The *Journal of Multimodal Rhetorics*

Volume 6, Issue 1

Spring 2022

"Someday a Real Rain Will Come" – Apocalypse, White Supremacy, and The Cinema of Reckoning

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> "All the animals come out at night... Someday a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets." — *Taxi Driver* (1976)

In an early scene in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver,* the camera cuts to white taxicab driver Travis Bickle as he writes in his journal to a first-person perspective of his drive down Times Square in mid-1970's New York City. Travis narrates his journal in voiceover as the camera follows him in a stunning display of ignorance and bigotry. He first describes his clients using racist, homophobic, and sexist insults, describing them as "sick" and "venal." Then he proceeds to brag about how he is willing to work in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Harlem, areas that racist cab drivers avoided. Travis peppers his slurs with the phrase, "Don't make no difference to me," suggesting a sort of colorblind approach to his occupation at odds with his both his overt and implied racism. But Travis just can't hide his contempt for the people he sees in Times Square, and he condemns them, saying that "someday a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets." Travis makes it clear that under the veneer of his self-proclaimed tolerance is a deep and abiding hatred of the LGBTQ community, sex workers, and people of color.

However, in wishing for a "real rain" to scour the streets of New York, Travis also deploys a specific sort of apocalyptic rhetoric that finds a comfortable home in many white evangelical churches. This rhetoric invokes images of natural disaster being harnessed by the faithful in a reckoning against their "faithless" counterparts. While metaphors of apocalypse are common in rhetorical scholarship because they provide a sense of urgency, in this essay I hope to provide a compelling case against their continued use, most importantly because they often mirror rhetorical strategies used to promote white supremacy. This similarity has significant implications for posthuman and new materialist scholarship focused on climate change.

Apocalypse and white supremacy collide most violently in the Christian white supremacist concept of "accelerationism."[1] I began writing this essay in 2019, months before COVID wracked the world, but after several white supremacist attacks on people of color. At the time, a white supremacist had just entered a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, to commit the 249th mass shooting of the year, killing twenty-three people and injuring another twenty-three, just months after a man live-streamed his killing of fifty people and injuring of another 40 in Christchurch, New Zealand.

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[1] Accelerationism is most notably associated with former Congressional candidate Paul Nehlen, whose abhorrent ideas I refuse to cite further.

Since that time, attacks that specifically target marginalized communities have only grown more common. Just in the last month before the publication of this essay, attacks in Uvalde, Texas, and Buffalo, New York, targeted Latinx school children and Black grocery shoppers, respectively. The white supremacist terrorist attack on the El Paso border community renewed U.S. interest in topics like gun reform, violence, toxic masculinity, as well as the white nationalist concept of accelerationism. The Southern Poverty Law Center describes accelerationism as "the belief among some far-right extremists that committing acts of terrorism will cause society to collapse. Following the collapse of Western civilization, the accelerationists believe that they will have opportunities to build a country for only white, non-Jews that are unimaginable under the current system" (Hayden, 2019).

The link between white nationalism/supremacy and accelerationism is clear, but what remains obscured is how closely the concept of crisis is linked to the idea of starting society over with a "clean" slate. While the SPLC suggests that accelerationism is a fringe concept not widely endorsed by the Right, I argue that we often find accelerationism – coupled with dangerous colonial frontier mythologies – in much of apocalyptic climate change discourse. Certainly, we can see that in the case of Travis Bickle with his conviction that his crusade against marginalized populations in NYC is sanctioned by God and nature. Travis sees a sinful city deserving of destruction and fully expects his God to send a biblical rain to restore it to order. However, I argue that with the aid of apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic, and disaster films, these apocalyptic rhetorics have metastasized into a discourse of climate change that drives a large subsection of the scholarly posthuman and new materialist turn.

Apocalypse and the Anthropocene

While the word "apocalypse" is often shunned for its dim connotations in rhetorical scholarship, its conceptual roots remain intact in discussions of the Anthropocene. These roots are most visible in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*'s recent special issue, "Rhetorical New Materialisms" (RNM) which situates itself in the "death, memory [and] loss" (Gries, et. al, 2020, p. 140) that defines pandemic time, acknowledges the "consequences of climate change escalating at unimagined rates" (p. 145), and the "failure" of "social justices" (p. 145) that force us to "finally reckon with the limits of our knowledge" (p. 145). Without using the word "apocalypse," the issue conjures images of the imminent collapse of the climate and democracy. As the issue acknowledges, climate change is a very real threat to global ecosystems, requiring that we continue to urge for immediate action. However, because the roots of apocalyptic rhetoric and environment in American culture are so thoroughly imbricated with white supremacist ideology, those discourses have become nearly impossible to disentangle, especially in frames that view democratic breakdown, "pandemics and [multiplying and worsening] climate collapse" as "disturbance[s]" and "opportunit[ies]" (Nicotra, in Gries, et. al, 2020, p. 160). It is this very framework that reveals the "apocalyptic" rhetoric that can underpin new materialism, because it sees the systemic collapse of global support systems as an opportunity to exploit.

