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Review: The Discourses of Environmental Collapse: Imagining the End

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It is always telling, and somewhat worrying, to listen to children who, whenever being asked about their perception of environmental issues and the future of mankind. They candidly explain we are living in a doomed world will soon be destroyed by an apocalyptic catastrophe if we do not observe the environmentalists' instructions. Therefore, how can our children find happiness if their perspectives are already condemned at such a young age? Three Swiss academics have commissioned ten thematic chapters to explore how these issues are framed in media discourses.

In *The Discourses of Environmental Collapse: Imagining the End*, Alison Vogelaar, Brack Hale, and Alexandra Peat argue that these panicked ideas and fears about our planet in danger can be analysed as discourses (in a Foucauldian sense) that carry similar messages into a worldview and an ideology. As we know, a discourse is a coherent way to encapsulate and express ideas and beliefs about how one sees the world, the present, and the future. In other words, a discourse frames our distorted perceptions of the world.

Perhaps the strongest of this whole, the opening chapter (on "Culture and collapse: Theses on catastrophic history for the 21st century") by Michael Egan conceptualises some of the recent theories of collapse from mid-20th century, reinscribing these debates into a discouraging and nightmarish scheme: "In catastrophic history, a new panoply of analytic vocabulary presents itself" (p. 19). As this essay was published before our current pandemic era of COVID-19, it is obvious that many observations and key terms could be applied as well into this unexpected context of 2020. Drawing from Risk Studies, Egan points out the recurrent, if not obsessive adjectives often used to describe what is portrayed as our doomed situation: "precarity, vulnerability, crisis, uncertainty, fear, and anxiety" (p. 19). To this list, Egan also adds "barbarism" (p. 19), referring for example to masses of refugees waiting to enter England at the Calais border (p. 19). In his conclusion, quoting Don DeLillo, Egan situates these everyday crises into a set of renewed narratives about the probable absence of any clear future: "Catastrophe is our bedtime story" (p. 19).

Following this interdisciplinary focus on the frequent utterance of the term “collapse”, Chapter 5 (titled “This is the end of the world as we know it: Narratives of collapse and transformation in archaeology and popular culture”) allows Guy D. Middleton to highlight selected covers of popular magazines — like *New Scientist*, *National Geographic* — and television documentaries which use “collapse” as a central ingredient to sell reportages, articles, and other stories based on these same menaces of an eventual “destruction of our civilisation” (p. 93). Within the media world, and especially in the titles of these reportages, the word “collapse” sells as an almost obvious symptom of our zeitgeist; it is virtually like a new fashion, or maybe a renewed dystopia.

Most of the remaining essays either focus on fictions or games reproducing these apocalyptic stories. But what really matters is how reality, as framed nowadays by narratives that are supposed to inform us about real events, are getting more and more obsessed by these dark themes, and this is exactly what Chapters 1 and 5 did very convincingly. News bulletins and documentaries are not always accurate, but they have become entertaining in the sense that they provide viewers with a daily dose of fear and discouragement. These are the projects which, on paper, can be sold to magazines’ editors and television broadcasters. As an unpredicted consequence of this growing over-dramatizing trend in the media (and in video games), a new apocalypse and other disasters seem to be announced almost every evening through infinite narratives, and we are nonetheless still alive. It is not that these hazards are false or exaggerated; perhaps it is just that we do not always get the whole picture of these complex issues, with a full consideration of the solutions that are taken.

There is no conclusion or recapitulation at the end of the book; a synthesis or some retrospective remarks would have been welcome. *The Discourses of Environmental Collapse: Imagining the End* is a valuable book, an original study that captures some central issues.

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