

SECTION 2

DOCUMENTARY IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

Chapter 5

‘We Are Dead and We Are Going to Die’: The Apocalypse Documentary

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It is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.

—Fredric Jameson

Where once one may have looked solely to fiction for visions of the future, increasingly, with credible climate-induced end of world portents coming at us from all directions, documentary is being recruited for the job. In the desperate scramble to imagine a viable future, it is to the realist arts we turn, as if there is no time left for fanciful stories now that our lives may depend on these portrayals. In film, representing the future is no longer strictly the provenance of sci-fi or action films; humanity’s glorious and spectacular end is now being declared, in fascinating and disturbing ways, by documentary as well. In the past five years alone, projects such as the Canadian-funded ‘Documentary Futures: The Next 150 Years’ and the US-supported ‘Futures We Dream Documentary Series’ have emerged, in addition to countless conference panels and presentations with titles such as ‘Documentary Speculations’, ‘Sci-Fi Documentary’, ‘Sustainable Futures’, ‘Envisioning Planetary Futures’ and ‘Ethnographic Speculation’.

With the message coming through loud and clear that the end could well be near, all manner of futurizing appears to be upon us. However, even within the documentary and experimental film sphere there are those who strive to imagine alternatives to the system that created the conditions for our demise, with Indigenous- and Afro-futurisms leading the way, while others appear to succumb to the belief that there’s

nothing to be done but watch the self-fulfilling prophesy unfold. And while no one can know which of these futurizing documentary speculations may turn out to be right, for after all, not even the most factually based prognostication can pretend to know the future, it is intriguing to think about the different approaches taken in documentaries that dare to tread in the uncertain terrain of the future.

My focus in this chapter will be on the work of those for whom the epithet attributed to Jameson appears most apt: inheritors and main beneficiaries of a system that was developed by and for them. In other words, as I will argue in this chapter, these divergent tendencies in the face of the future appear to be both racialized and gendered, with those proffering the vision of total catastrophic collapse being overwhelmingly the very beneficiaries of the system most responsible for the Anthropocene – that interlocking set of dominating logics of capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy.

As indicated, there are those who are diligently attempting to imagine otherwise, including Indigenous- and Afro-futurisms, as well as activists and scholars whose work helps us to imagine alternative post-capitalist, non-extractivist futures. Works by Adam and Zach Khalil (*Inaate/se* 2016), Sky Hopinka (*Malni: Towards the Ocean, Towards the Shore* 2020), Denise Ferreira da Silva and Arjuna Neuman (*4 Waters: Deep Implicancy* 2018) Thirza Cuthand (*Reclamation* 2018) and John Akomfrah (*The Last Angel of History* 1996; *Purple* 2017) give just a taste of this vibrant artistic and documentary movement. I intend to turn my attention to such work in the future, but in this chapter, I will consider the limits of the documentary imaginary of doom, as depicted in a small selection of films that I call ‘the apocalypse documentary’. In the apocalypse documentary, the future is depicted via the filmic present, positing a proleptic future anterior that bears the implacable conviction of certitude. What will have been is already here, its inevitability testified to by the visible evidence, filmed in observational style, and portrayed for all to see on screen. While I do not intend to affirm or deny the imaginary offered by these films, I would like to interrogate their methods, metaphors, and assertions, to better understand the implications of their message. What will become clear in the process, however, is that these films are less portents of the end than symptoms of the failures of a phallocratic, expansionist, extractivist, imaginary to envision alternatives to this demise. As Geographer Erik Swyngedouw (2010: 219) has argued, ‘sustaining and nurturing apocalyptic imaginaries is an integral and vital part of the new cultural politics of capitalism.’

The very first words of T. J. Demos’ book, *Beyond the World’s End* (2020) are: ‘We are entering the endgame – the terminal point of democracy, of liberalism, of capitalism, of a cool planet, of the Anthropocene, of the world as we know it.’ Demos, along with other anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, and de-colonial thinkers, has spent the last several years analysing moving images exploring just what an anti-Anthropogenic future might look like. And yet, for others, it turns out that rather than looking to a future beyond the dominant, toxic waste-generating, global economy of the present, they would rather directly imagine the world’s end. It even appears to be a pleasurable fantasy, faced with the same sort of glee that some little boys (and a few too many

grown men) bring to discussions of things like warships and bomber planes. I would not include either Jameson or Demos in that category, as I do not think either derives any such pleasure from these speculations, but I am intrigued by the blitheness or alternatively, the sombre serenity, with which such end of world prognostications are being declared. It is even more startling to witness ways in which this demise is being imagined in the documentary sphere which has generally been cautious to the point of abstaining almost entirely from presenting visions of the future.

