

The World for Word Is Forest: Anthropocene Futures, Object Use, and Post-Apocalyptic
Forms of Life¹

It was strangely like war. They attacked the forest as if it were an enemy to be pushed back from the beachheads, driven into the hills, broken into patches, and wiped out. Many operators thought they were not only making lumber but liberating the land from the trees. – Morgan Murray²

1. Introducing the vicarious image of the forest

The vicarious image of the forest provides us with a tremendously powerful speculative resource for political theory. To be a vicarious image means that the imagery in question “takes the place of something else,” namely, that it substitutes for a concept.³ The suggestion, then, is that vicarious imagery can perform affective and theoretical functions that concepts alone may fail to effect. This is particularly true for forest imagery, as forests are unusually multivalent objects, both as resolutely material places (indeed, they are the largest and most complex of terrestrial biomes) and as leafy bearers of darkly vibrant cultural and political imaginaries.

The forest – from *foris* (meaning “beyond” or “outside”) – has borne many meanings, often remarkably diverse.⁴ These meanings range from the identification of the forest as the source of civic imperilment (e.g., in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, where the Cedar Forest must be destroyed in order both to achieve independence from divine temper and to yield building materials for the city

¹ This turn of phrase is an intentional inversion of the title of Ursula K. Le Guin’s science-fiction novella *The Word for World Is Forest* (New York: Tor Books, 2010).

² Cited in Derrick Jensen and George Draffan, *Strangely Like War: The Global Assault on Forests* (White River Junction: Chelsea Green, 2003), 1.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Ronald Spiers, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 43, but see Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Random House, Inc., 2000), 63 for Kaufmann’s use of the striking phrase “vicarious image.”

⁴ Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1995), 83, but especially see Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). See also *The Forest: Politics, Poetics, and Practice*, ed. Kathleen Goncharov (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) for a perspective from the arts, specifically.

gates) to its use as an allegory of Christian guilt and waywardness (e.g., in Dante's "dark forest, where the straight way was lost"), from being Romanticized as "sites of lyric nostalgia," where the innocent frolic and gambol across Edenic woody landscapes, to Cartesian abominations, forests of error, in desperate need of subjection to the rigors of method (e.g., consider the parallel that Robert Pogue Harrison draws between the Enlightenment obsession with methodology as the sure solution to various quandaries and the emergence of German "forest mathematics," i.e., the science of forest management, in which forest becomes number).⁵

What emerges from this tangle of imagery is the idea that a forest is a site, on the one hand, but that it is also a situation. Forests are sites because they exist as places, not merely in places. Places are not abstractions, after all, but, rather, specific locales that consist of a multitude of agencies come into confluence. Here is the material truth that Harrison describes when he notes that, in the Roman imaginary, "forests were obstacles – to conquest, hegemony, homogenization," but, also,

[b]y virtue of their buffers, [forests] enabled communities to develop indigenously; hence they served to localize the spirit of place. This is confirmed by the fact that in [the Roman imaginary of] woodlands lived spirits and deities, fauns and nymphs, local to *this* place and no other.⁶

While forests have often played the role of the constitutive outside – what Harrison terms the negative "shadow" of the positive, of civilization, community, or law – they nonetheless occupy space, but this space threatens to exist beyond the sovereign claims of territorial occupation and right.⁷ Accordingly, forests can be entered and exited, inhabited, poisoned, or destroyed. As

⁵ Harrison, *Forests*, 13-18, 81-87, 93, 107-124. See also *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. Maureen Gallery Kovacs, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 39-56, Lawrence Warner, "The Dark Wood and the Dark Word in Dante's *Commedia*," *Comparative Literature Studies* 32:4 (1995): 449-478, and René Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 1998), 14.

⁶ Harrison, *Forests*, 51, emphasis in original. See also 46-58 and J. Donald Hughes, *Pan's Travail: Environmental Problems of the Ancient Greeks and Romans* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1996).

⁷ See Stuart Elden, *The Birth of Territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), especially 322-330.

Emerson indicates, the woods suggest “an occult relation between man and vegetable,” which is to say, the landscape itself.⁸ In the forest – or, rather, as a forest – a particular ecology takes place, and a forest ecology inheres in the numerous and varied relations that occur within the specific form of land community that a given forest embodies.⁹ A forest ecology is a land community, then, albeit of a particular kind (e.g., boreal, temperate, or tropical), and, as such, it consists of a range of interdependent agencies in congress together.

Obviously, forests cannot exist without trees, but forests are not simply gatherings of trees.¹⁰ This is what it means to say that forests are sites, but also situations. Forests are situations because to be a forest entails that a necessarily distributed state of affairs obtains.¹¹ Trees cannot live without soil, rich soils are produced by fungi and microorganisms, and other creatures render necessary ecological services ranging from decomposition to pollination.¹² As ecologists Burton V. Barnes and his associates note, considered in isolation, “[t]he plant assemblage is incomplete, and, like climate, physiography, or soil, is only one part of the landscape ecosystem” that a forest ecology comprises.¹³ Many singular agencies in motion, then, must come together in order to make

⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature,” *Nature and Selected Essays* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 39.

⁹ The term “land community” refers broadly to Aldo Leopold’s definition thereof. He writes, variously, that “[e]cology is the science of communities, and the ecological conscience is therefore the ethics of community life,” and that such community necessarily includes “not only plants and animals [including humans], but soils and waters as well.” See Aldo Leopold, “The Ecological Conscience,” *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays*, eds. Susan L. Flader and L. Baird Callicott (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 340 and “A Biotic View of Land,” *River*, 267, as well as Leopold’s explicit discussion of the land community in “The Community Concept” and “The Land Pyramid” in Aldo Leopold, “The Land Ethic,” *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), 203-207 and 214-218.

¹⁰ See Bernd Heinrich, *The Trees in My Forest* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998) for a beautifully simple testament to this fact.

¹¹ See Ram Oren and David A. Perry, *Forest Ecosystems* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008), especially Chapters 10 (“How Biodiversity Is Created and Maintained”), 11 (“The Biological Web”), 19 (“Herbivores in Forest Ecosystems”), 21 (“Ecosystem Stability II: The Role of Biodiversity”), and 22 (“Ecosystem Stability III: Conserving Species”).

¹² Consider, for example, D. H. Janzen, “The Natural History of Mutualisms,” *The Biology of Mutualism: Ecology and Evolution*, ed. Douglas H. Boucher (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 40-99, where the forest is taken as a primary example of a biotic community dense with mutualisms. See also Suzanne Simard et al., “Meta-Networks of Fungi, Fauna, and Flora as Agents of Complex Adaptive Systems,” *Managing Forests as Complex Adaptive Systems: Building Resilience to the Challenge of Global Change* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 133-164.

¹³ Burton V. Barnes et al., *Forest Ecology* (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1998), 373.

a forest happen – and it is crucial to emphasize this, namely, that forests are *happenings*, that they embody an ongoing temporal traversal of development and disturbance, renewal and succession.¹⁴ To borrow a turn of (para)phrase from Aldo Leopold, thinking like a forest materializes temporal dimensions that both fracture and inhere within the everyday, which is to say that thinking through the vicarious image of the forest necessitates an engagement with temporality as such.¹⁵

In this light, two material features of forests emerge as especially noteworthy. First, the degree of interdependency and interconnectedness that obtains in the forest is striking. As situations that both make possible, and rely upon, the centrality of biodiversity, forests embody and sustain the many interspecies relations that compose, and contribute to the maintenance of, ecological health and resilience. Second, forests can be ecologically reparative sites. In addition to performing biodiversity, forests effectively clean and filter water as it cycles through the land community. At a different scale, forests sequester carbon, which is to say that plants absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and store that carbon as biomass in the vegetal constituents of the forest itself.

As we work through, and with, the vicarious image of the forest, then, various of its aspects materialize before us, as if forest imagery were naturally anamorphic. Anamorphosis (from the conjunction of the Greek prefix ἀνά [ana-], meaning “again,” “up,” or “on” and μορφή [morphé], meaning “appearance,” “form,” or “shape”) is a term referring to a perspectival distortion that requires the observer to occupy a specific position, posture, or stance in order to perceive whatever has been anamorphosed. The iconic example of an anamorphic image is Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* (see [Figure 1](#)), in which the skull that dominates the foreground can be perceived

¹⁴ Oren and Perry, *Forest Ecology*, Chapters 7 (“Disturbance in Forest Ecosystems”), 8 (“Patterns and Mechanisms of Succession”), 10, and 11.

¹⁵ Aldo Leopold, “Thinking Like a Mountain,” *Sand County Almanac*, 129-133.

clearly only if the painting is observed from a particular angle. Arguably, anamorphic logics and techniques also inflect literary and philosophical objects, such as in John Donne's poetry, in its concern with the "making and unmaking of [...] enigmas," in some of Shakespeare's plays (as argued by James L. Calderwood and Ned Lukacher), or, conceived more broadly, in the perspectivism championed by Jean-François Lyotard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and others.¹⁶

What anamorphosis effects is a disruption that is contained within the structure of an image itself, such that the perspectival nature of perspective gets foregrounded dramatically and the illusion of a privileged position from which the sovereign observer comprehensively unifies the semic field is complicated or shattered. To say that forest imagery is naturally anamorphic is to suggest that the vicarious image of the forest harbors and sustains multiple and numerous dimensions of affective and theoretical import. It is also to suggest that some of these dimensions may best be elucidated and perceived by approaching the forest obliquely.

