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Image(s) of the World's End from Archtexts to Popular Culture (Example-Based Exposition)*

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Słowa kluczowe: apokalipsa, recepcja/pragmatyczna estetyka szkoły nitrańskiej, narracje lukowe/architekci, kultura popularna/popkultura, fabuła/historia

Summary

Methodologically connecting the experience- and interpretation-based aesthetic approach to popular culture (Juraj Malíček) and the pragmatist aesthetics (Richard Shusterman) on one hand and the views of what is called arch-textual thematology (Mariana Čechová) on the other, the paper seeks to observe the ties between arch-texts, in particular the final book of the New Testament — the Book of Revelation, and ‘pop-texts,’ i.e. such popcultural works of art (films, TV series, literary texts, comics etc.), within the frame of which the end of the world images appear in one way or another and which can be labelled with the agnomen ‘pop.’ Various appearances of a reanimation of the apocalypse-theme in various (popcultural) works of art become in the paper, an example-based exposition of the topic, referentially object of interest — from catastrophic films directed by Roland Emmerich and the post-apocalyptic comic book series *Y: The Last Man* written by Brian K. Vaughan to TV series like, for instance, *Ragnarok* (from 2020) and literary works like the pre-apocalyptic novel trilogy written by Ben H. Winters or other iconic genre fiction (for example, Cormac McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*).

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And it's time we saw a miracle
 Come on, it's time for something biblical
 [...]

 And this is the end/This is the end
 Of the world

(Muse *Apocalypse Please*)

The term apocalypse, in connection with the thematic dimensions of works of art, is not meant here in a figurative sense, in which it can be related to essentially any major tragic event or catastrophe (even of varying scale or scope), but precisely in its literal sense, in which it, being also related to the source archnarrative/archtext, i.e. the final book of the New Testament, the *Book of Revelation*, signifies the final destiny of mankind and the world.¹ The diachronic and synchronic cultural significance of the Apocalypse of John, which is '[s]uch a continuation of the prophetic books of the Old Testament (in particular the books of Ezekiel, Zechariah and Daniel) and of Jewish apocalyptic literature [...], which, however, already originated in the circles of early Christianity'² lies, on one hand, in the fact that the Judeo-Christian tradition is one of the pillars of Western civilization, and, on the other hand, in the fact that for humanity — and regardless of the specific religious background — the issues tied to the end of man, existence, the world, etc. are since the beginning of the culture naturally fascinating because they are shrouded in mystery.³ While it is true that the source text itself is open to interpretation and doesn't have to be necessarily understood in eschatological but in church-historical contexts,⁴ the fact is that an eschatological (tied to the last things of man and the world) interpretation is, in terms of the appearance of the apocalypse as thematic material in the arts, far more frequent and therefore culturally relevant and defining. Also from a thematological perspective, as will ultimately be shown below, it seems most effective to think narrowly about the apocalypse as those events thematized in works of art that extend beyond the level of an individual towards the level of a collective, or more directly, the civilization, and also the level of the local/regional towards the level of the global.⁵

¹ See and cf. *Krátky slovník slovenského jazyka*, eds. J. Kačala, M. Pisárčiková, M. Považan, Veda, Bratislava 2003, <https://slovník.juls.savba.sk/?d=kssj4> (accessed: 28.12.2022).

² G. Gece, H. Horváth, *Malý lexikon Biblie*, Bratislava 1990, p. 17 (ad hoc translated from Slovak by M.B.).

³ In this context, it is quite interesting that the Greek word from which the term apocalypse is derived is polysemous — see S. Prince, *Apocalypse Cinema*, New Brunswick et al. 2021, pp. 10–11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁵ Globality appears to be particularly important in post-apocalyptic narratives, as evidenced by Heather Hicks' concept of the globalized ruin, which forms the core of the author's understanding of post-apocalyptic fiction — see H.J. Hicks, *The Post-Apocalyptic Novel of the Twenty-First Century: Modernity Beyond Salvage*, London 2016, pp. 6–7.