In this chapter, I focus on a few prime examples of the apocalypse documentary, beginning with an analysis of Werner Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness* (1992), moving on to Nikolaus Geyrhalter's *Homo Sapiens* (2016), and ending with a discussion of Michael Madsen's *Into Eternity: A Film for the Future* (2010). Why these three films? Admittedly, the more likely place to look for films that not only portend our demise but also go some way to prefigure it in visual terms would be documentaries made for commercial television and cable, with for instance, the History Channel's hit series: *Life After People* (2008–10) and *Doomsday: 10 Ways the World Will End* (2016), or National Geographic's *Aftermath: Population Zero* (2008 and 2010). Creative independent documentary tends to be less prone towards the sensationalist or the hyperbolic than its commercial siblings, but it is for this reason that it is all the more surprising and perhaps disturbing to find that such apocalyptic visions have been with us as an almost subliminal undercurrent of documentary since at least Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness*, if not earlier in films such as Peter Watkins's *The War Game* (1965), and have found expression in the 2000s at the hands of other reliable and reputable filmmakers such as Geyrhalter and Madsen. There are other documentary imaginings of the post-Anthropocene future that serve as a bridge to the apocalypse documentary. Films such as *The Age of Stupid* (Armstrong 2009) which mobilizes the impending end of life on earth as a narrative device used to castigate us about our infinite hubris in the present. Or for that matter, *The Hottest August* (Story 2019), which while situating itself very much in the present, asks random interviewees of a particular place and time (New York City during the summer of 2017), about their thoughts and fears regarding the future.¹ Such films, however, hold out the hope that the present is still a time of action and potential to change the course of the future, something that the apocalypse documentary does not do.

The three films that I consider in some depth here have in common an attempt to prefigure a future where humanity has ceased to exist, and to do so while resolutely remaining in the present. That is to say, what they represent can be found in the filmic here and now, as we are brought face to face with what the filmmakers want to say on our impending and catastrophic end. The three independent documentary films I will be looking at here do share something identifiable with the more popular commercial fare, and that is the reflex to catastrophize, particularly on matters concerning the Anthropocene and its effects, or more particularly, the inclination to jump right past 'the trouble' of survival and wallow perhaps a bit too quickly in the foregone nihilistic conclusion: the end is nigh.

Thus, the apocalypse documentary, as I have identified it, has a grandeur to it, a type of mastery that partakes of a particular privilege, that of avoiding the more local,

more prosaic work of survival and repair, leaping over the mess and straight into the beyond. Such a move has been identified by several key feminist thinkers as a masculinist prerogative (Zylinska 2018; Haraway 2016; Tsing 2015; Barad 2007), as well as a colonialist one (Singh 2018). It is a manoeuvre that essentially leaves the clean-up and the caretaking to others in an all too familiar and all too familiarly gendered and racialized trope. Yet, there is another aspect that we might identify in these sweepingly masterful gestures, one that is less commonly identified with patriarchal prowess, but one that appears to be part and parcel of it as well. In the revelatory glee expressed in witnessing the glory of the blaze with which man may be seen to exit the stage, and certainly in the melancholic afterglow (dare I call it the *petite mort*), we can also identify a profound ambivalence that sits like a hole in the heart (a constitutive atrial septal defect) of the man-made project, as if to say, can we be done with this glorious yet 'dangerous and repulsive'² experiment already?

While the apocalypse documentaries I will be discussing in some depth here are much more muted and contemplative than their sensationalist cousins, there is, as I say, a discernible relation. For one thing, they all appear to borrow from earlier Christian tropes of Armageddon; there is no prospect of salvation or redemption, or in Derrida's words, 'it is an apocalypse without apocalypse ... an apocalypse beyond good and evil' (1992: 66). For another, they allude to the future – a tense to which documentary has rarely had recourse. The apocalypse – and here I refer to its secular, man-made, variety though this could hold equally true for the religious version – is not something that documentary has tended to manage very well, at least in part because the future tense has never been documentary's forte. Documentary operates with confidence in the present and past tense. Observational documentary, to which I will return in due course, is especially adept at the present tense, and in its purest form is steadfastly presentist, with a forthright stance of 'being there', and alluding to the past only as recounted by those in its perpetual present or embedded in the imagery of that present. Historically themed documentaries have generally had to find alternatives to the observational mode, but there is no lack of technique for unearthing and articulating that which has come before: be it archival material, witness accounts through formal or informal interview, re-enactment or some admixture therein.

