

## SEM20. “It’s the end of the world as we know it”: Politics of the apocalypse in literary and cultural studies

11 September h. 16:00-18:30, PN 8

### Convenors

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### Abstract

This seminar will explore the apocalypse as a hermeneutic framework for literature and cultural studies, focusing on how queer theory, postcolonial studies, and ‘post-historical’ perspectives engage with apocalyptic narratives as sites of ideological conflict, historical rupture, and cultural transformation. Apocalyptic imagery shows a productive ambivalence in elaborating the crucial issue of *whose* world is under threat or disappearing. In postcolonial contexts, for example, apocalyptic tropes are often reflective of colonial and postcolonial anxieties, where the apocalypse represents both the demise of imperial authority and the uncertain emergence of new, often fragmented, identities and realities. In queer theory, on the other hand, the apocalypse harks the end of the compulsory gender binary, which may be hailed as empowering or cataclysmic according to different positionalities. Through the lens of post-history, apocalyptic discourses disrupt linear historical narratives, offering a critique of the capitalist, heteronormative, and colonial systems that perpetuate cycles of oppression. We propose that apocalyptic scenarios provide a powerful and even heuristic tool for understanding how histories of oppression and resistance are interpreted and reimagined, and that apocalyptic narratives not only envision ends but also offer avenues for reinterpreting the possibilities of new beginnings.

We invite proposals that discuss the apocalypse as hermeneutic framework in literary and cultural studies, looking at specific case studies or, more widely, at methodologies and their own crises.

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### SEM20. Papers

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- (Post)human (post)apocalypses: Byron and Leopardi after the end of humanity (Alessandro Cabiati, Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia)
- “It’s not the end of the world [...]. It’s only the end of us”: On the Beach and the legacy of nuclear catastrophic imagination (Francesca Guidotti, Università degli Studi di Bergamo)
- Between collapse and the collective in two apocalyptic narratives of global health crises: Sarah Schulman’s *People in Trouble* and Gregg Bordowitz’s *Pandemic Haiku* (Samuele Grassi, Monash University, Polo di Prato dell’Università degli Studi di Firenze)
- “I shall not see a world that will be dear to me”: Unveiling the apocalyptic prophecy of the Morrigan (Luca Sarti, Università di Napoli l’Orientale)
- Entangled memories: Speculative archives and fictional genealogies in Lidia Yuknavitch’s *Thrust* (Arianna Preite, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna)

**(Post)human (post)apocalypses: Byron and Leopardi after the end of humanity**

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As a literary genre, post-apocalyptic fiction is a product of English Romanticism. In the 1810s and 1820s, apocalyptic narratives such as Lord Byron's 'Darkness', Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, and Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* reimagined, through a secular-scientific lens, the classical and religious eschatology of the Western tradition. Indeed, Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi is not usually included among the cluster of Romantic writers who established the post-apocalyptic genre. Leopardi, however, represented human extinction and the end of the world in several of his writings, most notably in 'Dialogo di un Folletto e di uno Gnomo' (1824), part of the collection *Operette morali*. On the surface, Leopardi's 'Dialogo' and works of English Romanticism like Byron's 'Darkness' (1816) describe the end of times in markedly different ways. 'Dialogo' discusses the extinction of human beings from the point of view of two fantastical creatures, a pixie and a gnome, who comment on how natural events are occurring even after humanity's apocalypse: rivers still run and celestial bodies keep on following their courses. In Byron's 'Darkness', the disappearance of human civilization is part of a broader cataclysmic event, the death of the sun, which, unlike in Leopardi's 'Dialogo', stops rivers from flowing and stars from shining. This paper will argue that, despite their apparent differences, 'Dialogo' and 'Darkness' display similar nihilistic tendencies and an analogous rejection of anthropocentrism. In both texts, human extinction is presented as being caused by despicable practices like war and cannibalism; gazettes, royal palaces, and paper money, symbols of human civilization and power, disappear or are destroyed; and other-than-human beings provide an alternative perspective to that of degenerate humanity.

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**Between collapse and the collective in two apocalyptic narratives of global health crises: Sarah Schulman's *People in Trouble* and Gregg Bordowitz's *Pandemic Haiku***

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This paper, drawing on queer theory, postcolonial studies, and 'post-historical' perspectives, explores two apocalyptic narratives as sites of ideological and cultural rupture, from two different yet interrelated time-settings: Sarah Schulman's novel, *People in Trouble* (1990), and Gregg Bordowitz's collection, *Pandemic Haiku* (2021).

Written in the heyday of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, Schulman's *People in Trouble* remains to this date "a story of the AIDS crisis from a lesbian perspective" (1998: 9). The novel portrays a global health crisis as an apocalyptic moment, as a historical and political collapse that unmasked systemic neglect and oppression from heteronormative institutions. *People in Trouble* foregrounds queer relationality as a site of survival and renewal, echoing the seminar's call to reimagine apocalyptic ends as also new beginnings. However, the afterlives of the novel also reveal the ways in which minoritarian histories are routinely overwritten in dominant narratives of (queer) inclusion. Schulman's novel was a direct source for Jonathan Larson's musical *Rent*, which reworked Schulman's characters, themes, and settings into a mainstream, prize-winning cultural product. Schulman recounts this process of erasure in *Stagestruck* (1998), where she details how her work – and that of the activist communities she was part of – was extracted and sanitised to fit a marketable image of LGBT progress.

