenty-first-century post-apocalyptic fantasy has become intensively parochial, focused simply on maintaining the natality of humanity.

If the earlier *Blade Runner* had played with the possibility that our species was open to formal replication – with the unique capacities of subjectivity being mimed by technology – *Bladerunner 2049* ties who we are to 'life,' a creativity beyond agency and technology. Perhaps this idea could only come to the fore in an age of extinction: once the human species is actually threatened, then the end of man is no longer a motif that might enable us to think of a new world and a new humanity, but simply becomes an occasion to cling to what might be extinguished. Even though contemporary post-apocalyptic culture retains some sense of futural or virtual anthropodicy, it is tellingly bound up with a far more nostalgic clinging to the wreckage of actuality.

The actual world is no longer held to account, and then redeemed by what we ought to be; instead, the simple possibility that we might not be, that we are faced with a possible end, is enough to generate an imperative that we must survive. This is no longer an anthropodicy concerned

with looking back at a barbarous past while claiming the potential for a felicitous future, but instead an intense nostalgia for the present, simply because we cannot admit its possible non-being. Once we are confronted with the genuine, though disavowed, possibility of human extinction, all we can do is reiterate that there can be no other world. From an anthropodicy that imagines justice arriving in the future once this world has been swept away, we transition to the post-apocalyptic where the very possibility of annihilation generates the demand that the future must sustain a past that we have already lost. As can be seen as far back as Milton's *Paradise Lost* there's something cinematic or arche-cinematic about this imaginary: if we could look back at the panorama of futility that is human history, we might consider ourselves unworthy. But if we look at history cinematically, where we can flashback to the past for the sake of a felicitous future, then what looks like sheer barbarism will in fact have been a step on the way to beatitude. In Book 11 of *Paradise Lost* Michael shows Adam the trajectory of fallen human history, including the flood that will annihilate all life save that which is rescued in the ark. Adam had questioned the very justice of human existence; what God, he asks, would create a being too weak to withstand a temptation placed in his way, and what worth could such an existence have?

> O miserable Mankind, to what fall
> Degraded, to what wretched state reserv'd!
> Better end heer unborn. Why is life giv'n
> To be thus wrested from us? rather why
> Obtruded on us thus? who if we knew
> What we receive, would either not accept
> Life offer'd, or soon beg to lay it down,
> Glad to be so dismist in peace (PL 11: 500-507)

Once Adam is shown the panorma of history he recognizes the worthiness of a life. It is the possibility of a new world, emerging from a trail of wreckage, that restores Adam's faith in humanity. The depiction of futurity, and not what we happen to be, grants Adam the will and duty to survive:

> O thou that future things canst represent
> As present, Heav'nly instructer, I revive
> At this last sight, assur'd that Man shall live
> With all the Creatures, and thir seed preserve.
> Farr less I now lament for one whole World
> Of wicked Sons destroyd, then I rejoyce
> For one Man found so perfet and so just,
> That God voutsafes to raise another World
> From him, and all his anger to forget (PL 11: 870-878)

Kant had also insisted on a cinematic comportment towards humanity and history: if we simply look at the past as an actual array of fragments, all we see is chaos, but if we look at that same world as if it were progressing towards a future of cosmopolitical recognition, we would act as if humanity were worthy. Religion, for Kant, will begin in a history of violence and dissension, but ultimately arrive at a rational present, where we cast away the particular trappings of various faiths and arrive at the purity and universality of spirit:

> This history of Christianity (which, so far as it was to be erected on a historical faith, could not have turned out other- wise), when beheld in a single glance, like a painting, could indeed justify the outcry, *tantum religio potuit suadere malorum!,* did not the fact still clearly enough shine forth from its founding that Christianity's true first purpose was none other than the introduction of a pure religious faith, over which

> there can be no dissension of opinions; whereas all that tur-moil which has wrecked the human race, and still tears it apart, stems from this alone: because of a bad propensity in human nature, what should have served at the beginning to introduce this pure faith - i.e. to win over to the new faith, through its own prejudices, the nation which was accustomed to its old historical faith - this was subsequently made the foundation of a universal world-religion.
>
> Should one now ask, Which period of the entire church history in our ken up to now is the best? I reply without hesitation, *The present.* I say this because one need only allow the seed of the true religious faith now being sown in Christianity - by only a few, to be sure, yet in the open - to grow unhindered, to expect from it a continuous approximation to that church, ever uniting all human beings, which constitutes the *visible representation (the schema) of the invisible Kingdom of God on earth* (Kant 159 emphasis added).