It is particularly in the future tense (along with the prehistoric past) where documentary has found the least firm footing, heavily dependent as it would be on speculation and conjecture. There have been some attempts, notably as already mentioned, Peter Watkins's *The War Game* (1965), which prognosticated, with compelling realism, the effects of a nuclear attack on a Kentish village. But even though Watkins' film won the Academy Award in 1966 in the documentary category, it is an entirely scripted and acted production, engaging local amateur actors to participate in a forensically researched and likely credible pre-enactment of a nuclear attack. The fake documentary, or docudrama, is one of the key 'documentary' modes in which filmmakers have chosen to address the future, mobilizing documentary authority and credibility in the service of a speculative project, and I certainly think Watkins' film can be considered

a prototype for the apocalypse documentary. Surely its realistic portrayal of the utter devastation that such a nuclear attack would cause, allegedly precipitating the BBC's censorship of the film for fear of audience credulity, should confer this status upon it.³

But the films of this study do not avail themselves of the docudrama licence, nor do they include any flashy graphics or slick CGI that you would find in the popularized commercial documentary, cleaving much more closely and carefully to the techniques that distinguish documentary from fiction rather than blurring the admittedly murky boundaries. The techniques to which I refer include a heavy reliance on observational footage and in the case of *Lessons of Darkness* and *Into Eternity*, some interview materials as well as voice-over narration.

For documentary that sticks closer to a more classical documentary style, eschewing the bells and whistles of fictional techniques, to concern itself with the apocalypse in particular, one would expect for it to operate in the expository vein, containing lengthy explanations and interviews with those who might be engaged in predicting, analysing, or otherwise theorizing the coming end. Anything else would necessarily imply that the apocalypse – to mangle Francis Ford Coppola's title – is happening now. And yet, it is precisely such an assertion that the apocalypse documentary makes. If we were to find a grammatical equivalent to the tense in which the apocalypse documentary speaks, the closest might be the future anterior (otherwise known, in English grammar, as the future perfect, 'this will have been'). The films under review here essentially say to us: since we have been able to photograph this, what you see here will already be underway, thus asserting that the future is, in effect, already here. Such visual certainties, visible evidence which operates on the level of synecdoche (surely they cannot have filmed everything, so that which is depicted stands in for the whole), lends the desired inevitability to their claim, while simultaneously foreclosing any other possible future imaginaries in the process. In other words, the claims made by these films have a totalizing quality.

All three of the apocalypse documentaries I discuss here operate in this ineffable predictive tone of the future anterior, though each approaches this temporality with a slightly different inflection. Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness* takes recourse in eternal truths that are meant to be as relevant now as they were in the past and will be, presumably, in the future; Geyrhalter privileges a more prosaic observational evidentiary mode, as if disclosing the path already laid out in front of us, while Madsen thrusts his voice into a hypothetical future, attempting to expose the blind spots of even our best scientific projections in the process.

My first encounter with an apocalypse documentary was several years back, the memory of which has haunted my visual field even when I had lost, and had to eventually track down, the referent. Seared into my brain were the images of the burning oil fields in Werner Herzog's film *Lessons of Darkness* (1992), a film he made during the first Gulf War after Saddam Hussein's vengeful retreat from Kuwait. In *Lessons of Darkness*, Herzog shoots what he clearly and instinctively identifies as an end of the world portent, a kind of 'present day' Armageddon unfolding before his, and our, eyes.

Herzog withholds the urge to historicize the images presented by refusing to identify precisely where we are and what we are seeing. Instead, he chooses to treat these images allegorically. Ever the romantic idealist in search of his 'ecstatic truth', it is his way of seeing beyond the facts – those pesky things that accountants count like beans⁴ – to the higher truths implied by the scene.

Herzog films the black, billowing inferno predominantly from the safety of a helicopter, taking a god's eye view of the unfolding catastrophe, and he accompanies the hellish images with text from the Book of Revelation, Chapter 9, which is also known, serendipitously, as the Apocalypse of John. He takes recourse in the mytho-poetic sublimity of the moment, a singular event that announces itself as timeless and universal in its formless, boundless, hideous power. Importantly for our purposes, as Kant tells us, the sublime must be apprehended from a requisite 'safe place' so as not to induce the physical fear that such awesome events can inspire. This precisely describes Herzog's chopper shot which allows him to view the noxious event without choking to death on its fumes. For Herzog, from his safe distance, it is easy to ruminate on the near biblical proportions of this catastrophe, without ever having to absorb, in any meaningful way, the all too real implications for the human and non-human populations in Kuwait and downwind of the black clouds of smoke, the toxic fallout of which continues in its effects to this day.⁵ Herzog's 'safe place' allows for a metaphorical rather than a historical or material relationship to the horrorscape.