This therapeutic view of climate and political trauma invokes the same process of white supremacist apocalypse-making that the United States used to colonize North America,

whereby white "survivors" created a post-apocalypse for Indigenous people and exploited the newly available resources that they left behind. Current white supremacist lenses render climate change a matter of urgency mainly because it threatens to affect white people, erasing how many vulnerable populations have already experienced environmental apocalypse. In doing so, not only does climate change become an issue that matters in proximity to whiteness — it also requires whiteness (white activists and scholars) to resolve it. By drawing attention to this overlap, I hope to nudge rhetoric scholars toward more inclusive metaphors for climate change, answering the *RSQ* special issue's call to "do better in interrogating [RNM's] own inadequacies and complicities in ongoing racisms and colonialisms" (p. 141).

Below, I discuss accelerationism's basis in religious apocalypticism to explain how the temporal boundaries that apocalypticism and accelerationism encourage exploitative colonial approaches to the trauma of the end of the world by focusing more on the world *after* the trauma than the trauma itself. Because marginalized populations are more likely to experience the trauma of a given apocalypse, this framework inherently discounts their suffering. Then, I tie that history to white supremacist evangelical traditions and frontier mythology, differentiating what I have so far in this essay called "apocalyptic" rhetoric from the rhetoric of reckoning and demonstrating how rhetorics of reckoning function by distinguishing righteous insiders from nonbelievers. I then demonstrate how rhetorics of reckoning have seeped into new materialist scholarship, and how such rhetorics draw deeply from what I call a cinema of reckoning. Finally, I suggest that calls to unity and the dissolution of the subject/object do more harm than good, especially when used to try to ontologically and philosophically flatten diverse groups as a response to apocalyptic exigencies.

Apocalypse, Acceleration, and White Evangelism

The postapocalyptic anticipation that props up accelerationism draws deeply from religious studies; the work of Nick Land suggests that somehow the world could find "redemption with the coming of a post/inhuman state" (Galindo Hervás, 2016, p. 312) by accelerating the dehumanizing elements of capitalism.[2] In its religious, ideological, or political contexts, accelerationism seeks to capitalize on or exacerbate rapidly deteriorating conditions in order to prompt a crisis, a transformation, and to reshape the results in their desired image. Unsurprisingly, right wing evangelical Christians have picked up the accelerationism banner, arguing that we should intentionally perpetuate harmful policy such as the continued occupation of Palestine by Israel in order to create the conditions for the end of the world according to white evangelical interpretations of the Book of Revelation.

In this way, accelerationism and apocalypse seem tailor-made for each other. I grew up in a hardline, highly segregated evangelical church, where stories of the impending destruction of the Earth were common in Sunday school alongside "reassuring" tales of how those not destroyed in the lake of fire would live forever in heaven, praising God. But not all of the lessons

[2] This theory draws heavily on the Marxist idea that we can accelerate through capitalism's stages by emphasizing its contradictions.

were about the end of the entire world. Many of them focused explicitly on God's punishment for non-believers, such as the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah or Noah and the Great Flood, a catastrophe like that anticipated by Travis Bickle. In these examples, non-believers perished in rains that served as metaphorical warnings but were enacted very much on the physical plane and through environmental action — as the rain of fire that claimed Sodom and Gomorrah and the rains that flooded the Earth. These lessons instilled a lasting impression of apocalypse, particularly that they were something that happened to someone else — a judgment for failing to live a holy life that was, not coincidentally, heavily coded as white, male, and straight.

I must have listened to thousands of sermons on the end of the world by the time I finally left the church at the age of eighteen, and each was marked by a sort of giddy anticipation of the rapture and sick fascination with the punishment doled out to the "lost." The apocalypse as it was framed by these pastors was never really an apocalypse (or revelation) at all, but rather what religious studies scholars call a "Day of the Lord," a moment in which God's wrath is weaponized by the righteous to punish their enemies. In this essay, I trace how this sort of apocalyptic rhetoric has metastasized with the aid of post-apocalyptic and disaster films into the discourse of climate change and the Anthropocene in posthuman and new materialist scholarship.

Reckoning, Rhetoric, and the Frontier

To return to the epigraph of this essay, these famous words by Travis show that he's a straight white man convinced of his own victimization at the hands of the minority populations of New York City. Travis sees New York as a place beyond hope, a lost place littered with literal and figurative trash — the literal trash provided by the garbage carriers' strike during the film's production and the figurative trash concocted by Travis' racist, sexist, and homophobic imagination — to the point that he believes nothing short of a divine rain can save the city. But Travis implies that the "real rain" would sweep away only the garbage, that the reckoning would spare the righteous and return New York City to its "rightful" owners, embodied, of course, by his whiteness and masculinity.