2. Prospectus

I intend to proceed as follows. First, I turn to the role of the apocalyptic imagination in the Anthropocene, which I argue is intimately and inextricably tied to the vicarious image of the forest in an epoch characterized by deforestation and catastrophic climate change. This leads to an

¹⁶ Anna Riehl, "Eying the Thought Awry: The Anamorphosis of John Donne's Poetry," *English Literary Renaissance* 39:1 (Winter, 2009): 141, 141-162, James L. Calderwood, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Woodbridge: Twayne Publications, 1992), Ned Lukacher, *Time-Fetishes: The Secret History of Eternal Recurrence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), Chapter 4 ("Anamorphic Perspectives, Human (Im)postures, and the Rhetoric of the *Aevum*"), and, in particular, the very difficult passage "*Veduta* on a Fragment of the 'History' of Desire," containing extensive reflections on the function and nature of anamorphosis, in Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2011), 157-202. See also Jen E. Boyle, *Anamorphosis in Early Modern Literature* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010) and Kiff Bamford, *Lyotard and the figural in Performance, Art and Writing* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012). For the most incisive description of Nietzsche's perspectivism(s) I have yet discovered, see James Conant, "The Dialectic of Perspectivism, I," *Sats: Nordic Journal of Philosophy* 6:2 (2005): 5-50, and James Conant, "The Dialectic of Perspectivism, II," *Sats: Nordic Journal of Philosophy* 7:1 (2006): 6-57. Consider also Joanne Faulkner, *Dead Letters to Nietzsche, or, the Necromantic Art of Reading Philosophy* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 156-168 for the suggestion that Nietzsche's understanding of the eternal return involves anamorphic effects.

extended series of arguments (traversing the work of Donald Winnicott, Hannah Arendt, Lee Edelman, and Nietzsche) about what role the future plays for us today – and what role it can play for us as we proceed forward into dark and uncertain times. I propose that the future should be conceived of as an object (an object in a sense of the term appropriated from psychoanalytic discourses), an object that can be used to generate political experiments, to inspire new engagements with radical democracy in a time of ongoing emergency, and to suggest resilient, post-apocalyptic forms of life that outstrip and survive our public disasters.

It should be noted, furthermore, that what follows is inflected both by Bonnie Honig's suggestion that catastrophic times may contain "hidden resources and alternative angles of vision [...], finding even in narrowed times opportunities for democratic renewal" and by what Jack Judith Halberstam terms "wild theory" – which is to say, "failed disciplinary knowledge" that is marshaled together from so-called "wild archives," deployed in idiosyncratic and specific configurations intended to cast some light upon the most pressing crises at hand.¹⁷ This method is particularly appropriate in a political culture rife with despair and a university culture that often rewards cleverly disguised defenses of the cultural, economic, and political logics that drive both climate change and its brutal background, consisting of the expropriation and devastation of creatures and peoples alike.¹⁸

3. The Anthropocene and the apocalyptic imaginary

¹⁷ Bonnie Honig, *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), xv, and Jack Judith Halberstam, "Charming for the Revolution: A Gaga Manifesto," *e-flux*, last modified 2013, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/charming-for-the-revolution-a-gaga-manifesto/>.

¹⁸ Deborah B. Gould, "Political Despair," *Politics and the Emotions: The Affective Turn in Contemporary Political Studies* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 95-114.

In the Anthropocene, the forest is increasingly threatened, and the current global rate of deforestation is increasing.¹⁹ Grim facts about the disappearing rainforest, in particular, dominate popular discourses about the subject of anthropogenic climate change.²⁰ Of course, the Anthropocene is a capacious term, and it is not limited in its effects or significance to deforestation alone. Rather, a whole range of consequences both global and local stem from this “new phase in the history of the Earth.”²¹ Taken altogether, the import of the Anthropocene entails a portrait of a damaged planet growing rapidly so toxic and unstable as to threaten the very ecological and material conditions that sustain our existence. These conditions already have become so endangered that we live amidst the sixth mass extinction in the history of life itself.²² Precise scientific predictions about the future do vary, but there is nonetheless a consensus that the consequences of climate change are manifesting already.²³

However, the role of deforestation in the Anthropocene is quite significant. As ecologists Joe Landsberg and Richard Waring note, after the burning of fossil fuels, land-use change, in which deforestation figures prominently, is the second major source of CO₂ emissions at present.²⁴ Some

¹⁹ Kim, Do-Hyung Joseph O. Sexton, and John R. Townsend, “Accelerated deforestation in the humid tropics from the 1990s to the 2000s,” *Geophysical Research Letters* 42 (May 7, 2015): 3495-3501, doi: 10.1002/2014GL062777.

²⁰ For example, consider the commonly cited factoid that between 30 and 50 football fields (a football field being 57,600 square feet, or a little more than an acre) of tropical rainforest are destroyed every minute. See Thomas K. Rudel, *Tropical Forests: Paths of Destruction and Regeneration in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) for a global survey.

²¹ Jan Zalasiewicz et al., “The New World of the Anthropocene,” *Environmental Science and Technology Viewpoint* 44:7 (2010): 2231. See also Will Steffen et al., “The Anthropocene: From Global Change to Planetary Stewardship,” *Ambio* 40:7 (November 2011): 739-761.

²² See, e.g., Rodolfo Dirzo, et. al., “Defaunation in the Anthropocene,” *Science* 25:345 (2014): 401-406, Jeremy Bendik-Keymer, “The Sixth Mass Extinction Is Caused by Us,” *Ethical Adaptation to Climate Change: Human Virtues of the Future*, eds. Allen Thompson and Jeremy Bendik-Keymer (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2012), 263-280, and Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014).

²³ For example, consider the following, all of which can be extensively cited as current, not future, effects of climate change: coral reef depletion, extreme weather events and their consequences, ice melts, increased coastal flooding, increased duration and effects of wildfire, increased pressure on groundwater supplies, intensification of allergy seasons, ocean acidification, prominent drought, seasonal shifts, severe heat waves, significantly increased extinction rates, and faunal/floral species displacements.

²⁴ Joe Landsberg and Richard Waring, *Forests in Our Changing World: New Principles for Conservation and Management* (Washington: Island Press, 2014), 78-82.

sources suggest that deforestation is more prominent than vehicular emissions.²⁵ Michael Williams states the point succinctly, “[w]ith forest clearing, the carbon is released through decay and particularly burning, and it could constitute anything between 10 and 50 percent of the total amount sent into the atmosphere.”²⁶ As such, the connection between deforestation and climate change is profound. As forests are destroyed – due to commercial agriculture and logging, construction and infrastructure expansion, mining, palm oil production, and subsistence considerations (e.g., for charcoal, firewood, and small-scale farming) – their sequestered carbon, including the carbon stored in forest soils, is released back into the atmosphere. This contributes to, accelerates, and exacerbates the catastrophic effects of climate change.

In light of the foregoing, it is easy to see why the Anthropocene is dominated by a distinctly apocalyptic sensibility.²⁷ The watchwords of the age seem to be catastrophe, devastation, and disaster, either incipient or forthcoming, and not without good reason. Indeed, a nascent apocalypticism has informed twentieth-century environmental thinking since Rachel Carson’s direly poetic prognostication of a *Silent Spring* (1962) that awaits such a destructive and short-sighted culture such as ours. Citing David Price, she writes,

[w]e all live under the haunting fear that something may corrupt the environment to the point where man joins the dinosaurs as an obsolete form of life. [...] And what makes these

²⁵ See Roddy Scheer and Doug Moss, “Deforestation and Its Extreme Effect on Global Warming,” *Scientific American*, last modified November 13, 2012, <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/deforestation-and-global-warming/>.

²⁶ Michael Williams, *Deforesting the Earth: From Prehistory to Global Crisis, An Abridgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 410. See also Chapters 13 (“The Great Onslaught: 1945-1995: Dimensions of Change”) and 14 (“The Great Onslaught: 1945-1995: Patterns of Change”) for a comprehensive history of deforestation from 1945 to 1995.

²⁷ It is difficult to avoid recollecting Louis Althusser’s observation that “what is reflected in the imaginary representation of the world found in an ideology is the conditions of existence of men, i.e. their real world.” See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Toward an Investigation,” *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 85-126. Consider also the claim that “[i]mplicitly or explicitly, disasters mediate philosophical inquiry” as articulated in Marie-Hélène Huet, *The Culture of Disaster* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 2. See also Lee Clark, *Worst Cases: Terror and Catastrophe in the Popular Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

thoughts all the more disturbing is the knowledge that our fate could perhaps be sealed twenty or more years before the development of symptoms.²⁸

That such an apocalyptic sensibility only becomes more pronounced as the reality of climate change materializes is to be expected, as is the culture of denial, disavowal, and displacement that attends the topic.²⁹

Mark Levene, dwelling upon climate change and the apocalyptic imagination, argues that the “apocalyptic quality of our situation” often manifests itself as one of two possible versions.³⁰ The first version entails visions of catastrophe and untold destruction that bear down spectacularly upon the present as consequence or comeuppance – e.g., as found both in classical moral myths like Noah’s Flood, or the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and in more contemporary narratives such as those found in the rich tradition of apocalyptic cinema, ranging from the nuclear anxiety of Stanley Kramer’s *On the Beach* (1959) through the dieselpunk fears of George Miller’s *Mad Max* (1979) to contemporary depictions of climactic or natural disaster like Roland Emmerich’s *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and Brad Peyton’s *San Andreas* (2015).³¹ The second version of the apocalyptic imagination that Levene discusses relies upon

²⁸ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (New York: Mariner Books, 2002), 188. On this note, consider the role of hysteresis in contemporary scientific discourse on the subject of carbon emissions in Kevin Anderson and Alice Bows, “Reframing the Climate Change Challenge in Light of Post-2000 Emission Trends,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 366:1882 (2008): 3863-3882.

²⁹ See Sally Weintrobe, “The Difficult Problem of Anxiety in Thinking about Climate Change,” *Engaging with Climate Change: Psychoanalytic and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Sally Weintrobe (New York: Routledge, 2013), 33-47, but also the seminal work of Harold Searles, who argues that

an ecologically healthy relatedness to our nonhuman environment is essential to the development and maintenance of our sense of being human and that such a relatedness has become so undermined, disrupted, and distorted, concomitant with the ecological deterioration, that it is inordinately difficult for us to integrate the feeling-experiences, including the losses, inescapable to any full-fledged human life.

Harold Searles, “Unconscious Processes in Relation to the Environmental Crisis,” *Countertransference and Related Subjects: Selected Papers* (New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1979), 236.

³⁰ Mark Levene, “The Apocalyptic as Contemporary Dialectic: From Thanatos (Violence) to Eros (Transformation),” *Future Ethics: Climate Change and Apocalyptic Imagination*, ed. Stefan Skrimshire (New York: Continuum, 2010), 59.

³¹ Perhaps one of the best examples of these films is Peter Weir’s *The Last Wave* (1977). In the film, David Burton, a former corporate attorney living in Sydney, is called upon to defend a small group of Australian Aborigines accused

a recovery of the ancient *purposefulness* of the idea of apocalypse – *not* as a prospect simply of obliteration, and with it world-end, but rather as a prophetic warning whose wake-up call to all humanity beckons them to participate in a general act of redeeming planetary reconciliation.³²

In other words, according to Levene, the apocalyptic imagination generates either fantasies of self-destruction (although, as Julia Hell notes in a different context, such fantasies often perform the subtle function of preserving the observer by means of her specular exclusion from the carnage depicted) or else fantasies of quasi-miraculous rejuvenation (e.g., the common trope in contemporary apocalyptic cinema and literature of “starting fresh,” as if to say, *après le déluge, moi*).³³ For Levene, it is these latter fantasies – as evidenced in his imperative to reclaim the meaning of apocalypse as “revelation” – that hold out hope for overcoming the trials and tribulations of the Anthropocene, specifically.