The authors of the thematological handbook *Themen und Motive in der Literatur*⁶ state that in relation to the theme of the apocalypse or the world's end in religious as well as secular texts four, as they call it, (motivic) constellations can be identified, i.e. '1. the representation of human and social decline or decay; 2. the outbreak of catastrophe; 3. the destruction of civilization; 4. the announcement or outright arrival of a new order.' In relation to the first constellation, the biblical account of the sinful cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which, as the seedbeds of sin, God destroyed with a rain of fire, could be used as an example. But, with regard to the motif of decay, perhaps also Marquis de Sade's controversial novel *The 120 Days of Sodom, or the School of Libertinage* (*Les 120 Journées de Sodome ou l'école du libertinage*, 1904; unfinished) thematising depravity and (moral) perversion in the form of the narrative about the events taking place at Silling Castle. The second constellation can be found both in the biblical story of the Flood and Noah's Ark, as well as in Albert Camus's novel *The Plague* (*La Peste*, 1947), although the plague epidemic here is symbolic or — somewhat more directly and as one of the key motifs — in Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Cat's Cradle* (1963), for example. The third constellation finds its application, for example, in Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's novel *Lucifer's Hammer* (1977). Another example of a narrative in which the apocalypse took place and marked the end of civilization as people knew it is Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* (2006). In it, the author does not thematize the apocalypse as such, it is present only in form of a starting point, as the prose primarily follows the fates of the characters of a father and son wandering through a devastated landscape (as consequence of the apocalypse). As for the fourth constellation, the announcement or arrival of a new order can be identified in the contexts of literature in the vast majority of dystopias, anti-utopias, and so-called post-apocalyptic narratives. Examples include, on one hand, Margaret Atwood's iconic dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and, on the other hand, Max Brooks' novel *World War Z* (2006), subtitled *An Oral History of the Zombie War*.

As the examples document, the above-quoted attempt to systematize or classify is problematic — especially because the four constellations are not clearly separable in the practice of art: constellations 2 and 3 overlap (which is directly confirmed not only by the above-mentioned but also by many other examples). All four constellations can also be conceived as a thematic algorithm, with respect to the factual forms of the apocalypse in narrative art, in which a broadly understood human and social decline leads to the outbreak of a catastrophe (e.g. ecological or economic), what culminates in the destruction of civilization whereby — since in the vast majority of narratives someone somehow survives — the ultimate consequence is a new (world) order. The aforementioned biblical flood of the world can be considered as a conclusive example in this regard. Moving beyond literature,

⁶ H.S. Daemmrich, I. Daemmrich, *Themen und Motive in der Literatur. Ein Handbuch*, Tübingen–Basel 1995, p. 47.

the book series *The 100* (2013–2016) by Kass Morgan, later adapted into a television series, or the originally French graphic novel *Le Transperceneige* (1984; *Snowpiercer*) by Jacques Lob and Jean-Marc Rochette, adapted first into a feature film and then into a television series, seem to be functional examples in this respect. While for the first narrative the underlying motif is nuclear war, which led to humanity having to leave the planet and live in a space colony, for the second the key plot point is a global environmental catastrophe ushering in a new ice age, and thus causing the survivors to inhabit a train powered by the principle of perpetual motion.

The apocalypse appears in one form or another in many works across time and across art form and genres; as a thematic element (explicit or implicit) it is present in, let's say, John Milton's biblical baroque and serious epic *Paradise Lost* (1667; 2nd edition 1674), as well as in Douglas Adams' iconic and comedic five-part trilogy *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979–1992). Also in view of the different modes of expression of works thematizing the apocalypse in one way or another, but also in view of the problematic nature of the thematic-motivic constellations formulated by Ingrid and Horst Daemrlich, it seems much more effective to pay attention to the apocalypse in the logic of what position it occupies in a particular story or rather plot, or in what relation to it a particular story/plot is. According to this key, three kinds of narratives can be identified: pre-apocalyptic, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic. It is true that while in pre-apocalyptic narratives the apocalypse, as a threat that usually does not get fulfilled, functions as a catalyst for the plot, in post-apocalyptic narratives the plot usually does not include it (if, then only in flashbacks of various kinds) and as such it is more a thematization of its consequences. In terms of the extent of occurrence of each type of story, the least numerous seem to be directly apocalyptic stories; the most numerous — at least in the recent period — are, by contrast, the post-apocalyptic ones, what can be attributed to the fact that, with regard to current global issues (climate crisis, energy crisis, global pandemic, rapid scientific progress, etc.), post-apocalyptic stories function as fictions of warning.⁷