While the current cultural interpretation of apocalypse invokes images of the end of the world, religious studies analyses break down the difference between apocalyptic texts and "Day of the Lord" texts, with the most important distinction being *for whom* the world ends. Apocalypses are for everyone, while Days of the Lord target a specific population of people such as the biblical cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, or the wider audiences of the flood narratives of Noah and Gilgamesh. Days of the Lord are more in line with Bickle's "real rain" in that they are designed to restore order or provide opportunity for those spared by whatever wrath is dispensed. Apocalypses, however, are transcendent in their initial effect: where Days of the Lord only end the world for a select few, apocalypses are for everyone. In an apocalyptic narrative, the world simply ends for all life, and "a revelation is mediated by an other-worldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural

world" (Collins 1998, p. 9). This distinction of transcendence is an important one, as the apocalypse serves as a transitionary moment after which all life has changed and all people now occupy a transformed space. While Day of the Lord narratives certainly transform the targeted spaces, these narratives are less stories about the end of the world and more examples of a divine power avenging their chosen people, tacitly endorsing their behavior as righteous in the process.

What comes after the disaster is critical to distinguishing between the apocalypse from the Day of the Lord; the apocalypse is essentially a reset button for everyone, where a Day of the Lord favors the "worthy" and provides a divine reward for the "chosen." While both serve an eschatological function, the Day of the Lord is more closely linked to a reckoning, or a sense of justice, than it is to divine judgment. The Day of the Lord serves as a violent instrument used to restore land and property to its "rightful" owners, a clean slate on which the survivors can begin again. In terms of land, the Day of the Lord's primary function is to clear any undesirable human influence and re-establish the area as a frontier for the chosen. To this point, I have used the word "apocalyptic" to describe events that more readily fall under the "Day of the Lord" category. But because "apocalypse" signals a very specific sort of ending — one in which the world ends equally for everyone — and because "Days of the Lord rhetoric" doesn't exactly roll off the tongue, for the remainder of this essay I will substitute "rhetorics of reckoning" for "apocalyptic rhetoric." These rhetorics of reckoning are crucial to understanding the role that white supremacy plays in the discourse of climate change, because they imply a twisted sort of restorative justice characterized by a violent divine intervention which re-establishes a frontier tailor-made for "The Chosen," i.e., white people.

New Materialism and Rhetorics of Reckoning

Rhetorics of reckoning's genealogical ties to white supremacy/nationalism/evangelism and the frontier make them unwieldy at best, and dangerous at worst. There seems to be at least some acknowledgement in rhetorical circles of the inadequacy or even distastefulness of the use of apocalypse when discussing climate change. Scot Barnett argues that we must "confront the prospect of the end of the world, or at least the end of human civilization" while shortly thereafter conceding that "statements like this might seem too apocalyptic" (2017, p. 387). Likewise, Donna Haraway asks, "How can we think in times of urgencies *without* the self-indulgent and self-fulfilling myths of apocalypse?" (2016, p. 35) There is an apparent tension in rhetorical scholarship surrounding the use of apocalyptic metaphors that remains just out of grasp, a gnawing uncertainty about contemplating the end of the world that has yet to be clearly articulated. These attempts to abandon apocalyptic rhetoric because of its inherent baggage might be noble, but rhetorics of reckoning seem to have taken root there instead.

Perhaps some of the discipline's distaste for the apocalypse stems from the fact that portrayals of such reckonings in popular culture since the late twentieth century are laden with raced ideological baggage that endangers the effectiveness of eschatological appeals. Yet despite how problematic they are, these rhetorics of reckoning find their way into the rhetorical scholarship on climate change. In his 2015 article, "Deep Ambivalence and Wild Objects: Toward a Strange

Environmental Rhetoric," Nathaniel Rivers suggests that William Cronon's meditations on the American Wilderness as a place teeming with nonhuman agency to suggest that our understanding of environmental rhetoric is incomplete if we do not "[give] wild objects their full due" (p. 423). However, Cronon situates his deep ambivalence toward wilderness in terms of a frontier mythology. Cronon's sense of land hinges on erasure of Indigenous understandings of how that land is inextricably linked to Indigenous ways of understanding, which frontier myths suppressed in favor of the idea of an "uninhabited" wilderness. Another way that this environmental context is whitely construed is illustrated by Richard Slotkins' definitions of frontier that consider it a place that exists at the edge of civilization. While this edge has traditionally been defined spatially — as a physical border between "civilized" white settlements and "uncivilized" Native lands — rhetorics of reckoning conceptualize this edge of civilization as temporal, a precipice of time over which civilization is hurtling as a result of climate change, nuclear war, failure of democracy, or pandemic. This temporal edge of civilization plays a recurring role in new materialist and posthuman scholarship both inside and outside rhetoric.