This disjunction between two senses of the word “apocalypse” also can be traced by examining briefly its etymology. “Apocalypse” stems from the Greek word ἀποκαλύπτω (*apokaluptō*), which means “to disclose,” “to reveal,” or “to uncover.” This original word stems from the conjunction of ἀπό (*apō*) and καλύπτω (*kaluptō*). Καλύπτω means “to conceal” or “to cover up,” “to hide away,” “to become befogged or enshrouded,” or “to be unclear, ambiguous, or

of murder. While pursuing the case, he is plagued increasingly with apocalyptic visions of the world’s destruction – or, rather, the destruction of the city whose laws he is called upon to interpret and uphold in court. Contrast the title shot (see [Figure 2](#)) – in which an unmoving stone tor looms over a solitary human figure who paints upon it – and the final shot (see [Figure 3](#)) – in which Burton crumples before the onrushing last wave (see [Figure 4](#)). Ostensibly, it is not that the world that is being destroyed, *per se*, but, rather, that natural law reasserts itself over positive law, that is to say, that the world is finally “breaking in.” See [Figures 5](#) and [6](#), in which the trees surrounding Burton’s suburban house effectively attack and destroy the structure during one of Burton’s visions. See also Nigel Clark, “Aboriginal Cosmopolitanism,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Studies* 32:3 (2008): 737-744 for a discussion of this topic, although he does not mention Weir’s film by name.

³² Levene, “Apocalyptic,” 61, emphases in original.

³³ Julia Hell, “Imperial Ruin Gazers, or Why did Scipio Weep?” in *Ruins of Modernity*, eds. Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 169-192. For examples of the latter, see the conclusions of Kevin Costner’s *The Postman* (1997), Roland Emmerich’s *2012* (2009), and Darren Aronofsky’s *Noah* (2014). A particularly striking example is found in the final shot of Álex and David Pastor’s *Los últimos días* (2013). See [Figure 7](#).

disputed.” ἀπό – cognate of the Latin *ab* (as in *abnormis*, “to deviate from a rule”) and related to ἀνωμαλία (*anōmalia*, meaning “anomalous or uneven,” “no longer the same”) – means “to be an exception,” “to be excluded, cut apart, or pushed aside.” ἀποκαλύπτω becomes ἀποκάλυψις (*apokalupsis*), “a sudden disclosure,” and this transforms into Church Latin *apocalypsis*, meaning “revelation.” In modern secular usage, as we have seen, “apocalypse” largely refers to “a cataclysm or catastrophe of unprecedented magnitude.” Historically, this transition from revelation to catastrophe is somewhat unclear.³⁴

However, this vocabulary of the apocalyptic – the apocalyptic imagination, imaginary, or sensibility – is worth considering because it dramatically sketches the linkage between the catastrophes and disasters (either slow violence or full speed ahead) that inflect the Anthropocene and the denuding or “uncovering” of the land that is entailed by the destruction of those forests that veil the earth. Reducing the register of apocalypse to a dialectical binary, as Levene does, appears to miss the point, insofar as he oversimplifies both components of the word’s meaning. To engage with apocalypticism in the Anthropocene necessitates that we acknowledge and make contact with the immense devastation that climate change embodies, which is indeed a dangerous, difficult, and mournful task, but it also exposes and reveals the underlying dynamics and commitments of our cultures and political economies that produce and subsidize such destruction in the first place. In both senses of apocalypse, then – catastrophe and revelation – there is danger and the negative, the risk of affective and political impoverishment, even unto material extinction, but, from this troubled and uncertain soil, alternative forms of life could emerge and proliferate. As Lawrence Buell observes,

³⁴ Numerous arguments abound. See, for example, Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Age* (London: Pimlico, 1993) and John R. Hall, *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity* (Malden: Polity Press, 2009).

Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal. Of no other dimension of contemporary environmentalism, furthermore, can it be so unequivocally said that the role of the imagination is central to the project; for the rhetoric of apocalypticism implies that the fate of the world hinges on the arousal of the imagination to a sense of crisis.³⁵

Furthermore, what this register of the apocalyptic contributes to theory for the Anthropocene (to borrow the turn of phrase from McKenzie Wark) is the degree to which it foregrounds futurity, which is to say, how we ought to apprehend the future in light of climate change.³⁶ This is not as simple a task as it may seem. As Kathryn Yusoff and Jennifer Gabrys note, “[c]limate change is a social, environmental, and scientific phenomenon that is characterized by its relationship to futures,” and “[i]magining futures is also a political act that configures present actions.”³⁷ As such, they continue, “the imagination of futures requires a careful critique of the ideologies of time – particularly in relation to present action – that are being produced.”³⁸

In other words, to discuss or theorize the Anthropocene – indeed, to exist within it as relatively frail mortals, subject to death and loss – requires, at first, an apocalyptic sensibility of climate change and its consequences. This apocalyptic sensibility indicates, initially, that something is terribly wrong – that numerous catastrophes exert themselves across our increasingly ruined landscapes and even more bear down upon us and our fellow creaturely travelers. It also uncovers the cultural, economic, and political logics that drive the processes of abuse and exploitation (of land and of peoples) that are unfolding around us. As we have seen, one principal cause and consequence of climate change is deforestation, and, as we shall see, the vicarious image

³⁵ Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 285. Also cited in Kathryn Yusoff and Jennifer Gabrys, “Climate Change and the Imagination,” *WIREs Climate Change* 2 (2011): 520.

³⁶ McKenzie Wark, *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene* (New York: Verso, 2015).

³⁷ Yusoff and Gabrys, “Climate Change,” 518, 519.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 522. For an interesting parallel, see Sheldon Wolin, “What Time Is It?” *Theory and Event* 1:1 (1997), where he discusses his claim that “political time is out of synch with the temporalities, rhythms, and pace governing economy and culture.”

of the forest necessarily hangs together with this apocalyptic imaginary. First, however, it is necessary to examine more closely this question of the future that is at play here – it is impossible to think like an apocalypse if we do not broach the subject of futurity, so it is necessary to turn now to “a careful critique of the ideologies of time.”

4. Using the future as an object (i)

Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, in their seminal text, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, define the concept of the object in psychoanalysis in the three following ways. In psychoanalytic discourse, objects are, or can be, drive-objects, objections of attraction, or objects as ordinarily or traditionally conceived. Effectively, drive-objects are the aims, ends, or targets of desires and psychic drives, that is to say, “the thing in respect of which and through which the instinct [i.e., *Trieb*, or drive, not “instinct,” as in *Instinkt*] seeks to attain its aim (i.e., a certain type of satisfaction).”³⁹ By contrast, objects of attraction refer to those objects that attract the subject, such that “the relation in question here is that between the whole person, or the agency of the ego, and an object which is itself focused upon in its totality (person, entity, ideal, etc.).”⁴⁰ Lastly, the so-called “traditional” object is that which “presents itself with fixed and permanent qualities which are in principle recognizable by all subjects irrespective of individual wishes and opinions,” which is to say, all those actual, ordinary objects that exist “out there” in the world.⁴¹

³⁹ Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1974), 273. The distinction between *Instinkt* and *Trieb* must be mentioned because of the unfortunate history of translating both terms by the word “instinct” in English. As Otto Fenichel notes, “This incorrect equating of instinct and *Trieb* has created serious misunderstandings.” Otto Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995), 12. In Freud, *Instinkt* retains the associations formed by the English word “instinct,” whereas *Trieb* (better translated as “drive”) refers to propulsive psychic pressures that shape the unconscious motivations underlying conscious activities, fantasies, etc. See Laplanche and Pontalis, *Language*, 214-217.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

While including our ordinary understanding of objects, the language of psychoanalysis provides us with a vocabulary that registers objects in a fashion significantly more expansive than the ordinary conception of objects alone. After all, for humans and other creatures, objects are not merely or only distant aggregates of features occupying space apart from our bodies. Rather, objects (as the necessary substratum of relations) compose the very stuff of lives and lifeworlds alike. As psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas notes, “we do not just see [objects]. We experience them.”⁴² In other words, we attach and detach from objects, we cathect them, we dwell upon them, aggress them, invest and divest in them. The play of objects occupies us endlessly. Furthermore, in psychoanalytic registers, what qualifies as an object can vary dramatically. For example, consider the contrast between Melanie Klein’s theorization of partial objects (such as the breast) and Bollas’s extended reflections on the capacity for *life itself* to be taken as an object (which is to say, in Bollas’s idiom, the capacity for subjects to use objects so as to “elaborate and articulate” the self throughout the course of a life).⁴³

Here, however, I suggest that we conceive of the future as an object, and considering the future as an object immediately foregrounds the relevance of this psychoanalytic byway. Specifically, the future is an object that is to be *used* in the present. If, as Yusoff and Gabrys have claimed, “[i]maging futures is also a political act that configures present actions,” then the futures we forecast and prefigure play various roles in altering or maintaining aspects of the present. As Bollas states, “the objects of our world are potential forms of transformation.”⁴⁴ As such, if our future is portrayed as a virgin territory ripe for further human expansion and limitless economic growth, then this yields normative implications of a particular stripe – and likewise for

⁴² Christopher Bollas, *The Evocative Object World* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 80.

⁴³ Hanna Segal, *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein* (London: Karnac Books, 1988), 11-23 and Christopher Bollas, *Cracking Up* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 90.