Kant's sublime refers to what he, in his time, thought of as nature or natural events, brought on by God: 'tempests, storms, earthquakes, etc.'. Kant says 'Provided we are in a safe place', visions of violence and destruction can work to

raise the soul's fortitude above its usual middle range and allow us to discover in ourselves an ability to resist which is of quite a different kind, and which gives us the courage to believe that we could be a match for nature's seeming omnipotence. (Kant 1987: 120; Ak 261 in the German text)

The problem with viewing man-made acts of utter devastation, such as those witnessed in *Lessons of Darkness*, in the manner in which Kant prescribes is threefold:

First, what safe space can there be said to be when the plumes of toxic smoke cover an estimated 200–400 km of the earth's surface for months, raining down all manner of poisons on the earth's inhabitants, not to mention into the water supply and onto the earth itself. What illusion of distance must be fabricated, and indeed, how does cinema help to amplify that illusion? Second, witnessing this act of hubris goes beyond evoking the joy of imagining we are a match for 'nature's seeming omnipotence' since the joy, if we call it that, turns quickly into despair when we acknowledge that man has actually attempted to match this omnipotence, not just imagine he is a match for it. And finally, what benefit is there in imagining we are omnipotent in this arena, when clearly it is to our own very significant detriment that all of this takes place?

So, recourse to the sublime in the apocalypse documentary is, in effect, a pretext, a distraction from our own implication in the events we are witnessing. It is a way of distancing the viewer from the scene of destruction, affording us a contemplative space that suggests our ultimate separateness, not entirely unlike the fantasy of escaping earth to colonize another planet as this one goes down in a ball of flames; a fantasy that would have us deny both the inescapability of the effects – if not on us directly then certainly on life and that which sustains it – and our culpability, again not necessarily our own directly, but perhaps, depending on who ‘we’ understand ourselves to be, more directly than we’d like to admit.

Herzog flies above the wreckage as if he is not implicated in it, as if he, and others similarly privileged, can contemplate the hideous beauty of the end and somehow not be swallowed up by it. Herzog nonetheless shares with our next filmmaker, Nikolaus Geyrhalter, the irrepressible impulse to document and bear witness, to capture the irreversible environmental devastation catalysed by human overreach, going some way to envision just what the end of the world might look like. No need for elaborate sets and fictional narratives, with the right access and the inclination to film, there is plenty of material to not only help us imagine what the end might look like but also ask us to watch as humans facilitate, in real time, the possibility of our own demise.

Images of the world without us (to borrow from the very influential 2007 book by Alan Weisman that has directly or indirectly inspired several apocalypse documentaries, especially of the commercial variety, but also Geyrhalter’s *Homo Sapiens*) might seem somewhat proleptic for documentary. There are films that have pointed in that direction (including Herzog’s), but presumably, when it does finally arrive, we won’t be around to film it, let alone watch that film. At least this is what I thought until at the 2016 Berlinale, I sat dumbfounded yet mesmerized, watching Nikolaus Geyrhalter’s observational feature documentary, *Homo Sapiens*. The title itself suggests a retrospective gaze, the way we usually refer to the now extinct *Australopithecus Afarensis* or *Homo Neanderthalensis* (Neanderthals). And given that we are in the midst of an acknowledged period of mass extinction (the sixth mass extinction the planet has known, as described by Elizabeth Kolbert), there is absolutely no reason why we cannot or should not imagine that our own extinction may well be impending. But, as I say, it isn’t just our impending doom that this film posits; it is its presence amongst us already, suggesting something of the paradox that Roland Barthes tells us inheres in the photographic image. He posited in *Camera Lucida* that every photograph in effect proposes just such an impossible simultaneity, announcing both: ‘We are dead and we are going to die.’

The anti-sublime of *Homo Sapiens*

It is more than just the prospect of apocalypse that inclines even photorealists towards a type of aestheticization that leans in the direction of the sublime. Even the post/industrial catastrophists are so inclined. The current penchant for films about capitalism’s ruins cannot repress the urge to find the beauty in the horror, developing

what has been termed the ‘post-industrial picturesque’ (Fassi 2010) or worse ‘ruin porn’. The aestheticization of the poisoning of the planet, the ambitious overreach of its human inhabitants, and the magnificent vision of interminable and unrecyclable waste created by the most profligate, extractive and depleting system ever invented (industrial capitalism) is surely to be decried.

To find beauty in the patterns of discolouration, etched by toxic acid into the earth’s surface by nickel tailings, as in the ‘manufactured landscapes’ of Edward Burtynsky, verges on the obscene. It is at best irresponsible, at worst unconscionable, for film-makers to revel in the allure of these images, given their implications for the sustainability of life on earth, as if aesthetics and politics operate in completely different registers of judgement.