Composed during the COVID-19 pandemic, Bordowitz's *Pandemic Haiku* – in connection with the MoMA exhibition "Gregg Bordowitz: I Wanna Be Well" – offers a fragmented, meditative response to an ongoing apocalyptic event, reflecting on illness, isolation, and care, which is further complicated by Bordowitz's position as an artist and

activist living with HIV. The poetic form itself, minimalist and constrained, becomes a formal embodiment of life under lockdown, underscoring how pandemic temporality disrupts linear narratives and demands new modes of witnessing. *Pandemic Haiku* is a collection of intimate dispatches from someone who knows what it means to live in a constant state of personal vulnerability and political critique, between narratives of the sick body and the body politic. Like Schulman, Bordowitz insists on precarity, interdependence, and the affective lives during the pandemic.

In both cases, the writing extends the moment of apocalypse to hint at community and the collective, against the separation imposed by the individual condition of survival. Importantly, Schulman and Bordowitz are also committed pro-Palestinian, New York-based Jewish writer-activists, with a long history of HIV/AIDS activism dating back to the heyday of the infamous ACT UP NY branch (Schulman 2021). Given the current global political climate, their unique perspective offers “a critique of the capitalist, heteronormative, and colonial systems that perpetuate cycles of oppression”.

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## **“It’s not the end of the world [...]. It’s only the end of us”: On the Beach and the legacy of nuclear catastrophic imagination**

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In the 21st century, we no longer think of disasters as single, isolated events. Instead, the dominant approach has shifted to seeing them as global, interconnected phenomena with widespread, far-reaching consequences. We cannot perceive apocalyptic events in their immediacy because they unfold over centuries or even longer. Like Morton’s hyperobjects, they are so vast and dispersed across space and time that they exceed our ability to fully comprehend them, thus challenging the narrow scope of anthropocentric vision.

The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki marked a watershed in human history and in the human imagination of the apocalypse. The sheer scale of the devastation made it impossible to process the catastrophe immediately, but literature was able to provide ‘rapid response’ narratives that began to process the trauma within a few years of the event, even though it would take generations to better understand its significance. This is the case with Nevil Shute’s novel *On the Beach* (1951), set in Australia after a nuclear war has killed most of the world’s population and the rest know they must die soon as the radiation approaches. Humanity will be wiped out, having proved unworthy of inhabiting the Earth, but one day someone better might take over. Disasters always make us think, or rather rethink, our present and past, but also our future, in a critical way; this rethinking can hopefully lead to a break with past practices.

The culmination of a very long process seems to have come last October, when the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to *Nihon Hidankyō*, a Japanese association of atomic bomb survivors, “for its efforts to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons and for demonstrating through testimony that nuclear weapons must never be used again”. While the crisis of humanism is still on the agenda, our present seems to make more and more room for a heartfelt plea to be humane, to feel empathy, compassion and understanding for our fellow creatures. The apocalypse would then serve as a wake-up call for radical change, an invitation to deal more humanely with the present and the future, including its global catastrophes.

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### **Entangled memories: Speculative archives and fictional genealogies in Lidia Yuknavitch's *Thrust***

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In her post-apocalyptic novel *Thrust* (2022), Lidia Yuknavitch weaves a tangle of stories around the central thesis that “*memory is proof that imagination is a real place*”—as one of the novel’s underwater creatures declares. Drawing on archival materials and historical studies that reconstruct the multiple temporalities through which the narrative travels, Yuknavitch composes a liminal tale suspended between the real and the imaginary. At its core lies the notion that genealogy itself is nothing more than a form of fiction (Muñoz 2009). From this perspective, memory becomes an act of mythopoiesis: a process of creating myths, tales, and narratives that manipulate past events and reshape how we imagine their futures. Yuknavitch’s novel will be examined through the lens of recent queer and decolonial theories that seek to “*exceed or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive*” by means of “*a series of speculative arguments*” (Hartman 2008). These approaches aim to open up new narrative possibilities emerging from sites of impossible speech. By analyzing the narrative strategies employed by the author and the effectiveness of the decolonial perspectives that the novel presents, the discussion will trace the connections between the text and the intra-active processes it stages (Barad 2007). These processes give rise to characters that resonate as collective, hybrid voices, blending into a unified movement that weaves together the past, present, and future of the human and more-than-human creatures inhabiting the planet.

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### **“I shall not see a world that will be dear to me”: Unveiling the apocalyptic prophecy of the Morrigan**

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Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic themes permeate (Anglo)Irish literature, ranging from contemporary novels, such as Sarah Davis-Goff’s *Last Ones Left Alive* (2019) and Eoin Brady’s *Weep* (2022), to ancient mythological texts. Building on this premise, this paper explores the apocalyptic prophecy sung by the Morrigan in *Cath Maige Tuired*, a key narrative in the Irish Mythological Cycle. Focusing on Whitley Stokes’s 1891 English translation of the *The Second Battle of Moytura*, published during the Celtic Revival—an era aimed at reclaiming Gaelic heritage and resisting British domination—the paper examines how the goddess’s verses depict the breakdown of natural and social order. This analysis is then juxtaposed with W. B. Yeats’s apocalyptic poem *The Second Coming* (1919)—often described as applicable “to any and all crisis” (Keane, 2012, p. 37)—which similarly grapples with societal collapse and the rise of new (dis)orders. Both works, in fact, highlight the tension between the destruction of the old world and the unsettling birth of a new one. Ultimately, by framing the end of the world as “a moment of rupture” (Pitetti, 2017, p. 438), this paper demonstrates how apocalyptic imagery is employed to address historical breaks and the formation of new identities in times of crisis.

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