⁴⁴ Christopher Bollas, *Being a Character: Psychoanalysis and Self Experience* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 4.

much less unambiguous depictions of a future Earth “without us” – whether ruined or renascent, depleted or rewilded.⁴⁵

In this regard, psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott draws a helpful distinction between two modes of engagement with our objects – “object-relating” and “object use.”⁴⁶ “Object-relating,” he writes, “is an experience of the subject that can be described in terms of the subject as an isolate.”⁴⁷ In relating to objects, the subject composes and recomposes her affective investments in objects (whether consciously or unconsciously). Accordingly, object-relating is private or subjective, and relating to an object yields various ruthless reconfigurations of internal relations vis-à-vis the object in question. To relate to an object requires only that the subject be capable of taking an object in the first place. It is important to note that Winnicott does not want to do away with object-relating – it is a crucially important component of human psychic life. However, object use is more complex, and it exceeds the process of object-relating. As Winnicott states, “in examining usage there is no escape: the analyst must take into account the nature of the object, not as a projection, but as a thing in itself.”⁴⁸

The capacity to use an object, then, is something that can develop (or fail to develop). Principally, in order to use an object, the subject must come to occupy what Winnicott terms “the intermediate position.”⁴⁹ In the intermediate position, the subject places the object “outside the area of the subject’s omnipotent control,” which is necessary if the subject is to apprehend the object as a “real object” instead of a projection.⁵⁰ In so placing the object, the subject finds the

⁴⁵ Caroline Fraser, *Rewilding the World: Dispatches from the Conservation Revolution* (New York: Picador, 2010), Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (New York: Picador, 2008) and Jan Zalasiewicz, *The Earth After Us: What Legacy Will Humans Leave in the Rocks?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁴⁶ Donald Winnicott, “The Use of an Object and Relating Through Identifications,” *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 115-127.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 120, 126.

object already there. This entails what Winnicott refers to as the fantasmatic destruction of the object, and this destruction evidences the object's continued existence as an external phenomenon, as something that stands apart from the subject's inner preserves of psychic life.⁵¹ As Winnicott notes, objects "may or may not" be able to survive their destruction by the subject, but their survival is the prerequisite to object use – "the object's survival of the destruction places the object outside the area of objects set up by the subject's projective mental mechanisms."⁵² In summary, as Winnicott states:

This sequence can be observed: (1) Subject *relates* to object. (2) Object is in process of being found instead of placed by the subject in the world. (3) Subject *destroys* object. (4) Object survives destruction. (5) Subject can *use* object.⁵³

What using an object entails in itself – as opposed to the *capacity* to use an object upon which Winnicott primarily focuses – is not immediately clear, particularly in the case of an object such as that which I have suggested, namely, the future. The principal example Winnicott provides is that of "the patient's ability to use the analyst," which is to say, to "finish with us [i.e., their psychoanalysts] and forget us," to "find living itself to be the therapy that makes sense" rather than being trapped in the Piranesian prisonhouse of interminable analysis.⁵⁴ What is clear, however, is that object use necessarily entails the ongoing experience of a certain *aliveness*, of a genuine (and genuinely creative) encounter with those objects of the world that do not reduce to mere specters in the haunted house of the subject. As Dodi Goldman notes, "[t]he healthy transformation of

⁵¹ See also Christopher Bollas, "The Necessary Destruction of Psychoanalysis," *The Mystery of Things* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 27-34, where he discusses the "generative forms of destruction that break disturbances of thought and character" characteristic of psychoanalytic processes and ways of thinking (27), and Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), who addresses psychoanalytic *thinking* (as opposed to the practice of psychoanalysis), which is characterized by "an unprecedented attempt to give theoretical account of precisely those forces that obstruct, undermine, play havoc with theoretical accounts themselves" (4).

⁵² Winnicott, "Use," 120, 126.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 126, emphases in original.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

destructive aliveness – Winnicott’s ‘use of an object’ – allows what is internal to be felt to have substance and what is external to be recognized as significant.”⁵⁵ As Melissa Orlie clarifies, “when we can use an object, we are able to create something of our own by using it, but using it first requires that we find it existing independent of our projections of it.”⁵⁶

In this sense, then, using the future as an object entails several theoretical steps. First, we *relate* to the future as an object – our imagined futures both sponsor, and derive from, our affective and cognitive composites and investments as communities and as subjects. Second, we *find* the future as our present bleeds into it (or bleeds out into it, as the case may be), as time’s arrow flies onward. Next, we fantasmatically *destroy* the future – that is to say, the apocalyptic imaginary takes shape for us, and, as it does so, we foresee Anthropocene futures afflicted by catastrophe and devastation. Finally, however, the future *survives* its apocalypse – as James Berger notes of the apocalyptic imagination,

[...] nearly every apocalyptic text presents the same paradox. The end is never the end. The apocalyptic text announces and describes the end of the world, but then the text does not end, nor does the world represented in the text, and neither does the world itself. In nearly every apocalyptic presentation, something remains *after the end*. In the New Testament Revelation, the new heaven and earth and the New Jerusalem descend. In modern science fiction accounts, a world as urban dystopia or desert wasteland survives. [...] Something is left over, and that world after the world, the *post-apocalypse*, is usually the true object of the apocalyptic writer’s concern.⁵⁷

There is one further place in which Winnicott addresses concerns related to this observation, namely, in his paper “Fear of Breakdown,” in which he observes that “fear of

⁵⁵ Dodi Goldman, “Vital Sparks and the Form of Things Unknown,” *Donald Winnicott Today*, ed. Jan Abram (New York: Routledge, 2012), 338.

⁵⁶ Melissa Orlie, “For Love of Earthly Life: Nietzsche and Winnicott Between Modernism and Naturalism,” *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Theory*, ed. Nikolas Kompridis (New York: Continuum, 2014), 183.

⁵⁷ James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 5-6, emphases in original.

breakdown is *the fear of a breakdown that has already been experienced*.⁵⁸ Of course, as always, Winnicott refers to the clinical context (Winnicott suggests that the psychoanalyst recognize and utilize moments when “a patient needs to be told that the breakdown, a fear of which destroys his or her life, *has already been*”).⁵⁹ Winnicott argues that this process occurs when the analysand has not yet properly undergone the breakdown that has already occurred. In other words, while the breakdown that is fear happened in the past, it has not been acknowledged and experienced in such a way as for its effects to register in the analysand’s life and object world. There is a direct parallel here between this fear of breakdown, on Winnicott’s analysis, and the understanding of apocalypse and post-apocalypse that I sketch out.

5. Using the future as an object (ii): neither natality nor no future

Therefore, through the work of the apocalyptic imagination, the future as an object can become freed for its use in the present. In other words, my central claim is that using the future as an object makes possible political forms of life that can address, recuperate, and survive the trials and tribulations of the Anthropocene. This is a way of saying that it is as if the apocalypse has already occurred – not because all is lost for us (I am not posturing here as a green Schopenhauer), but because the catastrophes and the revelations alike of late-stage capitalism enact and make manifest the underlying logics driving us into climactic disaster. This, in turn, entails the dual recognition that *we must become post-apocalyptic* and that *we have already become post-apocalyptic*. In this regard, the theoretical prescription to use the future as an object occupies a stance toward the future that differs significantly from two evocative political theoretical uses of

⁵⁸ Donald Winnicott, “Fear of Breakdown,” *Psychoanalytic Explorations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 90, emphasis in original.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.

futurity at present – that is, Arendt’s foundation of the political in “the fact of natality” and Edelman’s militantly polemical refusal of any political futurity whatsoever.⁶⁰

Natality, for Arendt, refers, on the one hand, to the miracle of beginning that characterizes the human condition – that is to say, to the fact that humans

are equipped for the logically paradoxical task of making a new beginning because they themselves are new beginnings and hence beginners, that the very capacity for beginning is rooted in natality, in the fact that human beings appear in the world by virtue of birth.⁶¹

On the other hand, natality is “inherent in all human activities” and, especially, in action (“the political activity par excellence”).⁶² This makes natality the “central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought,” but also the “ontological root” of the faculty of action, that is, “the capacity of beginning something anew.”⁶³ To act is to make a beginning, then, and beginnings do not derive in subsidiary fashion from the past – indeed, a beginning is precisely an “unconnected, new event breaking into the continuous sequence of historical time.”⁶⁴

One of Arendt’s major examples is the American Revolution, which she characterizes as an unusually successful political moment, one in which the truth is on full display, the truth that “binding and promising, combining and covenanting are the means by which power is kept in existence.”⁶⁵ As Bruce Rosenstock notes,

A state of nature does not precede the mutual promising of covenant making; rather, mutual promising is preceded by an act of severance from a prior compact. We can say, in other words, that political power is always a kind of remarriage after prior divorce.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 247.

⁶¹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1965), 211

⁶² Arendt, *Condition*, 9.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Arendt, *Revolution*, 205.

⁶⁵ Arendt, *Revolution*, 175.

⁶⁶ Bruce Rosenstock, *Philosophy and the Jewish Question: Mendelssohn, Rosenzweig, and Beyond* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 265

For Arendt, this “mutual promise” qualifies as the highest form of action because it neither resorts to any appeal to the past for its legitimacy, nor cites a dominant, popular, or sovereign will as its own warrant. To the contrary, the promise has no foundation but itself, that is to say, the act of promising as performed by those who have come together under its aegis. Promising cannot be severed from “promising’s everyday forms.”⁶⁷ As with all forms of action in Arendt, the overlapping relationship between “mutual promise” and natality is paramount. Natality provides the “ontological root” that makes promises possible in the first place. Both natality and the promise extend forward into the future, and each prefigures its own potential renewal.

As such, the dimension of the future, for Arendt, is constantly traversed by the tensions between two forces or possibilities that always remain at hand. On the one hand, there are the capacities of promise and renewal (i.e., of “(re)marriage,” in Rosenstock’s Cavellian idiom) that characterize human beings as political agents.⁶⁸ On the other hand, there is the totalitarian “lawfulness,” “which destroys the plurality of men and makes out of many the One who unfailingly will act as though he himself were part of the course of history or nature.”⁶⁹

In contrast to Arendt’s imagining a future in which political agency and renewal are possible by virtue of the miracle of natality (which is to say, because time unfolds linearly, enabling sequences of beginnings), Edelman, in his *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, dissents rather dramatically. His argument is worth dwelling upon because Edelman attempts to theorize a mode of engagement with futurity that foregrounds the fantasmatic destruction of the future as such. The central claim of his argument is as follows:

⁶⁷ Melissa Orlie, *Living Ethically, Acting Politically* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), 135.

⁶⁸ See Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁶⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken, 2004), 601.

the image of the Child, not to be confused with the lived experiences of any historical children, serves to regulate political discourse – to prescribe what will *count* as political discourse – by compelling such discourse to accede in advance to the reality of a collective future whose figurative status we are never permitted to acknowledge or address.⁷⁰

Edelman's primary theoretical antagonist is this figure or image of "the Child," which embodies and sacralizes the dimension of the future as the principal goal and value of any political community whatsoever. In other words, as Edelman notes, "politics [...] works to *affirm* a structure, to *authenticate* social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child."⁷¹ Over and against this figure of futurity, Edelman champions "the future-negating queer," a violently oppositional counterpart to the Child, who serves as "the place of the social order's death drive" and which generates "its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to that place, accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure."⁷²

Ostensibly, Edelman's argument stages an intervention in queer politics, as he explicitly positions himself in relation to critical expositions of the ideologically heteronormative underpinnings of political culture.⁷³ That being said, he states at numerous points in his argument that his primary concern is not with political "issues," *per se*, but, rather, with "the act of resisting enslavement to the future in the name of having a life" – that is to say, "we [i.e., we queers] do not

⁷⁰ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 11, emphasis in original.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 3, emphases in original.

