

Apocalypticism is the ideology known to humanity from the very beginning of its existence. Yet while initially apocalypticism was associated with religion only, it has gradually entered the lives of human beings on multiple other levels, characterizing the state of ‘being unsafe’ that humanity has brought itself to as a result of different actions. The possibility of apocalypse has become so threatening today that apocalypticism has turned into an essential cultural ideology for humans all over the world, despite religious differences. As a result, numerous cultural texts, including literature and film, have responded to this phenomenon, providing their audiences with various pre-apocalyptic, apocalyptic, and post-apocalyptic scenarios. Both Lisa Vox’s *Existential Threats: American Apocalyptic Beliefs in the Technological Era* and Andrew Tate’s *Apocalyptic Fiction* examine such narratives to understand the issue of apocalypticism from a cultural perspective.

Unlike Tate’s *Apocalyptic Fiction* that, for the most part, attempts to provide a literary analysis of the most famous apocalyptic novels from the twenty-first century only, Vox’s *Existential Threats* is much more ambitious in its endeavor to understand the ideology of apocalypticism. Focusing specifically on apocalypticism in the United States since the nineteenth century, the scholar examines various political events that sparked apocalyptic beliefs among Americans, religious and otherwise. Beginning her research with the Civil War, Vox traces how in the nineteenth century “racial superiority” of “white Americans” provoked thinking that “Western nations were spiritually, culturally, and racially better suited to lead the rest of the world” (xiv). Various historical events that took place after the Civil War, according to the author, essentially resulted from such an ideology of superiority. With the development of technology in the second half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, “some Westerners asked whether humans were all that special and whether the technology transforming their lives might be the means by which the human species, among so many others, might become extinct” (19). That accentuated the equal importance of science and religion in the questions related to apocalypse, as both seemed to be capable of answering them. It is during the times of the Civil War—“the world’s first technological war”—that the ideology of “scientific apocalypticism” emerged (19-20).

Technological progress that led to the possibility of apocalypse during the Civil War in part was responsible for the possibility of apocalypse during World War I and, later, World War II. After World War II, “the nuclear bomb focused the attention of both scientific and Christian apocalypticists” (53). During that time, questions related to “race, technology, and natural disasters” became especially prominent (53). Literary texts produced over those times responded to the emerging fears, but later “nuclear concerns merged with stories of time travel, species displacement, cosmic disaster, robots, and aliens” (64-65). It is interesting that despite an overt danger of nuclear war from a scientific perspective, the ideas of religious apocalypse continued to be sustained and the issue of “Bible prophecy” remained important during the Cold War, too (77). Nevertheless, a scientific vision of apocalypse made its way into fiction. Thus, in British fiction “hopeless visions of nuclear war eradicating humanity made appearances,” whereas in American fiction “stories of how nuclear war could cleanse humanity of its failings” were more popular (87).
Various other events that took place over the course of the twentieth century led to a thinking that apocalypse was inevitable: from the Dust Bowl—the environmental disaster that happened during the Great Depression—to the exploration of space and Neil Armstrong’s moon walk in 1969 that provoked ideas of “coloniz[ing]” other worlds (88). The concern of “damag[ing] the Earth beyond repair” (88) was certainly an environmental one, and, therefore, a large part of *Existential Threats* focuses on environmental problems as real causes of inevitable apocalypse. In the 1980s, numerous issues related to nature and the environment drew attention. Among them were climate change, nuclear winter, and species extinction. Christians and scientists in unison started to foretell the inevitability of apocalypse. With the U.S. involvement in the First Gulf War in 1991, apocalyptic beliefs were only reinforced. Vox argues that Christians saw Saddam Hussein as the Antichrist, whereas the issue of oil—the United States’ major interest in the war—allowed scientists to characterize the war as “the first environmental war of likely many future ones” (141).

Finally, the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and the War on Terror that followed them triggered apocalyptic thoughts among many. The feelings of insecurity that haunted Americans because of the attacks as well as of “powerless[ness]” that, according to Vox, resulted from the Afghanistan War (and, I would argue, also the Iraq War), indeed, promoted apocalyptic visions. Along the way, the recognition of climate change as humanity’s major “existential threat” (to refer to the book’s title) only intensified Americans’ belief in apocalypse.

All these events produced a large number of cultural texts that not only attempt to reflect humanity’s anxieties over apocalypse but also suggest possible ways in which human existence might be possible after the end of the world, though only with radical transformations. Both *Existential Threats* and *Apocalyptic Fiction* offer a glimpse into the large body of apocalyptic texts. While Vox examines such texts in the context of specific political events since the nineteenth century, which she interprets as triggering apocalyptic beliefs, Tate concentrates solely on the fiction published in the twenty-first century. *Apocalyptic Fiction* “identifies the dizzying variety of ways in which contemporary authors from Britain, America, and Canada envision the decline and fall of civilization, the twilight of Homo sapiens and the possible death of all life on the planet” (2). Being aware that “[e]nd-of-the-world fiction is emphatically not a recent phenomenon,” Tate “treats twenty-first-century ‘apocalyptic’ fiction as an expansive family of genres with a complex genealogy” (2). He identifies the questions related to the environment as central to the apocalyptic fiction of the twenty-first century. Yet their portrayal as biblical events—the pattern that reoccurs in a number of novels—allows one to classify such literature from the perspective of both scientific and religious apocalypticism. Some of the novels that Tate thoroughly investigates in his book include J.G. Ballard’s *The Drowned World* and *Kingdom Come*, Tom Perrotta’s *The Leftovers*, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins’s *Left Behind*, Margaret Atwood’s trilogy “MaddAddam,” Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, Jim Grace’s *The Pesthouse*, Suzanne Collins’s trilogy “The Hunger Games,” Veronica Roth’s trilogy “Divergent,” and James Dashner’s series “The Maze Runner.”

Both Vox’s *Existential Threats* and Tate’s *Apocalyptic Fiction* examine apocalypse not only as a myth but rather as a real threat, discussing specific actions of humanity that could or still can lead to it. Both books primarily focus their attention on cultural texts that deal with apocalypse. While Tate narrows his research down to the twenty-first-century apocalyptic fiction, Vox provides a much larger—politically, culturally, and literary—investigation of apocalyp-
ticism, going back to the nineteenth century and finishing her analysis with the current problems that can be seen as (potentially) leading to apocalypse. *Existential Threats* and *Apocalyptic Fiction* are highly recommended to students and scholars in Environmental Humanities and Religious Studies as well as to general readers who are interested in the development of apocalyptic thinking since the nineteenth century.

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