A look at the history of culture and art confirms, after all, that the thematization of the end of the world tends to be most prevalent at times that are defined by major turning points — the bombing of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II is a case in point, as Daniel N. Wójcik,⁸ for example, intensely and repeatedly thematizes it in his book on the apocalypse in connection with faith and fatalism. One of the most iconic cinematic achievements reflecting the threat of nuclear apocalypse, even, according to Wójcik,⁹ 'a masterpiece of

⁷ For more on this, see 'Cautionary Tale', [entry in:] M.K. Booker, A.M. Thomas, *The Science Fiction Handbook*, Hoboken 2009, p. 322.

⁸ D. Wójcik, *The End of the World as We Know It: Faith, Fatalism and Apocalypse in America*, York–London 1997, pp. 32–33.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

apocalyptic gallows humour,' is Stanley Kubrick's cinematic satire *Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned Not to Worry and to Love the Bomb* (USA–Great Britain 1964). In more recent history, the transition from the second to the third millennium and what is referred to as Y2K in reference to the year 2000 is also worth mentioning as an example of a watershed moment.¹⁰ From the recent past, one can also mention in this regard the year 2012, which — also in its alleged connection to the Mayan calendar and its end — was supposed to be the year of the end of the world. It was this prediction, tied to the numerical-symbolic date of 21 December 2012, that inspired Roland Emmerich's disaster film *2012* (USA 2009). The theme of the end of the world, by the way, also appears in Emmerich's other films falling into the category of the audience-pleasing (sub)genre of catastrophic science fiction films, namely *Independence Day* (USA 1996) and *The Day After Tomorrow* (USA 2004). While in the former the apocalypse becomes a theme in the context of an alien invasion, in the latter its source code is the climate crisis or the problem of global warming. Perhaps it was in response to the predicted but ultimately unrealised end of the world that the established genre filmmakers in the contexts of contemporary popular culture (Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg on one hand and Edgar Wright and Simon Pegg on the other) decided in 2013 to treat the apocalypse as thematic material in the contexts of the comedy genre, or comedic — and in terms of the plot rather bizarre — films. While the American film *This is the End* (dir. Seth Rogen, Evan Goldberg, USA 2013) is primarily defined by its incorrectness (the humour is often borderline) and a kind of metafictionality (the actresses and actors portray themselves; in this sense, the Czech distribution title *Apokalypsa v Hollywoodu* containing the word Hollywood is fitting), the British comedy film *World's End* (dir. Edgar Wright, Great Britain 2013) is primarily a meta-genre project with elements of social drama (for example, through the motif of homecoming or the motif of alienation). From a thematic perspective and in relation to the theme of the apocalypse and its position in a particular storyline or rather plot, it is noteworthy that while Wright's film is predominantly pre-apocalyptic (the main characters try to prevent the end of the world) and because of the final epilogue sequence, it is also a post-apocalyptic narrative, Goldberg and Rogen's film is one of the few truly apocalyptic narratives — the apocalypse is the climax of the narrative, it is the conclusion of the narrative. In the thematic context, it is interesting that — despite all its peculiarities, even controversiality — the apocalypse is actually thematised in relative conformity with Christian dogmas or rather the Christian worldview, what is confirmed by the final sequence, which shows the central duo of characters in heaven after the end of the world.