⁷² *Ibid.* It is interesting to consider, also, the degree to which Edelman even succeeds at defining his "future-negating queers" in terms as radical as he suggests. Consider Jack Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 107, where he writes of Edelman's "ferocious articulation of negativity ('Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital Ls and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop' [*No Future*, 29]), but ultimately he does not fuck the law, big or little L; he succumbs to the law of grammar, the law of logic, the law of abstraction, the law of apolitical formalism, the law of genres."

⁷³ See Teresa de Lauretis, "Queer Texts, Bad Habits, and the Issue of the Future," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17:2-3 (2011): 243-263.

intend a new politics, a better society, a brighter tomorrow, since all of these fantasies reproduce the past, in the form of the future.”⁷⁴ Here we arrive at (or return to) Edelman’s title – the future, Edelman argues, is a projection, one which the normalizing, oppressive structures of everyday political life necessarily erect and cathect.⁷⁵ His rejoinder is that “queers” (“the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form”) occupy a negative position within all such structures, fracturing the political and the social alike by negating and stymying all such futural projections.⁷⁶

While both Arendt and Edelman share a strong theoretical aversion to necessitarian political logics, it is relatively easy to see how they cannot be reconciled. Indeed, while Edelman never refers to Arendt, she would, in many ways, be his ideal antagonist. If Arendt and Edelman can be thought to form a spectrum of political uses of futurity – ranging from natality to no future, respectively – then how do these uses relate back to the theoretical suggestion that we should learn to use the future as an object?

In Arendt’s case, the problem is that her employment of futurity exemplifies object-relating without object use. For her, the future is something always in the process of beginning, and while political projects can fail – and the abyss of freedom underlying action guarantees no success – all failures are superseded by the opening up of new futures at each moment in time.⁷⁷ Promises can be broken, but new promises can be made and can be kept. In this regard, Arendt falls into the same trap as does Jacques Derrida in his theoretical articulations of a future that is infinitely

⁷⁴ Edelman, *No Future*, 30, 31.

⁷⁵ For an alternative perspective within queer theory, see José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

⁷⁶ Edelman, *No Future*, 4, but also 33-66 on the figure of the *sinthomosexual*.

⁷⁷ Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), especially Chapters 3 (“Feminists Make Promises: The Milan Collective’s Sexual Difference and the Project of World-Building”) and 4 (“Feminists Make Judgments: Hannah Arendt’s *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* and the Affirmation of Freedom”). See also Andreas Kalyvas, “From the Act to the Decision: Hannah Arendt and the Question of Decisionism,” *Political Theory* 32:3 (2004): 320-346.

deferred (*l'avenir/à venir*), of a democracy-to-come, or a justice-to-come that, for him, prefigures and promises the arrival of the messianic figure of the messianic itself.⁷⁸ Derrida's futurity, however, could also be received like a figure with whom you desperately would like to speak in a dim, anxious dream, never hearing your hailings, always turning the corner just ahead of you. Likewise, with Arendt, the vocabulary of an expansive future that opens up constantly misses the political opportunities that using the future as an object suggests (and which necessarily entail the fantasmatic destruction that Arendt disavows).

In Edelman's case, while he subjects the projections of any future to fantasmatic and figural destruction, there is ultimately a refusal of both object-relating and object use alike. The observation that, all too often, citations of the future in political contexts smuggle in disguised norms is a canny one, but, as Halberstam argues (see [n. 72](#)), what seems at first to be a radical perspective ends up as an "apolitical formalism," in which the inescapable stickiness of Lacanian structural norms is the point and purpose of the argument. Indeed, this is the irony of Edelman's title. The "stuckness" of his argument to the effect of NO FUTURE entails no future at all, but only the preservation of a certain structural status quo – forever and ever, in the name of Jacques Lacan, amen.

6. Using the future as an object (iii): eternal return

⁷⁸ For example, when, in Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman's *Derrida* (2002), Derrida relates the following:

In general, I try to distinguish between what one calls the future and "*l'avenir*." The future is that which – tomorrow, later, next century – will be. There's a future which is predictable, programmed, scheduled, foreseeable. But there is a future, *l'avenir* (to come), which refers to someone who comes whose arrival is totally unexpected. For me, that is the real future. That which is totally unpredictable. The Other who comes without my being able to anticipate their arrival. So if there is a real future beyond this other known future, it's *l'avenir* in that it's the coming of the Other when I am completely unable to foresee their arrival.

See also Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 2006), especially, but also Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) and Jacques Derrida (with John D. Caputo), "The Messianic: Waiting for the Future," *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, ed. John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 156-180. For a particularly lucid discussion of the subject, see the later chapters in Joanna Hodge, *Derrida on Time* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return is closer than anything else to the sense I have given to the suggestion that we must learn to use the future as an object in order to survive and flourish within the Anthropocene.⁷⁹ The concept is notoriously difficult insofar as Nietzsche, at different times in his career and corpus, appears to characterize eternal return in significantly varying ways, despite the centrality of eternal return for his thinking. As Joan Stambaugh notes, "Nietzsche's own attitude toward this thought is striking. He does not quite seem to know what to do with it, and yet he cannot leave it alone."⁸⁰ At times, for example, he proposes the eternal return as an ethical doctrine; at other times, it seems to be a distinctly metaphysical claim about the nature of the cosmos (e.g., that the universe repeats like a stuck record on a record player).⁸¹ This admixture of the cosmic (or material) and the intimate, I argue, is of paramount significance in the reading I propose, and the eternal return read as a prefiguration of using the future as an object leads us directly to the later Nietzsche's distinctly ecological perspective.⁸²

However, it is necessary first to mention one of the most dominant and convincing alternative interpretations of Nietzsche's doctrine, namely, that it is a thought experiment, a methodological principle by which the subject checks her *amor fati* and the status of her

⁷⁹ I am indebted to Melissa Orlie for the insight that Nietzsche and Winnicott share much in common (see Orlie, "Earthly Life").

⁸⁰ Joan Stambaugh, *Nietzsche's Thought of Eternal Return* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1972), xi.

⁸¹ An exhaustive review of the literature on this topic is impossible, but for notable commentaries, see Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche: Volumes One and Two*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 1984), especially Volume Two ("The Eternal Recurrence of the Same"); Pierre Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Karl Löwith, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Eternal Recurrence of the Same*, trans. J. Harvey Lomax (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997); Lukacher, *Time-Fetishes* (see [n. 16](#)); and Robin Small, *Time and Becoming in Nietzsche's Thought* (New York: Continuum, 2010).

⁸² See, e.g., Adrian Del Caro, *Grounding the Nietzsche Rhetoric of the Earth* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004); Max Hallman, "Nietzsche's Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics* 13 (1991), 99-125; Melissa Orlie, "Impersonal Matter," *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011) 116-136; Graham Parkes, "Staying Loyal to the Earth: Nietzsche as an Ecological Thinker," *Nietzsche's Future*, ed. John Lippitt (London: Macmillian Press, 1999), 167-188; and Michael E. Zimmerman, "Nietzsche and Ecology: A Critical Inquiry," *Reading Nietzsche at the Margins*, eds. Steven V. Hicks and Alan Rosenberg (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2008), 165-185.

commitment to a life of radical affirmation.⁸³ As Gilles Deleuze puts it, “[t]he eternal return gives the will a rule as rigorous as the Kantian one. [...] As an ethical thought the eternal return is the new formulation of the practical synthesis: *whatever you will, will it in such a way that you also will its eternal return.*”⁸⁴ There are good reasons why this interpretation dominates. For example, consider the most striking articulation of eternal return that Nietzsche provides:

What if some day or night a demon were to steal into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: “This life as you now live it and have lived it you will have to live once again and innumerable times again; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unspeakably small or great in your life must return to you, all in the same succession and sequence – even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned over again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!” Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: “You are a god, and never have I heard anything more divine.” If this thought gained power over you, as you are it would transform and possibly crush you; the question in each and every thing, “Do you want this again and innumerable times again?” would lie on your actions as the heaviest weight! Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to long for nothing more fervently than for this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?⁸⁵

Accordingly, this dictate to affirm can be read as a check or a test, yes, but it can also be read as an ongoing imperative to act – as Nietzsche’s insistence that the eternal return is something that we *do*, that we *ought* to do. The eternal return is a function of the will to power, but, as such, it is the transformative process of return to the conditions from which one begins. This, I suggest, is what is at stake in Nietzsche’s other famous imperative, namely, to “become who you are,” and the same paradoxical tension between finding and creating as is evidenced in Winnicott’s

⁸³ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Mariner Books, 1978), 158-171, Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 141-169, and Orlie, “Earthly Life,” 171.

⁸⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 68, emphasis in original.

⁸⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 194-195.

discussion of object use occurs here.⁸⁶ If we consider Nietzsche's understanding of the will to power correctly, it shows how the willing to power and the transforming discovery of the conditions of reality overlap completely in the process of eternal return.

After all, the will to power, for Nietzsche, does not refer to some simple drive to dominate that is characteristic of life itself, although it is frequently misunderstood in this fashion. To the contrary, the will to power is necessarily complex, conditional, and differential; it is navigated and negotiated.⁸⁷ The will to power refers to a broadly conceived capacity to make distinctions and express preferences – ranging from the sheer brute existence of a thing (animate or inanimate, organic or inorganic), which contributes singularly to some state of affairs in the world for the length of its duration, to the relatively high degree of preferential granularity expressed in animal behaviors, human or otherwise.⁸⁸

For Nietzsche, the eternal return, then, entails the returning, again and again, to the earthly conditions from which one emerges, as if to say, the eternal return *to* the same – this same, which, nonetheless, is paradoxically not the same upon each occasion of return (much like how the imperative to “become who you are” makes sense only in light of Nietzsche's observation that, due to the work of time, “you are always another person”).⁸⁹ On the one hand, this is a return that we cannot escape. As Nietzsche argues and documents at length, even the most hinterworldly aspirations of the ascetic and the resentful do not succeed in buying them a ticket offworld.⁹⁰ Such

⁸⁶ Ibid., 152 and Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for None and All*, trans., Adrian Del Caro (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 192. See Orlie, “Earthly Life” for an extended comparison of Nietzsche and Winnicott. See also Nehamas, “How One Becomes What One Is,” *Nietzsche*, 170-199.