The whiteliness of these environmental attitudes becomes clearer in contrast to Indigenous thought. Where Cronon and Rivers promote a newly discovered deep ambivalence, and Slotkin advances the notion of civilization as necessitating borders, Daniel Wildcat demands respect for a "deep spatial relationship to the land" cultivated by Indigenous people (2009, p. 17). Rivers, Cronon, and Slotkin all propose a connection between land and human, but Wildcat's connection draws on Indigenous peoples' "long-term relationships with particular landscapes and ecological systems [which] make their observations very useful, for their longitudinal time frame 'study' is not five or ten years, but often seven or more generations" (p. 29). For Wildcat, the deep connection to the land is not merely a useful tool in the battle against climate change, but an ontological position — a reality, he argues through his use of an Octavio Paz epigraph, that must be "known" and not just "used" (p. 1). This divergence in thinking with regard for human-land relations and temporality have significant repercussions for rhetorics of reckoning.

Because the impending apocalypse is temporal, much of the focus on climate change rhetoric hinges on the amount of time we have left to change things before its effects become irreversible. In 2018, it was twelve years (Watts, 2019). More recently, the world has been given as few as eighteen months (McGrath, 2019). But this sort of temporal focus blinkers climate change evangelists to the prior and continuing postapocalyptic existences of Indigenous communities. John Mohawk argues that the forced separation of Indigenous communities from their land, and the conceptual separation of the individual from nature, has forced many Indigenous communities into a state of crisis not unlike the hypothetical postapocalyptic landscapes offered by posthumanism (2008, p. 218). The frontier mindset has resulted in a colonial Day of the Lord for Indigenous people complete with the purported divine exigence in the shape of Manifest Destiny.

Not coincidentally, religious studies scholars articulate two phases of the apocalypse — spatial and temporal. In spatial apocalypses, the new plane of existence that is revealed is transcendent, whereas in the apocalyptic language such as that found in new materialist

rhetorics, the world often becomes largely uninhabitable, at least temporarily. This narrative framing fits the mold of the Day of the Lord, especially in flood narratives such as that of Noah and Gilgamesh, or fiery vengeance stories like Sodom and Gomorrah and Jericho. In those stories, a wrathful deity spares a chosen people from annihilation and, in the case of Noah, asks them to repopulate the world. Having given up on the hope of converting non-believers, deities choose instead to wipe them out and start again with an ideologically homogenous chosen few. The selective destruction of the world results in a *de facto* unification — in Noah-story terms, every human and animal are literally in the same boat after having been given the ultimatum, "join us or die." To join is to abandon every nonconforming ideological affiliation in favor of a looming threat of extinction, a prospect that often surfaces in apocalyptic rhetoric. But where Days of the Lord offer an appeal to unity before enforcing it through a systematic purge of nonconformity, apocalypses simply reorganize the human ideological population through the revelation of a new transcendent plane, requiring no persuasion. Paul writes in Romans 14:11 that God says of the apocalypse, "every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God," offering no indication of the possibility for denial. In the post-apocalypse, we are simply re-oriented regardless of our affiliation or proximity to righteousness.

Posthumanism was not always so focused on appeals to unity. Rosi Braidotti offers a careful critique of the sorts of posthuman unification we should strive for in *The Posthuman*, noting that "[t]he global economy is post-anthropocentric in that it ultimately unifies all species under the imperative of the market and its excesses threaten the sustainability of our planet as a whole" (2013, p. 63) and that "the size of recent scholarship on the environmental crisis and climate change alone testifies to this state of emergency and the emergence of the earth as a political agent" (p. 63-4). This first half of Braidotti's argument for unification through crisis seems to be the major focus of posthumanism, to the point that it has become a defining trope of the subdiscipline. But Braidotti does something quite valuable when she notes that we cannot simply abandon individualism as a whole, noting that "one needs at least *some* subject position: this need not be either unitary or exclusively anthropocentric, but it must be the site for political and ethical accountability, for collective imaginaries and shared aspirations" (p. 102). In the rush to embrace a posthuman subject, rhetorical scholarship seems to have neglected this key point. Importantly, Braidotti fully rejects apocalyptic exigence, warning the reader against a unification that derives itself from a "sense of shared vulnerability, that is to say a global sense of inter-connection between the human and non-human environment in the face of common threats" (p. 50). This framework functions kairotically, with Braidotti acknowledging that individualism is useful as a critical tool in moments of raced and gendered crisis, and warning explicitly against the "full-scale humanization of the environment" (p. 85). This warning is not heeded in later posthuman scholarship.

Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulhucene* (2016) follows a similar path, but instead of qualifying on human unification, Haraway expresses her commitment to the apocalyptic metaphor to describe the effects of the Anthropocene:

> These times called the Anthropocene are times of multispecies, including human, urgency: of great mass death and extinction; of onrushing disasters, whose unpredictable specificities are foolishly taken as unknowability itself; of refusing to know

> and to cultivate the capacity of response-ability; of refusing to be present in and to onrushing catastrophe in time; of unprecedented looking away… How can we think in times of urgencies *without* the self-indulgent and self-fulfilling myths of apocalypse, when every fiber of our being is interlaced, even complicit, in the webs of processes that must somehow be engaged and repatterned? (p. 35)

Haraway rightly wants to avoid apocalyptic frameworks for their fatalism, but her examples of death, extinction, and disaster are distinctly stuff of Days of the Lord. The apocalypse is meant to be a narrative of great human transcendence, but the effects of the Anthropocene as described by Haraway offer only human suffering as a result of a human tendency to cling to individualism as evidenced by the argument that "bounded (or neoliberal) individualism amended by autopoiesis is not good enough figuratively or scientifically; it misleads us down deadly paths" (p. 33). Haraway, it would seem, offers the same choice to either "join us or die."

Perhaps the binary "join us or die" is too restrictive, as demonstrated by Scot Barnett's article, "Living Well in the Anthropocene," in which Barnett responds to Roy Scranton's statement that "we have to learn how to die not as individuals but as civilization" (2017, p. 21) by saying that "[o]n the surface, statements like this may seem a bit too apocalyptic" (p. 387) Despite Barnett's qualification, apocalyptic language seeps into the essay. Even the invoking of the Anthropocene immediately channels thoughts of extinction-level events, a point Barnett concedes in his definition of the era, "What is unique about the Anthropocene is that it is forcing us to confront the prospect of the end of the world, or at least the end of human civilization" (p. 387). Here, Barnett approaches the temporal border of civilization, a frontier of posthuman existence that requires exploration. Barnett sees the Anthropocene as an exigence that forces humans together regardless of the outcome, a prospect that Scranton might frame as "join us AND die." Barnett suggests that "when we learn to die, we detach ourselves not from the world or others in the world, but from ideas such as the self, individuality, certainty, and stability that are increasingly unhelpful for the hybrid problems and opportunities posed by the Anthropocene" (p. 387). Unification is hardly inevitable and might not even be desirable depending on what a given person would stand to lose by taking up this bargain. But Barnett takes this position one step further, arguing that not only is unification helpful but that to resist unification by remaining attached to individuality is "unhelpful." According to Barnett, to remain disunited in the face of the Anthropocene is to actively hinder the solution to its problems. Most troubling, however, is Barnett's reference to the "opportunities" provided by the Anthropocene, hinting at the accelerationist attitudes toward climate change as a chance to reestablish the frontier.

While Barnett explicitly calls for unification, the benefits of abandoning individuality are more often simply assumed. Thomas Rickert's *Ambient Rhetoric* takes as its goal "the dissolution of the subject-object relation" (2013, p. xii) and Karen Barad asks us to "renounce the very idea that individual objects possess discrete attributes" (2007, p. 292). Nathaniel Rivers quotes the National Climate Assessment that stresses "the need for the American people to prepare for and *respond to* [climate change's] far-reaching implications" (2015, p. 421, emphasis in Rivers' quote), and then argues that "[w]e are in a moment when fully thinking through response-ability is a pressing national and international need" (p. 421). Rivers sets an apocalyptic

exigence and seems to suggest that "the American people" and "we" are responsible for avoiding the end. I wish to draw attention to the ontological flattening of diverse American culture in the NCA's own quote, suggesting a monolithic American people that are both responsible for and equally concerned by the looming end of the world, and the assumption of "we" in Rivers' statement that performs the same function. The presumption here is that all Americans, if not all humans, should be gravely concerned with this developing threat to the end of civilization, this encroaching temporal frontier, and that the most pressing issues facing the world today are those that threaten nations and species. Each example of scholarship here presents unity as the solution to the apocalyptic threat of the Anthropocene, this in itself is not troubling until we examine the circumstances under which unity has been presented as a salve to apocalyptic threat in popular culture.