I want to signal a shift here from *Lessons of Darkness* as well as from other more recent celebrations of the awesome beauty of man-made ruin. For as magisterial as the framing of the shots may be in Geyrhalter’s *Homo Sapiens*, beauty and aesthetics seem less a central aim than a casual byproduct, like a shiny throw-away wrapper that is useless within seconds of opening. Or perhaps more to the point, the beauty of his images does little to adorn the starkness of their object – it makes no difference whether you find the image in the frame beautiful, moving, transcendent or what have you – it is still bound to a referent which, like a deeply embedded tick, can only be disassociated from its material implications at the viewer’s peril. Perhaps it is useful to compare Geyrhalter’s representation of anthropogenic excess in *Homo Sapiens* with Baichwal et al.’s in *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* (2018). Where Geyrhalter locks frame and holds his shots almost unbearably long, allowing the viewer to contemplate the margins as well as the centre of the scene, and to take in the implications of what we see, Baichwal’s camera soars in glorious drone flights, often accompanied by similarly soaring music and the dulcet tones of megastar Alicia Vikander’s narration reassuringly anchoring the images to a pat explanation. With Geyrhalter, no explanation is forthcoming, but the effect of less not more information, less not more accompaniment through the devastation, leaves the viewer in the stark space of undoing, giving no hand-holding reassurances of familiar filmic tropes or pacing to lessen the blow.

While there is most certainly an attraction to the abstract aesthetics of these ruins, Geyrhalter’s camera does not seek the patterns or dynamic tensions in the frame so as to merely apprehend the abstract beauty of the material waste, for its own sake. Instead, for 90 minutes, Geyrhalter, the unflinching Austrian chronicler of the detritus of late capitalism, wordlessly stares into the abyss of our impending, seemingly unstoppable, doom. In this film, there are no helicopters to hide in, no illusions of safe distances from which to experience the view, no protection from the decay that spells our demise. This film is anti-sublime in precisely the sense Steven Shaviro (2012) describes in his writing on a very different type of apocalypse film (Lars Von Trier’s *Melancholia*), where he advocates instead for an anti-sublime in the face of such portents of the end. Shaviro’s anti-sublime refuses metaphor, distance, illusion, figuration. It is, in his words, ‘[a] phantasm made real: this is the process of actualization,

by means of which figuration is erased, and potentiality is reduced to definiteness and determination.' And it is this definiteness, this undeniability, the starkness of the image that destroys any recourse to the sublime. As Shaviro tells us (2012: 43), '[n]o metaphor can survive being taken literally.'

And yet, there is a different type of obscenity to which Geyrhalter is susceptible, and that is what Joanna Zylińska has referred to as 'extinction porn' (Zylińska 2014: 106). Pornography is nothing if not literal, the viewer never intended to interpret the image as anything but what it graphically represents, a hard material fact that is undeniable in its effects. I don't want to stretch the pornography metaphor itself too far, as I have my reservations evoking it in a strictly negative association; porn deserves better. I merely want to signal that there may indeed be something obscene in these images that simultaneously mourn and celebrate our extinction. I use 'obscene' in the literal sense of the term, which in the original Greek referred to that which was kept offstage, or 'off scene'. The 'off-scene' here are the birds, the bugs, the flies, the frogs, mostly present only on the soundtrack, but they clearly if obtusely suggest that while we may well be gone, life on the planet is not. They look set, along with the weeds that peek through the cracks in the walls and the trees that break up the pavement, to regenerate perfectly well in our absence, much like the wildlife that has taken over Pripyat in the Chernobyl exclusion zone created in the wake of the nuclear power plant meltdown of 1986.

Further, as we look into Geyrhalter's abyss, it dawns on us that if the future is already present, then indeed, we are not gone, at least not all of us. I don't think Geyrhalter fully intends for this reading, but attending more carefully to the implications of this proleptic future anterior representation, if there is a viewer to witness the ruin, then this viewer must also, necessarily, live with the consequences of western culture's overreach and our excesses. The survivor-viewer would have to, in effect, do the tedious work of surviving, initiating the laborious process of adapting and adjusting our ways of living to better align with our planetary co-inhabitants. This is precisely what Haraway (2016) means by 'staying with the trouble'. To put it more prosaically, there is feminized labour that needs to be performed, which extinction porn might prefer to have us skip over, leaving the caretaking to others.

Nikolaus Geyrhalter has directed more than a dozen documentaries, but is perhaps best known for his 2005 film *Our Daily Bread*, a film that documents the thoroughly unappetizing process of industrial food production in Europe. All of Geyrhalter's films, I believe without exception, explore aspects of the demise of western civilization, beginning with his feature-length film on Chernobyl (*Pripyat* 1999), and culminating to date, with *Matter Out of Place* (2022). His film *Abendland* from 2011, a wordless film essay shot exclusively at night, reveals a vacuous European culture, obsessed with security, technology and superficial pleasures. The title's various meanings – 'the Occident', 'evening land', 'night life', 'twilight' – all point to the decadence of the cultural values that to this filmmaker at least appear to be a sign of a precipitous decline. *Homo Sapiens*, in some ways, revisits many of his former obsessions, but only to suggest it has all come to an end, as if to say: the party's well and truly over.