⁸⁷ See, e.g., Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 110 and Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Judith Norman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 18-20. See also Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 130-134.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 35-36.

⁸⁹ Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, 174-175.

⁹⁰ Nietzsche *Zarathustra*, 20-24, 111 and Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality and Other Writings*, trans. Carol Diethe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

fantasies inescapably reflect historical, material, and psychic *Herkünfte*; they are, at best, strategies of traversing the earth (albeit strategies that can lay waste).

On the other hand, it is a return that we can enact, perform, or practice. This, I think, is the truth of Lawrence J. Hatab's argument that we should take Nietzsche's claims about the eternal return literally (which is not to say, factually, i.e., as a cosmological doctrine).⁹¹ Taking the eternal return literally – that is to say, recognizing the inescapability of earthly conditions and yet, also, heeding the imperative to return to those conditions – directs our attention toward those ecological provisionings that sustain life, that make life possible in the first place. To eternally return necessitates making contact with the world that exists – regardless of its condition – rather than fleeing into some wholly fantasmatic alternative, and such contact entails an engagement with destruction (the destruction of the fantasmatic alternative, the recognition of real destruction and loss in the world).

As a particularly striking example, consider George Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), which lucidly performs this logic of return. The film, a post-apocalyptic epic, follows the Imperator Furiosa as she flees across a barren wasteland from the warlord Immortan Joe, her former liege. Accompanying Furiosa are Joe's wives, who, until their escape, served as the breeding stock for Joe's attempt to preserve his family line. Together, constantly pursued by the primal father Joe (see [Figure 8](#) and [9](#)), Furiosa and the women seek to find the "Green Place," where Furiosa had been born. They find this place and its few remaining inhabitants (the Mothers, see [Figure 10](#)), but it is no longer green, for it was poisoned and destroyed long ago. On the verge of despair (see [Figure 11](#)), the group nearly strikes out into what appears to be an endless desert, but, at the last

⁹¹ Lawrence J. Hatab, "Shocking Time: Reading Eternal Recurrence Literally," *Nietzsche on Time and History*, ed. Manuel Dries (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 149-162.

minute, they decide instead to return to the Citadel – the community over which Joe holds his sway by controlling the water supply (see [Figure 12](#)) – and reclaim it.

There is a visual analogy in the film between the Citadel – which is no temple of doom, but rather a raggedly resilient community of survivors – and what the Mothers carry as their most prized possessions, namely, seeds and shoots. In [Figure 13](#), part of the Citadel can be seen, consisting of mesas the tops of which are covered in greenery (a rarity in this desertified world) and the columns of which are marked by Joe’s tribal icon, a broken skull (see [Figure 14](#)). [Figure 15](#) and [16](#) show one of the Mothers’ shoots growing in a makeshift pot, the shattered skull of a small, probably extinct animal. The centrality of death and loss in the film is never effaced, whether it is the constant violence that inflects the vehicular chases, or the revelation that Joe’s warboys become soldiers because the appeal of a glorious death outweighs slowly succumbing to the tumors that plague them. Nevertheless, the capacity to regrow remains foregrounded in both images – greenery, sprouting from a riven skull.

Fury Road exemplifies both the logic of return and the use of the future as an object. It exemplifies the former by virtue of its absolute refusal to condone transcendental imaginings of escape from the consequences of an earth we have devastated – that is to say, Furiosa’s group does not simply escape from Joe and find the Green Place, as if a better world were merely “somewhere over there,” past material or temporal horizons. And it exemplifies the latter insofar as it inscribes the former in a post-apocalyptic imaginary that depicts passage toward emergent resilience and toward the reclamation and recuperation of what might seem, at first, to be a wholly ruined landscape (both ecologically and politically). As McKenzie Wark observes, in a recent informal

essay about the film, “the green world, is not, or not just, ideological. It is the actual city from which they have come and to which they must return.”⁹² He continues to note that it is a film

that refuses the option of acceleration. We can’t keep fueling this machine forward forever expecting some green world to be at the end. It is a film that refuses the option of negation, too. It can’t be fought with blood. Blood for blood just reproduces [...] violence. [...] The hardest thing of all might be to imagine rebirth and carry it out. To not accelerate or negate or succumb to inertia, but to *extrapolate* from what we know and do toward a remaking of the city [...] ⁹³

7. Post-apocalyptic forms of life

To become post-apocalyptic, then, entails what Romand Coles refers to as our pressing need to imagine and perform novel “democratic possibilities beyond the borders of extant political topographies,” “to relish certain tensions – difficult though they are – as a source of democratic ethical and political generativity,” and to occupy “more multidimensional modes of public engagement when it comes to time horizons, depths of criticism, range of visions for political possibility and transformation, narrowness and breadth of publics, and so forth.”⁹⁴ More specifically, there is a tension between the vicarious image of the forest, the combined and uneven apocalypses that characterize the Anthropocene, and the possibility of crafting forms of life and reinscribing our affective investments in ways sufficient to our conditions of crisis – in ordinary language, changing how we live and what we care about, the principle task of any radical politics.⁹⁵ Crisis thinking, as Sarah Amsler notes, must be understood as “a cultural and emotional practice

⁹² McKenzie Wark, “Fury Road,” *PS: Public Seminar*, last modified May 22, 2015, <http://www.publicseminar.org/2015/05/fury-road/#.VYIEhkY3TAE>.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.

⁹⁴ Romand Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics: Reflections for the Possibility of Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xiii, xix.

⁹⁵ For the vocabulary of “combined and uneven apocalypses,” see the fantastically underrated Evan Calder Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypses* (UK: Zero Books, 2011).

as well as a subjective experience or objective condition,” and crisis names “a moment at which those involved in a situation come to understand they cannot go on as they have before.”⁹⁶

What, then, is a post-apocalyptic form of life such as that which I propose, and how can such forms of life occur? Taking up the latter question, the first step, I argue, necessitates an affective and material disinvestment in the political and social structures that, in fact, accelerate, characterize, and effectuate the conditions of Anthropocene devastation that compose and inflect our apocalyptic times – in other words, to become what Sara Ahmed calls an “affect alien.”⁹⁷ To become post-apocalyptic means that the apocalypse can be figured no longer as a threat bearing down upon us from the future (the fury of a vengeful God or a rioting Nature, the last wave breaking the scoundrel city), but rather as the conditions of the present that can and must be surpassed and survived. As Evan Calder Williams observes,

the post-apocalyptic is not an image of that-to-be. It is not that which lies beyond the apocalyptic event. It is a perspectival stance to be taken up now. [...] a necessary optic onto the flourishing wasteland of late capitalism, the recognition that the apocalyptic event has been unfolding, in slow motion with sudden leaps and storms.⁹⁸

A partly useful theoretical move in this regard can be found in, and appropriated from, a surprising place, namely, a neglected text, *The Forest Passage (Der Waldgang, 1951)*, by the German reactionary modernist Ernst Jünger.⁹⁹ In it, Jünger draws upon the storied figure of the

⁹⁶ Sarah S. Amsler, “Bringing Hope ‘To Crisis’: Crisis Thinking, Ethical Action and Social Change,” *Future Ethics*, 141, 140.

⁹⁷ Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 157, where she writes, “to be an affect alien is to experience alien affects – to be out of line with the public mood, not to feel the way others feel in response to an event,” and 171, where she continues, “[t]o be an affect alien does not mean you necessarily respond to the same events with a different affect [...] Rather an affect alien might experience the same affect but in relation to different objects, which are judged by others as ‘the wrong objects’” for that affect.”

⁹⁸ Williams, *Combined*, 158, emphasis in original.

⁹⁹ See Jeffrey Herf, “The Conservative Revolution in Weimar” and “Ernst Jünger’s Magical Realism,” in *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 18-48 and 70-108. It is not unproblematic to cite Jünger here, given his status as a prominent Weimar conservative, albeit one who – unlike both Heidegger and Carl Schmitt – never ascribed to Nazism in any form. Nevertheless, we can learn something both from his somewhat oblique development of the figure of the forest rebel and his possible intellectual complicity with the rise of National Socialism as a cultural and political ideology. See

forest outlaw (in European history) in order to propose a radical ethic of divestment and withdrawal from the state form.¹⁰⁰ Jünger's *Waldgänger* (translated by Thomas Friese as "forest rebel," although it has also been translated as "forest flier") is neither a Schmittian partisan, rooted in the existential call to defend a territory from external aggressors (what Jünger derisively refers to as the "German struggle" for national identity), nor a figure who embodies "a form of anarchism," which entails "all the terrors of the raft of the Medusa."¹⁰¹ To the contrary, the forest rebel is one who undergoes a particular kind of transformation, travail, or traversal that Jünger refers to as a *Waldgang* ("forest flight," or "forest passage").

For Jünger, a forest passage has both personal and political components and consequences.

As he writes,

Catastrophes test the degree to which men and peoples are still natively grounded. At least one root thread must still connect directly with the earth – our health and our prospects for a life beyond civilization and its insurances depend upon this connection. This becomes evident in phases of extreme threat, during which the apparatus not only leaves man high and dry but encircles him in a manner that appears to dash all hopes of escape. At this point the individual must decide whether to give up the game or persevere from his own innermost forces. In the latter case he opts for a forest passage.¹⁰²

What the forest passage entails, then, is recourse to forms of affective and political resilience in the face of catastrophic circumstances – circumstances that may well be engendered

also Thomas R. Nevin, *Ernst Jünger and Germany: Into the Abyss, 1914-1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

¹⁰⁰ See, e.g., Harrison, *Forests*, 69-81 for a brief history of this figure, who emerged in medieval Europe as a cultural icon in contraposition to Forest Laws and nascent enclosures of forested commons or wilderness space. See also Stephen Knight, *Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009) for a lengthy scholarly discussion of the most famous "forest outlaw," as well as the historical significance of this tradition.

¹⁰¹ Ernst Jünger, *The Forest Passage*, trans. Thomas Friese (Candor: Telos Press, 2013), 39. See also Carl Schmitt, *The Theory of the Partisan: Intermediate Commentary on the Concept of the Political*, trans. G. L. Ulmen (Candor: Telos Press, 2007).