The Unity Soliloquy and the Cinema of Reckoning

I return now to film to illustrate the problem of unity as "convenient consubstantiality." Our understanding of apocalypse seems to be driven primarily by the misnamed apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic genre of film which mischaracterizes the Day of the Lord narrative as apocalyptic. Apocalyptic film — with its focus on the death, destruction, and chaos of the fall of civilization — might be better categorized as a cinema of reckoning, and these reckonings like other reckonings are targeted and they discriminate. Cinema of reckoning does significant ideological work, often in the historical context of perceived racial crisis. The seeds of white victimization were sown as early as 1915 with *The Birth of a Nation*, but they sprang forth during the tumultuous 1960's when the fear that white Americans might lose their stranglehold on governmental power in the United States went mainstream. A cinema of reckoning began to develop and flourish as a stark warning of the "dangers" of desegregation. The fact that *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) featured a Black man as its protagonist was as scary as any flesh-eating zombie to the crowd that feared a widespread political realignment in favor of historically marginalized Black Americans. This fear is made painfully explicit in *Planet of the Apes* (1968), where the land — revealed at the end of the film to be a post-reckoning United States — is governed by tribes of anthropomorphic apes onto which the protagonists project their own backwardness, lack of education, and tendencies for violence. That said, it must still be noted that for all their failings, the protagonists who are human are also white. The apes, for all their "civilized" qualities, are still meant to be seen as racialized animals who are incapable of advanced thought, as illustrated by their inability to believe that Charles Heston's character flew into their midst. Cinema of reckoning took vaguely articulated fears of "white genocide" and spun them into cautionary tales of the disintegration of social fabric at the hands of zombies and six-foot-tall anthropomorphic orangutans.[3]

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[3] It is no coincidence that two of the most significant films in the cinema of reckoning were released in 1968 — George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* and Franklin J. Schaffner's *Planet of the Apes.* These films debuted in the thick of the Civil Rights Movement, just three years after Lyndon B. Johnson signed the *Voting Rights Act of 1965* and Malcolm X's assassination, and the same year that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. At a time when white Americans

Another way that cinema of reckoning articulates white anxiety is through the deployment of colorblind rhetorics. As a preface to the Day of the Lord, cinema of reckoning often employs what I call the "unity soliloquy" to prime its audience for its vision of a new post-racial world. The unity soliloquy given by the ostensibly white protagonist of the film has roots as far back as *Planet of the Apes'* opening sequence, when George Taylor muses on the conflict that defined the Civil Rights Movement in terms that would today be at home in an #AllLivesMatter rant. Looking out the window of the Icarus as it orbits a strange "new" planet, Taylor says,

> Seen from here, everything seems different. Time bends, space is boundless. It squashes a man's ego. I feel lonely. That's about it. Tell me though — does man, that marvel of the universe, that glorious paradox who sent me to the stars, still make war against his brother? Keep his neighbors' children starving? (*Planet of the Apes*)

Planet of the Apes' use of "man" as a catch-all term for humanity is the first indication of the film's position on how humans should organize themselves in the face of potential extinction. According to Taylor, the concept of humanity should trump embodied identity differences, resulting in people treating each other as "brothers." This reference to "man," read as "mankind," is a call to a particular species identification at the expense of raced individualism. The second sign of the film's flattening humanistic approach is that Taylor mentions in passing that his ego is "squashed," noting a radical realignment of his identity priorities through his newfound exterior perspective. In noting his squashed ego, Taylor signals that his individual identity has taken a backseat to his species identity as a result of his widening universal scope through his interstellar travel. Taylor's ego is suggested to have impeded his ability to see the "whole" picture of humanity, implying that a more harmonious human existence relies simply on the ability of Othered humans to set their egos aside as well.

The rhetorical function of the unity soliloquy closely mirrors calls to abandon subjectivity in rhetorical scholarship. Both calls heavily rely on the aesthetic of the post-apocalyptic landscape to set the scene for their arguments. Both place a premium on the ability to make wider connections outside of "personal" identification in service of a wider perspective that flattens human difference, a critique continuously leveled at posthumanism by scholars like Alexander Weheliye and others. Both appeals hinge on the rhetor's ability to call their audience to a state of shared vulnerability that Braidotti warns we should avoid. But colorblind rhetoric as a response to white victimization is not the only thing that racism and the cinema of reckoning have in common. When Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, he urged citizens of the United States to "lay aside our irrelevant differences" (Miller Center, 2022). Similarly in *Night of the Living Dead*, Helen cajoles her fellow survivors that We may not enjoy living together, but dying together isn't going to solve anything." Finally, in *Planet of the Apes*, Taylor muses about human difference in the *Icarus*, wondering "does man, that marvel of the universe, that glorious paradox who sent me to the stars, still make war against his brother? Keep his neighbor's children starving?" Together, these three representative quotes demonstrate a deep skepticism toward the validity of human racial difference. Johnson implies

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likely feared their own Day of Reckoning for the enslavement of Black Americans and the evils of segregation, the cinema of reckoning really began to take hold of the American imagination.

that race is an "irrelevant" distinction, Helen questions the point of racism in the face of an impending Day of the Lord, and Taylor simply flattens human ontology in familial species terms.