Narratives thematizing the end of the world in one way or another fall quite naturally, with regard to the theme itself, usually into the supergenre category of fantastic fiction, most often into SF (science fiction as well as speculative fiction)

¹⁰ See, for example, C. Horrocks, *Baudrillard a milénium*, Praha 2002.

and horror. In any case, this by no means exhausts the basic genre nature of end-of-the-world stories. Since pre-apocalyptic stories usually work with the motif of imminent threat, the thriller finds a place in their genre nature through suspense (the struggle against time). And on a general level, the above is true whether the apocalypse is averted or sabotaged by a hero (let's say, Peter Hyams' *End of Days*, USA 1999) or a straight-up heroic collective (let's say, Michael Bay's *Armageddon*, USA 1998), or by an oddly mismatched duo, the angel Aziraphale and the demon Crowley (Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett's comedic fantasy novel *Good Omens. The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch*, 1990). Since post-apocalyptic stories work quite fundamentally with the motif of the struggle for survival or the motif of wandering (both of which are conditioned by the setting of a largely devastated landscape, a ruined world), their genre nature is strongly co-defined by adventure. In connection with the theme of the end of the world, signs of psychological or socio-psychological drama (chaos, failure of previous social structures, fear, insecurity, isolation, etc.) appear quite naturally in most of this type of narratives — this fact is documented quite aptly not only in the eighth series of the horror anthology TV series *American Horror Story*, simply subtitled *Apocalypse* (dir. Bradley Buecker et al., USA 2018), but also in Xavier Gens' extremely disturbing and inherently intimate psychological horror film *The Divide* (USA–Germany 2011). This claustrophobic movie, plot of which unfolds around a group of several disparate characters taking refuge in a basement fallout shelter, moreover aptly illustrates one of the leitmotifs of many apocalypse narratives, namely the contrast between the 'big' story (global cataclysm) and the 'small' story (most often the fate of an individual). Another variant of the contrast between the 'big' and the 'small' story — besides linking together a pre-apocalyptic narrative and detective fiction — appears in Ben H. Winters' novel trilogy *The Last Policeman* (2012–2014), following police detective Henry Palace, determined, despite the threat of the end of the world, to discover the truth and thus solve the crime. Yet the questions from the cover of the Czech edition of the first volume are eloquent in relation to the nature of the narrative: 'What's the point of solving the murders when we're all going to die in six months anyway? [...] On what foundations does our civilization rest? What is the value of life? What would you do, what would you really do, if your days were numbered?'¹¹ Winters' unconventional detective trilogy can also be described as an implicit apocalyptic narrative; although the text itself does not explicitly thematize this, readers have little choice but to interpret the conclusion of the third part as implying that the apocalypse is irreversible and has occurred in the fictional world outside the plot of the novels themselves. In the force field of the contrast between the 'big' and the 'small' story, or — because there is a bit of a shift from Winters' novel series — in relation to the oppositions

¹¹ B.H. Winters, *Čas se krátí*, transl. M. Polová, Praha 2015, back cover (ad hoc translated from Czech by M.B.).

global vs. individual or objective vs. subjective, there is, among others, Lars von Trier's film with a title that is indicative of both the end of the world theme and the expressiveness of the film itself, *Melancholia* (Denmark–Sweden–France–Germany 2011).