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 24. Compare this, on the one hand, to Zarathustra's call to "remain faithful to the earth" (Nietzsche, *Zarathustra*, 6) and, on the other hand, to Deleuze and Guattari's rather different valorization of "a new earth, a new people." Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 101, 88, 109.

and worsened by the very apparatuses ostensibly intended to countervail and curtail catastrophe. Jünger highlights two consequences of undertaking a forest passage (for it is a choice, a development, an unfolding of alternatives in its own right). First, the forest rebel “allows no superior power to dictate the law to him, neither through propaganda nor force,” which grounds the figure in a firmly anti-totalitarian politics.¹⁰³ Second, the forest passage is “above all a passage through death,” which is to say, the death of those forms of life that the forest rebel survives, including the forest rebel’s own mode of being prior to undertaking such passage.¹⁰⁴ Unfortunately, Jünger frequently slips into a language of semi-sovereign selfhood, situating the figure of the radical individual as a nearly divine entity whose strength consists in the capacity to resist, but he also complicates this fixation – writing, for example, that the forest rebel is

not an exception, he represents no elite. Far more, he is concealed in each of us, and differences only arise from the varying degrees that individuals are able to effectuate the freedom that has been bestowed on them. In this he needs help – the help of thinkers, knowers, friends, lovers.¹⁰⁵

Counterintuitively, then, Jünger’s theorization of the forest passage prefigures something like an expanded version of the “undercommons” as theorized by Stefano Harvey and Fred Moten.¹⁰⁶ Harvey and Moten suggest something like a fugitive commons (“where the refuge gives

¹⁰³ Jünger, *Forest*, 35.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 32. In this regard, Jünger belongs to a particular tradition of ecological writing that foregrounds the individual’s capacity and obligation to resist cooptation and oppression. The obvious comparison would be Henry David Thoreau. See, e.g., Nora A. Hanagan, “Individual Responsibility or Irresponsible Individualism: Re-examining Thoreau’s Political Ethics,” *Midwestern Political Science Association*, 2009 Annual Meeting and Christian Maul, “A Sort of Hybrid Product: Thoreau’s Individualism between Liberalism and Communitarianism,” *Thoreauvian Modernities: Transatlantic Conversations on an American Icon*, eds. François Specq, Laura Walls, and Michel Granger (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 157-171.

¹⁰⁶ Stefano Harvey and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013). Both bear similarities to forms of autonomist thinking, as well. Also, see Melissa Orlie, “Tragic Realism and Credible Democratic Hopes: Practical Means for an Ecological Future,” *Radical Futures Past: Untimely Political Theory*, eds. Romand Coles, Mark Reinhardt, and George Shulman (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2014), 459-487, in which the need for “alternative arrangements” (463) and “material leverage” (482) in the face of the “calamity [...] already upon us” is foregrounded persuasively.

commons”), which can come into a flickering existence where alternative forms of knowledge production and material exchange give shape to communities that, in seeking after what Harvey and Moten term “planning” (“self-sufficiency at the social level”), simultaneously hide themselves away from the powers that be and in(ter)dict them.¹⁰⁷ This entails “the ruptural and enraptured disclosure of the commons,” or, rather, of an alternative commons that no longer expects the neoliberal Leviathan to covenant, nor keep its promises.¹⁰⁸ As Halberstam points out helpfully in his introduction, the undercommons is not to be conceived as

a place where we “take arms against a sea of troubles/and by opposing end them.” The undercommons is a space and time which is always here. Our goal – and the “we” is always the right mode of address here – is not to end the troubles but to end the world that created those particular troubles as the ones that must be opposed.¹⁰⁹

A useful example of what I take the undercommons to describe can be found in Rachel Talalay’s cult film *Tank Girl* (1995).¹¹⁰ In the film, Rebecca (see [Figure 17](#)), a playful and pragmatic person, lives in an autonomous community found deep in the post-apocalyptic wasteland (see [Figure 18](#)). Owners of the last independent well in Australia, the commune is attacked and destroyed by independent contractors employed by Water and Power (see [Figure 19](#)), a megacorporation that lays claim to all basic resources (up to and including the violent extraction of drinkable water from those whom they execute). After serving time in a Water and Power prison

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 28.

¹⁰⁸ As Stefano comments in an interview,

in a way, the undercommons is a kind of break piece, between locating ourselves and dislocating ourselves. What’s so enduring for us about the undercommons concept is that’s what it continues to do when it is encountered in new circumstances. People always say, ‘well, where the fuck is that.’ Even if you do that clever Marxist thing like, ‘oh it’s not a place, it’s a relation,’ people are like, ‘yeah, but where’s the relation.’ It has a continuing effect as a dislocation, and it always makes people feel a little uncomfortable about the commons. (149)

¹⁰⁹ Jack Judith Halberstam, “The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons,” *The Undercommons*, 9.

¹¹⁰ The sole other existing scholarship on *Tank Girl* (1995) of which I am aware focuses primarily on a reading of the film as a distinctively feminist reclamation of science-fictional tropes. I would suggest that such a reading is not unrelated to my own. See Marilyn Manners and R. L. Rutsky, “Posthuman Romance: Parody and Pastiche in *Making Mr. Right* and *Tank Girl*,” *Discourse* 21:2 (1999): 115-138.

camp, and refusing an employment offer made by its CEO, Rebecca (with the help of a fellow prisoner) manages to escape during an attack by the mysterious “Rippers,” a fearsome and mysterious group of anti-corporate rebels. After stealing a tank and rescuing the only other survivor of the massacre, Rebecca encounters the Rippers again, discovering that they are, in fact, genetically modified kangaroo hybrids initially bred as instruments of war (see [Figure 20](#)), but who have since fled into the desert and partly dedicated themselves to combating Water and Power’s malign influence.¹¹¹

What Rebecca discovers in her encounter with the Rippers is first and foremost an alternative community – a literally subterranean commons composed of the estranged and the strange, which disrupts, hides, and produces forms of life that exceed the expectations of the wasteland. It is deeply significant that the Rippers are revealed to be characterful and comic figures, rather than humorless icons of monomaniacal and ruthless efficacy, because their existence as a community is not solely defined by their opposition to Water and Power (although they do act against it). To the contrary, the Rippers – much like Rebecca herself – are marked by an essential creativity and playfulness that provides the wellsprings of community formation, lives worth living, and sustained resistance to corporate oppression. Another example of this can be found in the film’s most enduring icon, the eponymous tank that Rebecca steals from Water and Power and repurposes into what is simultaneously a campy work of art and a weapon of ongoing struggle (see [Figure 21](#)).

By the end of the film, of course, Rebecca and the Rippers triumph, deposing the CEO of Water and Power (who is revealed to be a holographic projection, an illusion) and releasing the

¹¹¹ On this note, see Stacy Alaimo, “Eluding Capture: The Science, Culture, and Pleasure of ‘Queer’ Animals” and David Bell, “Queernaturecultures,” both in *Queer Ecologies*, eds. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010), 51-72 and 134-145.

massive reservoir of water hoarded by the corporation back into the desert wasteland. In this regard, the conclusion and final shots of the film (see [Figures 22](#) and [23](#)) form a brilliant counterpoint to the ending of Peter Weir's *The Last Wave* (see [n. 31](#)). In the latter film, the last wave signifies the destruction of the world – its natural fury is the culmination of a virtual plague of apocalyptic signs – whereas, in *Tank Girl*, the last wave released by Rebecca and her hybrid tribe promises to repair the desertification of the world and rework its ruin. The inversion of apocalypse into post-apocalypse is complete.

8. Conclusion: the world for word is forest

Brad Evans and Julian Reid, in their critical interrogation of resilience, argue that the very concept of resilience is a neoliberal construct intended to marginalize the political and privatize further the individual's responsibility for her own security and well-being.¹¹² For them, “resilience” refers only to a power play in language, the latest ruse of “bright green” capitalism, intended to foist upon various publics the costs of surviving the consequences wrought by big business and its ideologues.¹¹³ Have you been fracked recently? No problem! Become resilient; buy the kit. They argue that discourses of resilience involve

the deliberate giving up of any possibility that climate change can be understood as a threat from which we can secure ourselves, as well as any expectation that the state or any other political authority might be able to protect us from its dangers.¹¹⁴

There is certainly the capacity, as Paul B. Preciado has noted, for capitalism to become “punk,” to ceaselessly refigure itself so as to “reterritorialize such new forms of life almost as soon as they

¹¹² Brad Evans and Julian Reid, *Resilient Life: The Art of Living Dangerously* (Malden: Polity, 2014).

¹¹³ For example, see Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins, and L. Hunter Lovins, *Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2000).

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

emerge.”¹¹⁵ However, that such a capacity remains characteristic of capital’s shark-like movement (swim or die) does not obviate those concepts and vocabularies that become its prey.

Indeed, many good reasons suggest themselves as to why resilience (“the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and still retain its basic function and structure”) and resilience thinking (forms of theoretical articulation, evocation, and invocation that emphasize the centrality and value of resilience) in the Anthropocene outstrip traditional categories and modes of thinking through and living out the ecological and the political alike.¹¹⁶ While Paul Hoggett suggests that the primary task of contemporary environmentalism is to figure out “how to sound the alarm without being alarmist,” how to approach climate change without slipping into “survivalist” discourses informed by an apocalyptic imagination, I would recommend the opposite – that the ecologically wakeful borrow an image from Walter Benjamin, that of the “alarm clock that in each minute rings for sixty seconds.”¹¹⁷ Such a constant reminder of the extent and severity of the ecological crisis is a necessary counteractant to the dormitive effects encouraged by and rewarded in popular media and policy circles. This directly relates to the need for practices and strategies of resilience in the face of Anthropocene disaster.

¹¹⁵ Quoted in Halberstam, “Charming.” See also Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junky: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans. Bruce Benderson (New York: Feminist Press, 2013).

¹¹⁶ Brian Walker and David Salt, *Resilience Thinking: Sustaining Ecosystems and People in a Changing World* (Washington: Island Press, 2006) and, for a more traditional, but very well-documented set of empirical case studies, see Daniel P. Aldrich, *Building Resilience: Social Capital in Post-Disaster Recovery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

¹¹⁷ Paul Hoggett, “Climate Change and the Apocalyptic Imagination,” *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 16:3 (September, 2011): 262 and Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism” (1929), *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 239. See also Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History”* (New York: Verso, 2005). Hoggett’s stance fits perfectly into what I would suggest is the dominant mode of thinking about apocalyptic imaginaries, which is itself perfectly captured by Matthew Gross and Mel Gilles, who argue that “the deeper we entangle the challenges of the twenty-first century with apocalyptic fantasy, the more likely we are to paralyze ourselves with inaction – or with the wrong course of action.” *The Last Myth: What the Rise of Apocalyptic Thinking Tells Us About America* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2012), 200. Obviously, I disagree.