Humanity is elevated through a cinematic regard, a capacity to flash back from the present, allowing the past to be comprehended as an unwitting condition for a redeemed future. There is an ostensible stark difference between Milton and Kant, where the paradisiacal end of history relies (for Milton) on transcendence. For Milton, God's grace will allow, despite human sin, for a new world. For Kant it is our capacity to imagine ourselves as if we were members of the kingdom of ends, not driven but our personal or located interests, that will enable us to act for humanity to come. But this apparent difference between transcendence and immanence, between God and Man, really exposes a far more intimate and difficult relation between humanity and the world. The world *is* akin to a divine horizon, an orientation towards what we have the power to become. Milton's justification of the ways of God to man – an attempt to make

sense of this world and its relation to divinity — cannot allow humanity to be utterly fallen. Theodicy is anthropodicy, but the reverse is also true; the ability to see humanity as necessary for the best of all possible worlds emerges from a sense of divine right. For Milton, justifying God requires giving an account of human redemption (for what God would create a being incapable of rising to the terms of its own existence?). This means that all theodicies are always anthropodicies, and vice versa: to assume that humanity must be justified is to regard humanity as if it were divinely created.

Here, again, I would argue that there is something cinematic about the post-apocalyptic arc: it is not simply that history will end with redemption – for that assumption is simply apocalyptic, and accepts that this world might (or should) be erased to make way for a higher world. In the *post*-apocalyptic moment, when the very thought of the world's end is posed, when humanity is accused of being unworthy, that very possibility demands that the past be made sense of through a divine future. One briefly steps outside the present by imagining its non-being, and thereby generates the imperative to save the world.

6. Conclusion:

To conclude I wish to make a distinction between an inevitable involvement in narrative, where we cannot but look at the past as a series leading towards the present, and a far more distinct cinematic and post-apocalyptic comportment that is bound up with the concept of the world. Michael is

able to show Adam human history because Milton writes *Paradise Lost* with the modern sense of 'humanity,' – the being whose single and unified history composes the horizon of all our action and value. Kant also assumes that there is a single history of reason, a thing called humanity, that will eventually recognize itself as the acknowledged legislator of the world. This notion of 'a' humanity requires that past and future become fragments in a single narrative whose end must be felicitous, even if the unfolding of the end flirts with annihilation. It is as though the time of history is not a continuous causal sequence, but a disconnected collection of frames that need to be pieced together to grasp a sense that can only arrive as if they were viewed from above. The cinematic gaze is not recollection but collection – a feature that comes ever more to the fore in contemporary cinema of multiple and forking timelines that demand some exercise of sense on the part of the viewer.

Henri Bergson had argued that it was an error to view time cinematically, as a sequence of stills melded together. His objection to this way of thinking about time was that it occluded the living force of events, their intrinsic tendency to open out to a creatively different future. But, as Deleuze noted after him, if we think of time this way – as capable of being cut and pasted – then something other than life's own forward momentum can be imagined (Deleuze 1989). It would be *radically* cinematic to think of time as though any of its segments could generate an entirely different world: what if rather than Michael showing Adam the inevitable timeline of Christian destruction and redemption, Adam had turned towards other spaces on the globe, or taken one of the events he viewed and explored other lines of time and outcomes emerging

from its potentiality? Post-apocalyptic and Anthropocene time has been made possible because of the framing of world and humanity, and of now seeing the scarred planet of the twenty-first century as the ground from which 'we' must act. But this same cinematic historical regard can be cut into, looking at lost worlds less as collateral damage, and more as fragments opening to other futures.

Milton's Adam is shown the future of humanity, narrated from the point of view of an angel who knows mankind's better future. This framing technique anticipates contemporary end of world epics, where we view our own world on the brink of its end, only to have that end averted by humanity triumphing over destruction to arrive at a destined future of beatitude. If we could take a point of view of ultimate narrative resolution, then humanity as it is and has been would not be found unworthy. In *Paradise Lost* Adam has already asked God why he was brought into existence, given that he was too fragile to meet the terms of existence. Here is the question that haunts post-apocalyptic modernity: how on earth can humanity be justified if its own freedom brings about its fall? As with every post-apocalyptic epic, the answer lies in the end. It is through the very thought of *not existing*, of asking whether it might be better not to have been, that humanity imagines a world in which it brings itself to justice. The cinematic panorama of history requires not simply a stringing together of events, but a cutting into the line of actual events, with the later sense of a fulfillment. What looks like the sheer barbarism of the past is ultimately a step towards justice. Indeed, the more violent and chaotic the scene of history seems to be, the more compelling is the demand for a later justice: by presenting history as a string

of snapshots, the very order and coherence of history is located in the point of view of the spectator who can survey the past as a whole.