Even criticism of cinemas of reckoning drift into this colorblind rhetoric. In *Eli Roth's History of Horror,* the eponymous host reacts with incredulity to a racist character in Romero's *Dawn of the Dead,* the follow up to *Night of the Living Dead*. He asks, "Why is this guy concerned with racism? Like, there's zombies in the building! Aren't there bigger problems?" (Sayenga). And it is here that I believe we find real exigence for cinemas of reckoning. Faced with accountability for their atrocities, white Americans flock to cinemas of reckoning as an attempt to lock racial arguments in American discourse into stasis by offering trauma on a worldwide scale as the "more important issue" and casting racial identity as "irrelevant" and "inconsequential" in the face of a looming worldwide trauma. Faced with the repercussions of generations of institutionalized racism, cinemas of reckoning offer a sort of *deus ex machina,* a Hail Mary for white Americans to imagine an end run around reconciliation and reparation.

There has been a veritable deluge of disaster film and cinema of reckoning in the post-9/11 American cinemascape. Zombies, climate change, earthquakes, volcanoes, meteors, viruses, aliens, apes, nuclear war and even trees have served as agents of catastrophe. While the agents and agencies shift according to filmmakers' sensibilities, the disaster film narrative follows a distinct formula: dispossessed white humanity endures an extinction-level-event, is delivered through some stroke of luck or divine intervention, and then begins to rebuild civilization. We can tie this back to the Frontier Mythology that shaped American westward expansion during the 19th century. This mythology violently "reset" the United States for the exploration and colonization of white Americans and established those same attitudes regarding "civilization" and "wilderness." At times of intense racial tension, cinema of reckoning sides with those like Travis Bickle, reveling in the idea that "[s]omeday a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets." Like Sodom and Gomorrah, the story of Gilgamesh, and the Great Flood, these movies and television shows are concerned with restoring a pastoral sensibility to the United States that can then be repopulated by "chosen" people who automatically buy into accepted morals and beliefs.

The second issue with cinema of reckoning is the historical moment when it continually resurfaces. While scholars have often read the cinema of reckoning as a response to anxiety about the state of the nation, the racial component of the genre has been obscured. Whiteness as portrayed in the cinema of reckoning hinges upon the victimization of "white" culture to the point that "progress" becomes impossible, a sort of paralysis through political correctness that stalls the white civilization mission. Unable to reconcile the disproportionate use of state violence against people of color with the assertion that the United States now occupies a "post-racial" era, cinema of reckoning instead wipes the slate clean through an external agency (be it a meteor, climate change, alien invasion, pandemic, or zombies), resetting the United States' population and eliminating the racial diversity that thwarts the Lord's Chosen People for whom the world is made.

Unlike the disaster film, which dramatizes the dissolution of American society on screen, the cinema of reckoning joins the action after its dissolution. Disaster films generally end with a sense of possibility of rebuilding, while cinema of reckoning tends to take a bleaker view, with the action taking place almost wholly within a broken society.[4] Both the disaster film and cinema of reckoning offer implicit arguments about who exactly is expected to survive the extinction-level events, and what the world would or should look like in their wake. The United States and its analogues are often shown in a state of desolation, with wandering groups of heavily armed white males staking claims to precious resources such as water and arable land. In this sense, the cinema of reckoning reinvigorates Frontier Mythology by literally killing off marginalized Americans by the millions, and plopping their white male antagonists in the middle of a *new* New World ripe for exploitation. This Frontier Mythology, in turn, grounds evangelicalism's environmental dominionism claims.[5]

In these terms, I would hesitate to characterize the cinema of reckoning genre as apocalyptic at all, primarily because of the scope of judgment associated with the societies in these films

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[4] For example, *Independence Day* (1996) is a disaster epic because it is a two-hour journey through the systematic destruction of the United States by extraterrestrials, culminating in a rebuilding effort. *A Quiet Place* (2018), on the other hand, reflects the aesthetic of the cinema of reckoning because it takes place after the supposed extraterrestrial invasion and the possibility of rebuilding seems much more remote. Notable disaster films of the late 20th / early 21st century include *Independence Day* (1996), *Mars Attacks!* (1996), *Deep Impact* (1998), *Armageddon* (1998), *2012* (2009), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *Cloverfield* (2008), and *Poseidon* (2006). Cinema of reckoning has a long-storied history, but to give an example of the genre's breadth and ubiquity here's a short list: *12 Monkeys* (1995), *Waterworld* (1995), *The Matrix* (1999), *The Road* (2009), *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), and *Oblivion* (2013). This non-exhaustive list serves as only a partial representation of how frequently Americans are encouraged to think about the end of the world.