In terms of post-apocalyptic narratives, M. Keith Booker and Anne-Marie Thomas¹² state that the first science fiction narrative of this kind is usually claimed to be the 1826 novel by the in connection to fantastic fiction seminal author Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*. It is worth noting that this is one of those works of fiction which, from a present-day / contemporary perspective, exhibit considerable anticipatory-prognostic dimensions (in the past largely associated with science fiction, as it were, inherently). The title of Shelley's novel may evoke the popular comic book series by the author trio around Brian K. Vaughan's *Y: The Last Man* (2002–2008). While Shelley's prose concentrates on the pandemic-stricken world of the late 21st century and focuses on the character of the seemingly immune Lionel Verney, who towards the end of the story wanders the depopulated world as possibly the last man on Earth, searching for possible other survivors, Vaughan's comic book script follows the fate of Yorick Brown, who is the only human individual with a Y chromosome to survive the andro-apocalypse of the early 21st century. (Brian K. Vaughan's script may remind the iconic Polish film *Seksmisja* [dir. Juliusz Machulski, Poland 1983] due to its basic and founding elements). The anchoring of the end-of-the-world theme in the context of fantastic fiction is confirmed not only by Shelley's novel and other examples already mentioned, but also by another classic work of the science fiction genre, namely Herbert George Wells' novel *The Time Machine* (1895). The latter can also be seen as pioneering on the level in which the thematization of the end of the world is linked to the motif of time travel or time and space travel, as the case may be. In this sense, then, Wells also seems to foreshadow such narratives as the *Terminator* (i.a. dir. James Cameron, USA–Great Britain 1984) film series/franchise or the *Supernatural* (USA 2005–2020) television series. While the former group of narratives thematizes time travel and the (scientific-)technological apocalypse (the key motif being that artificial intelligence acquires consciousness, defies humans and initiates a nuclear cataclysm), the latter — in relation to the setting of the alternate universe that appears in the series from the twelfth series onwards — works with the motif of space travel and the topos of the alternate world. In the fictional world of the series, the theme is rather a Christian-mythological apocalypse (the struggle between the forces of Heaven and Hell). Wójcik¹³ notes that understandings of end-of-the-world imagery have varied considerably depending on historical and cultural context, and that the symbolism and interpretation of particular scenes described in the *Revelation of St. John* — for example, the opening of the seven seals — have

¹² M.K. Booker, A.M. Thomas, 'Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Fiction', [in:] M.K. Booker, A.M. Thomas, *The Science Fiction Handbook*, p. 53.

¹³ D. Wójcik, *The End of the World as We Know It*, p. 31.

also varied. Although the author does not state the above in relation to (contemporary) art, his words can be understood as legitimizing all sorts of (re)interpretations of apocalyptic scenes, even the more extreme or radical ones — for example, the fact that in Gaiman and Pratchett’s novel *Good Omens*, the plague among the four horsemen of the apocalypse has been replaced by Pollution.

Although in our cultural area Christianity forms a key framework to which narratives thematizing the apocalypse are in one way or another tied, it should not be forgotten that “[a]ll cultures have apocalyptic myths.”¹⁴ The authors of the thematological handbook *Themen und Motive in der Literatur* further illustrate the above idea with references to Hesiod, in whom motifs of this kind appear in connection with the thematization of cosmic and human decay, but also to Norse mythology — the key words here being Ragnarök and *Völuspá*. While the latter is the title of one of the mythological poems, the former is a marker of the end of the world: “The word ragnarok is a compound, the first part ragna meaning “ordering forces” and was commonly used when referring to the gods. The second component, rok, means “fate” or “destiny.” Thus the whole word means the fate or destiny of the gods. The second component, however, was confused in early studies of Germanic mythology with the word rokkr, meaning “dusk.””¹⁵ In contemporary art, the image of the end of the world defined by the framework of Norse mythology appears sporadically. In the mainstream of globally distributed popular culture, it has resonated more prominently in two works in particular — the third of the films about the originally comic book superhero character Thor (*Thor: Ragnarok*, dir. Taika Waititi, USA–Australia 2017) and the Norwegian TV fantasy series *Ragnarok* (Norway 2020–2023, dir. Mogens Hagedorn et al.) inspired by the Norse mythology. The former is sparingly touching on mythological material, including end-of-the-world themes, and is rather only initially inspired by it, while being highly reinterpreted (in the film, Hela is the daughter of Odin and the older sister of Thor, although in Norse mythology Hel, the guardian of the world of the dead, is the daughter of Loki). The second is also reinterpreted in relation to Norse mythology (the narrative is set in the fictional city of Edda, the protagonist is the young man Magne, otherwise a reincarnation of Thor) and the links to the archtext are rather allusive-subtle, but it is worth noting that the mythological end of the world from the title of the series is materialized in the narrative in the form of a factual threat from the actual world — the theme is ecological crisis or pollution. Here — as in many other works — Stephen Prince’s¹⁶ words about the fact that in popular cinema contexts there is often a secular/secularising ‘translation’ of religious content, and the apocalypse is linked by the filmmakers to ac-

¹⁴ H.S. Daemmrich, I. Daemmrich, *Themen und Motive in der Literatur*, p. 49 (ad hoc translated from German by M.B.).