The future in observational documentary

Observational filmmaking has made a comeback, perhaps not as the dominant mode of documentary in the twenty-first century, but as a viable alternative to the 'storytelling' mania that has funders, programmers and commissioning editors currently in its thrall (see Juhasz and Lebow 2018 for a critique of this narrative mania). Sergei Loznitsa, RaMell Ross, Eric Baudelaire, Brett Story, Kevin Jerome Anderson, Bing Wang, Alina Rudnitskaya, Lucien Castaing-Tayler, Varena Paravel, Vitaly Mansky and Nikolaus Geyrhalter – to name just a few – have resuscitated observational documentary techniques, though with a significant difference from their Direct Cinema antecedents. For the most part, they no longer simply champion its 'being there' effect of witnessing. These new observational films are indebted more to Fredrick Wiseman than to Ricky Leacock or D. A. Pennebaker, as they tend to focus more on effects of systems, operations, events, lingering long enough to contemplate their implications. For instance, in Kevin Jerome Everson's *Tonsler Park* (2017), it is the US electoral system that is under scrutiny, as seen in the microcosm of a district polling station in Charlottesville, Virginia, over the course of a single election day. In Lucien Castaing-Tayler and Varena Paravel's *Leviathan* (2012), it is the waste and carnage of industrial fishing practices. In the case of *Homo Sapiens*, the system is no less than the civilization made possible by industrial capitalism *tout court*, the cumulative effects of centuries of destructive human intervention on the planet.

Most of these contemporary observational filmmakers work with sound designers, layering and manipulating audio tracks, even while adhering to other Direct Cinema principles such as rejecting voice-over narration, interviews, archival footage, and the use of non-diegetic music. They all appear equally willing to engage in visual setups and even *tableaux vivant* when appropriate. In the many interiors of decaying buildings that find their way into Geyrhalter's film, there are off-screen manipulations with visible effects. For instance, Geyrhalter did not hesitate to use an off-screen fan in scenes such as those in abandoned classrooms and libraries, where sheets of paper and books are seen and heard flapping, or to make the lanterns swing in the abandoned church. He had no compunction to focus the attention of the spectator on the sounds of dripping water in a scene of a submerged movie theatre.

Questions of authenticity, accuracy or fealty, that so obsessed filmmakers and scholars of the Direct Cinema school, all miss the point. That Geyrhalter manipulates the soundtrack or artificially creates wind to heighten attention to certain images over others does not diminish in the least the implicit commentary the film makes on this terrifying proleptic future anterior. Like many of the contemporary observational revivalists, Geyrhalter's use of observational techniques is not about some servile adherence to mimetic strategies. Instead, it gives wordless testament to the unspeakable, simply by shooting in the direction of the disaster. What difference does it make to the veracity of the film if the hollow sound of a cavernous cathedral is amplified, along with the only sign of life, the sound of flapping wings?

And if at first our anthropocentric impulse is to see in this the absence of something (ourselves, that is), we might also reattune our habits of viewing to hear the presence

of something else; the augmented sound in this film allows us to register the wind, or wings flapping as presences that may begin to help us remember that some species and certainly all of the elements will survive these ongoing catastrophes. The apocalypse documentary doesn't fully attend to this; yet this film does gesture towards it, helping to reframe that which may constitute life on this post-human planet earth.

Adhering to at least some of the key principles of Direct Cinema (as I say, no narration, no interviews, no archival material) like its observational predecessors, Geyrhalter's film is unable or unwilling to attend to its context: it can provide no background, no historical detail. We are left to fill in the gaps of information and implication. And yet, here too we seem to have a difference. Whether it points to the very different world in which we find ourselves, or whether it is more a factor of the incontrovertibility of what is shown, the new observationalism we see here is neither entirely ahistorical nor apolitical. It may too conveniently elide the point of precisely who is responsible for this imminent extinction and indeed who are its earliest and seemingly most expendable victims, but it does nonetheless want to force a reckoning with its spectator. In order to maintain the political implications of his point, it would seem to be crucial that the context is left indeterminate. We see this too in *Leviathan*, for instance, where we are never told anything about which fishing vessel we may be on, or in whose waters. Geyrhalter's eschewal of detail, background, history, context is actually a rejection of specificity that allows him to make a much more thoroughgoing critique of systems and circumstances. What Geyrhalter's film contributes to this deepening of the temporal dimensions of the observational film is a comment, finally, on the future. As the promotional blurb on his website says, the film asks provocatively, 'what will remain of our lives after we're gone?'