The end of the world, and the cinema of the end of the world, are neither accidental nor extrinsic, but essential to the morality of humanism. Both 'world' and 'humanity' (in their phenomenological sense) are cinematic terms: I see the earth before me as the horizon for the unfolding of history, and imagine every other individual as also sharing this sense of the whole, each of us operating with a sense of humanity in general. Each one of us becomes Adam being instructed by Michael, viewing a scene of wreckage from on high, while assuming that humanity will, and should, be redeemed. Only by imagining itself as bound up with the world, where each event is part of a shared horizon of human sense, can each event be justified, with the absence of humanity becoming unthinkable. Imagining oneself as a member of the kingdom of ends, as a being who could live *as if* their life were part of a virtuous whole, allows the world to be fully humanized. Well before Heidegger argued that an animal is poor in world, and that a stone has no world, Kant had already insisted that the justice of the world requires imagining oneself not as simply existing as part of a series of events, but *as if* one could grant those events a narrative and felicitous coherence. Well before Kant argued for rational cosmopolitanism, Milton had also made clear that simply looking upon the world as it happens to be would be intolerable; one needs to imagine events from the point of view of a redeemed humanity, looking at the past and into the future while contemplating what it might be not to have been. When we arrive at twenty-first-century post-apocalyptic

cinema this capacity to rescue the panorama of futility dominates cinema, and finds its way into what comes to be known as the Anthropocene.

Although dating of the Anthropocene is a crucial political issue – does it begin with industrialization, colonization, nuclear energy, or intensified agriculture? – it's the cinematic spatialization of time that makes such debates possible. Looking back one can see that despite a diverse, discordant, dispersed and violent history there is now a common predicament where 'we' all inhabit a world bound by the possibility of loss; it is just that sense of imminent loss that seems to make the future worthy and necessary. However destructive the past may have been the present is a moment of recognition, and a chance for humanity to slough off its haphazard and destructive past.

It is the capacity to imagine the past as a panorama — not simply as a narrative, but as a series of vignettes, where snapshots are set together to compose a whole — that allows the present to be imagined as more than itself, as the point in time where humanity will arrive at a sense of itself and regain the world. Looking at the present cinematically helps us to imagine that we might pan forward. Where we are becomes a moment of potentiality, a point at which a real and proper humanity might emerge. This would allow us to make sense of those near-future dystopias – where climate change has yielded an intense barbarism, only to give way to the new world of a justified humanity. *Mad Max: Fury Rd* sees a world of resource depletion and tyranny, where the masses are controlled by water- and oil-squandering elites, vanquished by the heroic Max (with the aid of an indigenous women's collective). The *Hunger Games* (2012) also depicts a future

controlled by ageing and idle totalitarian rulers, who are challenged by the prowess of the young subjects whom they force into brutal and spectacular hunting games. Both films are typical of post-apocalyptic future dystopias that allow a new humanity to triumph over a fall back into feudal tyranny. Even more acute than dystopias of political regression are those that depict nomadism as the loss of the world. Either a few disparate humans are left wandering a cityscape, or – as in *The Road* (2009) – urban spaces give way to a wasteland that offers nothing more than wandering through lifeless space. By presenting the loss of humanity as the end of the world – as the end of social fabric and complexity -- humanity becomes that which must be saved in order to save the world. If we remain committed to the cinematic conception of the world, where every event attains its sense only in its final relation to a redemption and recognition of the whole, and where the fragments need to be pieced together by an overarching comprehension that allows the future to justify the past, then the end of humanity would be the end of all sense and value. It is we and we alone who can justify the world, precisely because the opposite – an inhuman world – is presented as so nightmarish. This might explain why post-apocalyptic cinema (from *Planet of the Apes* (1968) to *Oblivion*) relies so heavily on us viewing fragments of the present that now exist in a future where they have lost their world. Just as cinematic comportment allows us to look at the past as a flashback — as a scene that finds its sense in the present — so the forward glance where a fragment from our own present is stranded allows us to imagine the loss of who we are, as though a world without us would be a world without sense.