¹⁵ *Mytológia. Ilustrovaný sprievodca svetovými mýtmi a legendami*, Bratislava 2006, p. 320 (ad hoc translated from Slovak by M.B.).

¹⁶ S. Prince, *Apocalypse Cinema*, p. 3.

tual problems (ecological crisis, pandemics, nuclear threat, etc.) seem to be echoed. There are at least two other titles in Nordic cinema that are very different in relation to the end of the world: August Blom's *Verdens undergang* (Denmark 1916), which can be seen as foreshadowing modern catastrophe-apocalyptic narratives of the *Armageddon*-type, and Mikkel Brønne Sandemose's *Ragnarok* (Norway 2013), which admittedly finds inspiration in Nordic mythology, but also reinterprets it significantly because the nature of the story is dominated by adventure (the protagonist is an archaeologist, the treasure-hunting motif is important in the storyline) and also by the fantastic (the serpentine monster).

Not only from a thematological perspective, but also from a cultural-anthropological perspective, for example, two moments are particularly significant in relation to the end of the world theme (both the Christian apocalypse and the Nordic ragnarök) — not least because they perhaps justify the frequent occurrence of the theme in art across time: fate or fatefulness and something that can be called the openness/closedness of the end. In his book on the end of the world in relation to faith and fatalism, Wójcik¹⁷ problematizes the question of the inevitability of the apocalypse, or that it can also be understood as part of God's plan for humanity, repeatedly. For Norse mythology, the element of fatality is explicitly constitutive:

Norse mythology is permeated with the idea of fate. Fate could not be changed. This idea culminated in the Ragnarok, the imminent destruction of the world, and this inevitability pervades all Norse mythology. The end of the world was also precisely foreordained by the details of what would happen, and the gods were preparing for it every day. [...] Even when the gods were threatened with destruction, they could not stop the coming of the ragnarok. The doom was bound to come, and all they could do was keep calm and bravely wait for certain destruction. For the Norse, fate was a part of their lives, something that could not be avoided or changed and had to be met without fear.¹⁸

At the same time, it is worth recalling the words of Horst and Ingrid Daemmrich¹⁹ that '[w]ith the exception of the Islamic tradition, apocalypses end with the prospect of the future.' In the Christian tradition, one can mention in this respect the chiliasm (Christ's millennial reign) or the emergence of a new heaven and a new earth after the Last Judgement.²⁰ In Nordic mythology, then, the motif of the end as a new beginning, and thus the materialization of ontological-existential hope, is perhaps even somewhat stronger:

When the fire finally subsides and the seas recede, the earth will rise again from the sea whole and fertile. The sprouts will rise again, though they have not been sown, and the harvest will be abundant. Odin's sons Vidar and Vali will be alive, along with Thor's sons Modi and Magni, who will wield the hammer Mjøltnir. Balder and Hod will arrive from Hel, and all will

¹⁷ D. Wójcik, *The End of the World as We Know It*.

¹⁸ *Mytológia*, p. 320 (ad hoc translated from Slovak by M.B.).

¹⁹ H.S. Daemmrich, I. Daemmrich, *Themen und Motive in der Literatur*, p. 49 (ad hoc translated from German by M.B.).

²⁰ See G. Gecse, H. Horváth, *Malý lexikon Biblie*, pp. 73–74 and 18 (ad hoc translated from Slovak by M.B.).

always sit on the grass where Asgard once was and reminisce about the past. These gods will rule the world again and tell each other stories of the old gods, of Fenrir and the Midgard serpent. The sun will give birth to a daughter as buoyant as himself before he is devoured by the wolf, and the daughter will follow him, taking the same path on her life-giving journey crossing the sky. The world of men will be repopulated by two men, Lif and Lifthrasir, who will remain hidden during the Ragnarok in the clearing of Yggdrasil. The end will thus contain within itself the germ of a new beginning, and the cycle of life will begin anew.²¹

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