[5] This is dramatized to the extreme over the arc of HBO's *Game of Thrones*. Daenerys Targaryen's legions of brown-skinned formerly-enslaved people are simply sacrificed to the Night King and his army of the dead, which has been widely theorized to be an allegory for climate change (Fortuna, 2019). *Game of Thrones* devotes considerable screen time to the troubles faced by Daenerys in her quest to end slavery. When she liberates the Unsullied and then the slaves of Astapor, Yunkai, and Meereen, she faces significant resistance from the slaveowners who argue that they are unable to realign their ways of life on such short notice. The cities fall back into slavers' hands, formerly enslaved people petition Daenerys to sell themselves, and Meereen becomes the target of terrorist attacks funded by former slaveowners. As the series progresses, the white inhabitants of Westeros refer to the formerly enslaved as "foreign scum," "dirty," and "savages" (see Season 7, 2017), and speculate on the ability of the series' people of color to acculturate and fit in. Faced with a difficulty racial problem, *Game of Thrones* takes the easy way out, eliminating its peoples of color systematically through a series of Days of the Lord and white purity fantasies.

whose worlds have "ended." The worlds that cinema of reckoning characters find themselves in are as far from transcendent as possible. Instead, these films portray a world in which, Stephen King notes, "we're getting a chance to exercise our most anti-social emotions. You know, that mob impulse. It's like 'kill 'em all and let God sort 'em out'" (Savenga, 2018). If anything, cinema of reckoning seems to set the world back to a time during which extreme violence, food poverty, and precarious living were the rules of the day — much like the prototypical Western and the frontier it mythologizes.

End Game: The Divine Reward of the Apocalypse

> "If the only thing keeping a person decent is the expectation of divine reward then, brother, that person is a piece of shit." — Rust Cohle, *True Detective*

While post-apocalyptic landscapes in cinema often are meant to *look* bleak, they carry a sense of white possibility and wonder that is usually only found in space exploration and western films. Having weathered the "real rain" of the apocalypse, Earth's remaining inhabitants find themselves in a position to remake the world. Sheltered from the flooding, the predominately white survivors are gifted a true New World to repopulate, only this time their progress through an unpopulated wilderness ripe for exploration and settlement is unimpeded by Indigenous populations. In true Day of the Lord fashion, the world has only ended for *some* of its inhabitants, and the remaining humans can count themselves among the chosen. In this way, the post-apocalyptic landscape of popular culture evokes a concept of frontier that never existed outside of the whitewashed history books of the twentieth-century United States. This frontier gives its occupants an opportunity to establish their utopian society unencumbered by its history of racism through an ethnic cleansing with no human agent to shoulder the blame.

It is in this utopian future that the whiteness of evangelicalism and climate change thought converge with disturbing results. The fatalistic rhetoric of white evangelicalism toward the end of the world has driven particularly harmful policies, especially in the context of climate change. I myself was raised to believe that the rapture — an event during which Jesus would descend from heaven and physically take his most devout followers back to paradise — was always imminent. We were told that catastrophic geological, weather, and climate phenomena such as hurricanes, earthquakes, famine, plague, drought, and flood increased in frequency the closer we came to the rapture, and so the only people who had to fear these phenomena were those who were not "saved." The dread we experienced as a result of these deadly events was to be supplanted by the anticipation of an impending *deus ex machina* that would spare us from the worst of the apocalypse. In 2017, House Republican Tim Walberg from Michigan offered a wrinkle on this theory, stating that he "believe[s] that there is a creator in God who is much bigger than us. And I'm confident that, if there's a real problem, he can take care of it" (Gajanan, 2019). Unsurprisingly, the evangelical party line on climate change seems to be that either God will fix it, or that they welcome the effects because it means they are closer to their divine reward.

While apocalyptic rhetorics of climate change in the discipline of rhetoric are more skeptical of a *deus ex machina,* the divine reward that awaits survivors of the apocalypse have been laid out at length for survivors of the cinema of reckoning. The argument that the relinquishment of individualism would avert a climate disaster or better help us cope with a world ravaged by the catastrophes of climate change brings apocalyptic rhetoric too close to white evangelical and popular culture representations of the end of the world. To put it bluntly, this way of thinking and arguing has historically privileged white, straight, ablebodied men. The posthuman appeal to a sense of shared vulnerability threatens to humanize iguanas and ice cubes while Black Americans are killed in the streets by cops who, on the whole, face fewer consequences than promotions for their actions. In short, white climate change evangelists are newcomers, tourists in the realm of vulnerability. Adopting apocalyptic rhetorics that have historically marginalized people of color threatens to alienate marginalized communities in the United States while promoting accelerationist understandings of climate change that would provide a frontier-like space for white survivors to build a world "saved" from having to reckon with its violence toward people of color.

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