A cinematic approach to history – where past and future require the overview of the spectator to achieve sense – is at the heart of the concept of the world, especially in the intimately related sense of the end of the world. If western modernity, from at least Milton and on through Kant to the present, felt the need to justify human existence, it was primarily through an enriched sense of the world. Any present that I experience here and now is only possible because it implies a retained past and an anticipated future; any experienced particular is haunted by a silent sense of humanity as a whole. The present or any single event is ultimately a fragment of a horizon of sense; to lose that horizon is to lose the world. It is perhaps universal that any experience, and not simply human experience, implies a retained past and an anticipated future, and that presence of the here and now is always located within a horizon of meaning; what is not universal and is tied to Western modernity is the ultimately human nature of this horizon. Many indigenous cosmologies regard the world we live in now – the human world – as having emerged from a prehistory of animal spirits that continue to reside alongside human temporality. It was precisely this notion --- that what we know is merely a fragment of a sense that a more expanded or divine intuition might encompass -- that Kant rejected in his critical project. We are not, Kant insisted, lesser versions of a divine understanding that surpasses our finite cognition. The very sense of world requires that it is experienced through time for oneself and others. The *world* is given to us relationally and is synthesized by our subjective capacities; to speak of a world beyond that horizon is to lose what makes a world a world. Whatever may exist in

itself is quite a different question from what it is legitimate to claim to know.

Once we accept the premise of the necessarily subjective horizon of the world, the ethical imaginary limits itself to a virtual humanity. This yields not only the categorical imperative – where I can justify what I do only if I could imagine any other possible subject consenting to my decision – but the increasingly intense modern sense of a virtual humanity, or humanity to come. In order to think and act ethically I must regard this world and its history *as if* humanity were ultimately to arrive at virtue. This regard, I have suggested, is cinematic: viewing history as if it were a spatialized set of events requiring the synthesis of a spectator takes hold of the philosophical imaginary well before post-apocalyptic cinema and Anthropocene discourse. The stakes of this cinematic comportment become increasingly apparent in end of the world culture, where the very thought of the absence of a human viewer would amount to the end of the world.

Imagining the end of the world all too often becomes a fantasy of techno-managerialism: what's being played out is the dream of saving this world for us. In the face of possible non-existence what is not considered is the fragility and contingency of human existence. Rather than end times allowing us to think of other modes of existence, we appear to be increasingly incapable of imagining any world other than this historically contingent, but seemingly necessary, world of urban hyper-consumption. Whoever remarked that it was easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism failed to notice that nearly all contemporary 'end of world' epics depict nothing other than the end of

capitalism. Far from the sixth mass extinction prompting us to consider that what we have known as our world might be a fleeting moment in a cosmos of worlds, we have erased all sense that things might be otherwise. The more information and evidence that confirms the ways in which we have damaged the world to the point of our own non-viability, the more we present ourselves as exhaustive of the world, as though our own non being both amounted to the end of the world.

_____

Works Cited:

Brooks, Peter. 1984. *Reading for the Plot; Design and Intention in Narrative.* New York: Knopf.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1989. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image.* Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 1978. *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction.* Trans. John P. Leavy. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Edelman, Lee. 2004. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Heidegger, Martin. 1995. *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics, World, Finitude, Solitude.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Husserl, Edmund. 1960. *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology.* Trans. Dorian Cairns. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Jemisin, N.K. 2015. *The Fifth Season (The Broken Earth).* New York: Orbit.

Kant, Immanuel. 1996. 'Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason.' In *Religion and Rational Theology.* Ed. And Trans. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 39-216.

Kolbert, Elizabeth. 2014. *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History.* New York: Henry Holt.

Latour, Bruno, and Timothy M. Lenton. "Extending the Domain of Freedom, Or Why Gaia is so Hard to Understand." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2019, pp. 659-680.

Naas, Michael. 2015. *The End of the World and Other Teachable Moments: Jacques Derrida's Final Seminar.* New York: Fordham University Press.

Sheldon, Rebekah. 2016. *The Child to Come: Life After the Human Catastrophe.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Weisman, Alan. 2008. *The World Without Us.* New York: St Martins.

Zizek, Slavoj. 2011. *Living in the End Times.* London: Verso.

[i] https://www.fhi.ox.ac.uk; https://www.varsity.co.uk/news/17528