And yet, therein lies the conundrum of this film. *Homo Sapiens* asks the spectator to witness, from the impossible position of their own demise, the devastation of post-industrial fallout and the battle waged by the earth to reclaim itself from its vain, improvident, self-appointed stewards. With not a single human – worker or consumer – in sight for the entire length of this almost unbearable, relentless, observational experience, the film neatly upends notions of anthropocentric agency, in the sense that the elements (with the help of the few remaining animal species – mostly birds and bugs and the occasional frog) are the only agents and the camera operates as if by itself, giving the impression of having been left running to document the end. The suggestion here is that we humans have rendered ourselves obsolete. One is only left to wonder, what is this act of agentless witnessing and from what possible vantage point are we being asked to confront what amounts to our own extinction? This is far from Kant's 'safe distance', unless the final resting place – gazing from beyond the grave – is understood to be a new type of sublime safety.

We are dead and we are going to die. In this filmic collapse of time, the future is already present, and the present is the future, and there would seem, finally, to be no horizon beyond. Much like the psychoanalytic Primal Scene in which the subject fantasizes (in horror) the witnessing of their own creation, in *Homo Sapiens* what is

figured is the Final Scene, in which we are invited to collectively fantasize our own demise. The film presents us with a koan-like riddle about an impossible spectatorship: what does it mean to witness that which we are ultimately not there to see?

And that is precisely where Michael Madsen's *Into Eternity* would like to take us – a future where human civilization as we know it has ended, yet its toxic effects linger on, into eternity. The film attempts to conjure the possibility of future cognizant beings who may or may not have the ability to read complex sign systems, and who might unwittingly or very much wittingly encounter something that contemporary humans have tried desperately to hide: thousands of tons of radioactive nuclear waste. In the film, Madsen takes us into the depths of the earth where Finnish scientists and engineers have designed a spent nuclear fuel storage facility that is meant to harbour the long-enduring toxins for 100,000 years. The facility is called Onkalo, which in Finnish literally means 'cavity', or as Madsen tells us, 'hiding place', as if these highly sophisticated men and women of science are merely playing a children's game of hide and seek. Everyone knows that which is hidden is eventually meant to be found, even if some of the interviewed scientists demur that they would prefer if the site were forgotten for all time once it is sealed.

The colossal underground site is set to commence operation in 2025, and although its construction began early this century, the complex of tunnels that zigzag to a depth of nearly half a kilometre is only expected to be finished and sealed in another 80–100 years. Madsen reminds us that nothing this ambitious has ever been undertaken and no man-made structure has ever lasted even a fraction of the 100,000 years this facility is meant to endure. He reminds us too that this multi-billion Euro project will harbour a very small proportion of the waste produced by Finland alone and that with almost 450 operating nuclear power plants around the world currently, this unprecedented effort represents what amounts to a drop in the ocean of radioactive waste being produced. The wisdom of such a massively ambitious yet woefully insufficient undertaking is, in a manner of speaking, the main concern of this documentary, as Madsen attempts to first imagine and then communicate with whoever the future beings are who might encounter this underground temple of doom.

Throughout the film his understated narration poses a series of questions to these sentient beings, knowing full well that they will never, not in 1,000 let alone 100,000 years, watch this film. The same beings who might encounter the opening to this tunnel and be curious enough to attempt to breach its seal are imagined to likely know as little about our technologies as humans today know about communications systems of our prehistoric ancestors. Systems of writing are only as old as approximately 3000 years BCE, which makes the historical era calculated generously, at most, only about 5,000 years old. Years of excavation and study of prehistoric humans have yielded only the most rudimentary understanding, and the time span in question is a mere sliver of what geologists refer to as 'deep time', that Onkalo is meant to exist. Keep in mind too, that if the future 'archaeologists' (or whatever we might call them) are as intrepid as their predecessors, they will have dug themselves into their own grave well before they ever learn anything more about us or the danger they were meant to avoid.

The questions Madsen poses to these inquisitive future beings are equally impossible, both because they will never reach their allegedly intended audience, and because they would never be understood by them. He asks questions such as ‘does your society depend upon unlimited energy?’ or ‘how far into the future will your way of life have consequences?’ In effect, we are left to imagine that the questions are indeed meant for us, the present-day spectators who must face our era’s folly and quietly register the full ambivalence of the scene. I mentioned at the start that the apocalypse documentary exposes a hole in the centre of this man-made era, the atrial septal deformity in the heart of the Anthropocene, that it would appear no amount of repair can heal. Onkalo is just such a wound, where the supposed repair is no more than a symptom of profound repression, literally and not at all metaphorically, burying our traumatic, toxic, remains deep in the heart of the earth.

Into Eternity is different from the other two apocalypse documentaries discussed earlier in that it knows itself to be absurd, posing unanswerable questions to imaginary interlocutors, revealing the geo-engineering solutions ultimately as elaborate failures, forcing a reckoning not with an impossible future so much as an untenable present. Instead of vaingloriously revelling in the impending disaster, as Herzog does in *Lessons of Darkness*, it much more modestly, but no less artfully, hopes to reveal the extent of the folly rather than matching it with its own. Though *Into Eternity* does ultimately have its own version of pyrotechnics, with the climactic detonation scene deep in Onkalo’s tunnels, it is better characterized by the much more muted flame at the end of a match that weakly illuminates Madsen’s face as he introduces us to the hiding place. The film’s ambitions are to raise the spectre of hubris, not to celebrate it with nihilistic grandeur, either of dramatically flaming oil fields or for that matter dramatically rotting carcasses of structures that have long outlived their use, as with Geyrhalter’s *Homo Sapiens*. However, what all three of these apocalypse documentaries share is a recognition that the future we fear is, in some very real sense, already here, and although it may not be the all-encompassing apocalypse some have been anticipating, it is vast and tragic. There is an ambivalence inherent in all of these films, a muted sensationalism that is attracted to catastrophe, even as they evince a melancholic resignation to a fate that feels as inevitable as it is illogical.

When William Gibson quipped that ‘the future is already here, it’s just not evenly distributed,’ he meant something very different, in that advanced technology, robotics, AI, etc. is already happening, but that access is highly uneven. We may want to rethink this statement rather in terms of the unevenly distributed effects of anthropogenic excess, but the apocalypse documentaries that posit this future anterior are far from recognizing this truism. The catastrophe they portend and identify as proleptically already here is not the attuned recognition that there are entire populations that have been living the apocalypse, some for decades, others for centuries, having been the target of forced migration, biological warfare, poisoned water sources and explicit, coordinated, genocidal campaigns starting with the first colonial encounters. Nor do they appear to be particularly focused on those facing the

possibility of utter and irreparable ruin with each passing hurricane, monsoon, tsunami, drought or wildfire season, made worse not only by the excessive extraction and burning of fossil fuels but also by ‘plantationocene’ monocultural and toxic agricultural practices that deplete the earth’s ability to withstand such extreme, climate-induced, weather events. No, these apocalypse documentaries are more in tune with the type of first world accelerationism that appears to recently have awakened to the recognition that something is seriously amiss, but as much as they decry it, they appear to believe in the inevitability of the end precisely due to their belief in the inevitability of the current capitalist system. As there is no potential for system change, there is no averting the inevitable. Instead, these apocalypse documentaries rush towards this fate for the dramatic, clima(c)tic, embrace. It seems that the direct beneficiaries of the interlocking systems that have contributed to exhausting earth’s resources can indeed imagine – and image – the end of the world before they can imagine an end to capitalism.

Notes

1. There are also more experimental artists’ imaginings which tend to blur fiction and documentary, leaning more into the sci-fi direction and generally refraining from making any empirical claims. Some examples include Indigenous artist, Thirza Cuthand’s mockumentary, *Reclamation* (2018) or Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind’s more sci-fi inclined, two-screen projection, *In Vitro* (2019).

2. The words ‘dangerous and repulsive’ are taken directly from Madsen’s narration in *Into Eternity*.

3. Although as Cook (2015) has discovered, government desire to avoid raising anti-nuclear sentiment in the midst of the cold war was a factor in its censorship. See John Cook, ‘The War Game: How I showed that BBC bowed to government pressure’, *The Conversation*, 2 June 2015. <https://theconversation.com/the-war-game-how-i-showed-that-bbc-bowed-to-government-over-nuclear-attack-film-42640>. Accessed 11 July 2024.

4. This is a reference to Herzog’s assertion in his ‘Minnesota Declaration’ (30 April 1999) which is actually
- subtitled ‘Lessons of Darkness’ in reference to this film.

5. The polluting effects of these fires have been recorded as far away as the glaciers of Northern Tibet. See Zhou, J., Tie, X., Xu, B., Zhao, S., Wang, M., Li, G., Zhang, T., Zhao, Z., Liu, S., Yang, S., Chang, L., and Cao, J. (2018), ‘Black carbon (BC) in a northern Tibetan mountain: effect of Kuwait fires on glaciers’, *Atmospheric Chemistry and Physics*, 18, pp. 13673–85, <https://doi.org/10.5194/acp-18-13673-2018>. Perhaps not surprisingly, in the English language at least, most publications focus on the effects of the fires on US military personnel with studies on respiratory and other problems faced by US Gulf War veterans after prolonged exposure to the plumes. This type of exclusionary attention (in this case not only of the human inhabitants of the region but also of the non-human ones, including animals but also things like water contamination, etc.) neatly echoes Herzog’s own biases where he can remain more concerned with the metaphor than the matter.

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