For example, arguments by Naomi Oreskes, Harald Welzer, and others (including well-documented journalism of ongoing events, such as that by Christian Parenti) contend that some of the most profound sources of conflict and political violence in the present and (near) future stem from the effects of climate change.¹¹⁸ As Jared Diamond and numerous environmental historians have documented, climactic shifts can exercise consequences of import ranging from the geographical displacement of cultures to their utter destruction.¹¹⁹ Indeed, such consequences do not belong solely to the preserve of the past, but, rather, inflect numerous indigenous peoples and subsistence forms of life at present (in addition to the effects cited above that affect virtually everyone, see [n. 23](#)).¹²⁰ However, as Mark Levene and Daniele Conversi argue, while “some peoples on the planet ostensibly [are] more vulnerable to climate change than others, and, by implication, more threatened with violent extinction,” it would seem that the sovereign Leviathans of the Global North – and their “almost total dependency on thin, often distant supply lines to provide basic services, including water, food, heat and light” – are vastly more brittle than those

¹¹⁸ Naomi Oreskes and Eric M. Conway, *The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), Harald Welzer, *Climate Wars: What People Will Be Killed For in the 21st Century* (New York: Polity Press, 2012), and Christian Parenti, *Tropic of Chaos: Climate Change and the New Geography of Violence* (New York: Nation Books, 2011). These accounts evoke nothing if not Nietzsche’s “wars such as the earth has never seen” (Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 144.

¹¹⁹ John L. Brooke, *Climate Change and the Course of Global History: A Rough Journey* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), and Brian Fagan, *The Long Summer: How Climate Changed Civilization* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), to name but a few. See also Mark Pelling and Kathleen Dill, “Disaster Politics: Tipping Points for Change in the Adaptation of Sociopolitical Regimes,” *Progress in Human Geography* 34:1 (2010): 21-37.

¹²⁰ For case studies and reflections in various contexts, see, for example, the following: Christopher Boyer, *Political Landscapes: Forests, Conservation, and Community in Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), Zoltán Grossman and Alan Parker (eds.), *Asserting Native Resilience: Pacific Rim Indigenous Nations Face the Climate Crisis* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2012); and Jake Kosek, *Understories: The Political Life of Forests in Northern New Mexico* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006). For a fascinating tonal contrast between the competing vocabularies of climate change impact and the virtue of “resilience,” compare Paul Fallon, *Architecture by Moonlight: Rebuilding Haiti, Redrafting a Life* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 2014) and Peter F. Hallward, *Damming the Flood: Haiti and the Politics of Containment* (New York: Verso, 2010).

subsistence societies that survive displacement and genocide.¹²¹ This brittleness, this lack of redundancy in favor of efficiency and this lack of versatility in favor of monoculture and monopoly (agricultural, economic, social) stand out as the polar opposites of resilience in any form.

As such, there are good reasons as to why the material and theoretical register of resilience continues to offer a tremendously valuable vocabulary for thinking about our Anthropocene present and its future effects. This is why, ultimately, what I have termed post-apocalyptic forms of life should be positioned as forms of political community oriented toward resilience. As Williams notes, “we become post-apocalyptic when we start making something of what has been revealed,” and, if nothing else, what is revealed in the Anthropocene is the catastrophic nature of the present.¹²² This yields, on the one hand, consequences (as detailed extensively in this essay and its footnotes) and imperatives – to repurpose the material and political structures we inhabit, “to witness the uncanny persistence of old modes of life” and disrupt them, to create and become the new forms of life that we are.¹²³

The vicarious image of the forest, then, returns, as if with a vengeance – a leafy rippling, the darkly vibrant invocation of a resilient ecology composed of a heterogeneous plurality of agencies (human and inhuman) and materialities thronging together in the great din of matter’s unfolding and refolding.¹²⁴ Subject to axe and torch, yes, but also capable of renewal and succession. The forest as vicarious image and as material ecology forms the condition of our

¹²¹ Mark Levene and Daniele Conversi, “Subsistence Societies, Globalisation, Climate Change and Genocide: Discourses of Vulnerability and Resilience,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 18:3 (2014): 282, 292. See also Tor Håkon Inderberg et al. (eds.), *Climate Change Adaptation and Development: Transforming Paradigms and Practices* (New York: Routledge, 2014) for extensive discussions of adaptation strategies and tactics in local, transnational contexts, as well as Jared Diamond, *The World Until Yesterday: What Can We Learn from Traditional Societies?* (New York: Penguin, 2013).

¹²² Williams, *Combined*, 158.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹²⁴ Nigel Clark, *Inhuman Nature: Sociable Life on a Dynamic Planet* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2011). See also Christopher Reyer et al., “Forest Resilience, Tipping Points, and Global Change Processes,” *Journal of Ecology* 103 (2015): 1-4.

existence (the world for word is forest) – the apocalyptic connotations of mass deforestation on the scale we have effected remain clear. However, it also offers the possibility of a reclamation and recuperation of the landscape – a reveiling of the earth, after the apocalypse of the present has exhausted itself. New forms of life – post-apocalyptic forms of life – can and should take shape in the present, then, affecting and seizing upon various “tactics born from dogs gone wild” and lessons learned from how forests think, so as to ready “for the role we will have in [the post-apocalypse’s] coming to be.”¹²⁵ As Jünger observes, “a forest passage can be realized anywhere;” as Williams insists, we should consider “what we lose when we agree to let ourselves be told what the apocalypse means.”¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Williams, *Combined*, 174, 158. See Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013) for a brilliant cosmopolitical text.

¹²⁶ Jünger, *Forest*, 74 and Williams, *Combined*, 67.



Figure 1. Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533).



Figure 2. An Aboriginal Australian tribal shaman paints on a stone tor. *The Last Wave* (Peter Weir, 1977).



Figure 3. Burton stares in disbelief at the onrushing last wave. *The Last Wave* (Peter Weir, 1977).



Figure 4. The titular last wave makes its appearance. *The Last Wave* (Peter Weir, 1977).



Figure 5. Burton looking for a flashlight as the surrounding trees intrude. *The Last Wave* (Peter Weir, 1977).



Figure 6. Burton crouching in fear as the trees destroy his kitchen. *The Last Wave* (Peter Weir, 1977).



Figure 7. After the apocalypse, the rewilding. *Los últimos días* (Álex and David Pastor, 2013).



Figure 8. Immortan Joe. *Mad Max: Fury Road* (George Miller, 2015).



Figure 9. Joe's carnivalesque warband in pursuit of Furiosa. *Mad Max: Fury Road* (George Miller, 2015).



Figure 10. The Mothers. *Mad Max: Fury Road* (George Miller, 2015).

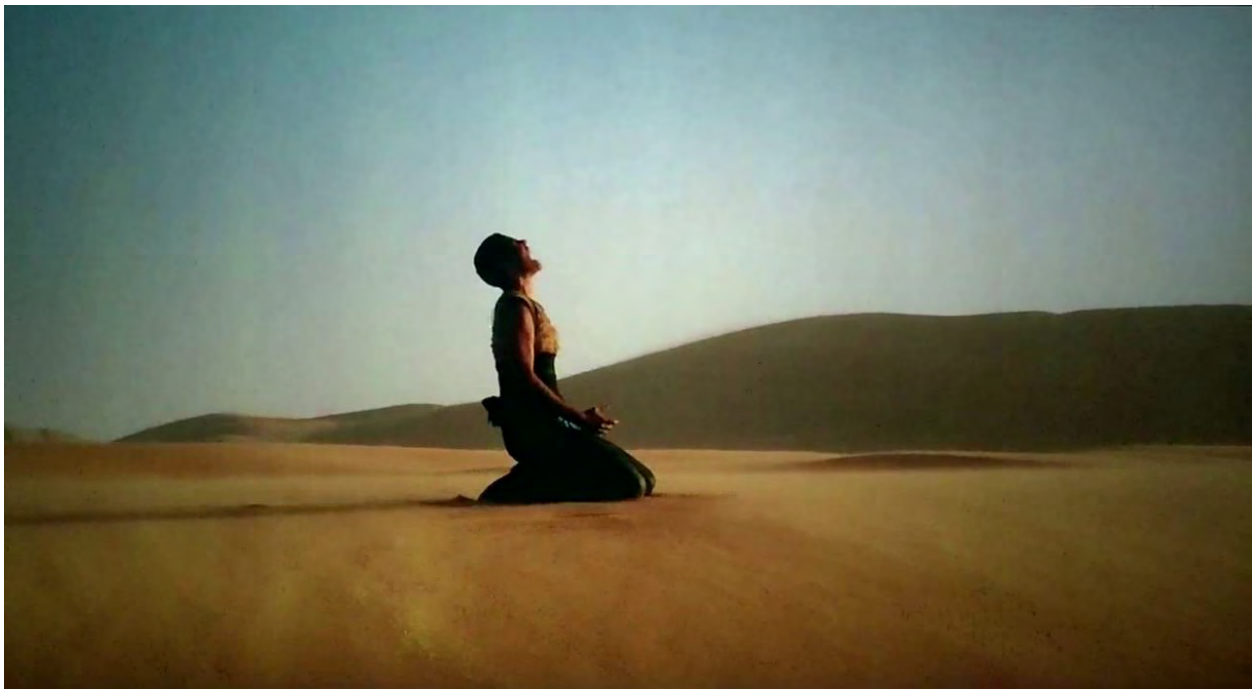


Figure 11. Furiosa in despair after discovering that the Green Place no longer exists. *Mad Max: Fury Road* (George Miller, 2015).



Figure 12. Joe releasing water (which he terms “Aquacola,” as if water were a brand name commodity) after a political speech. *Mad Max: Fury Road* (George Miller, 2015).



Figure 13. One of the Citadel mesas. *Mad Max: Fury Road* (George Miller, 2015).



Figure 14. Immortan Joe's icon, again. *Mad Max: Fury Road* (George Miller, 2015).



Figure 15. One of the Mothers' shoots growing in a makeshift pot.



Figure 16. *Mad Max: Fury Road* (George Miller, 2015).



Figure 17. Rebecca. *Tank Girl* (Rachel Talalay, 1995).



Figure 18. The desertified world of *Tank Girl* (Rachel Talalay, 1995).

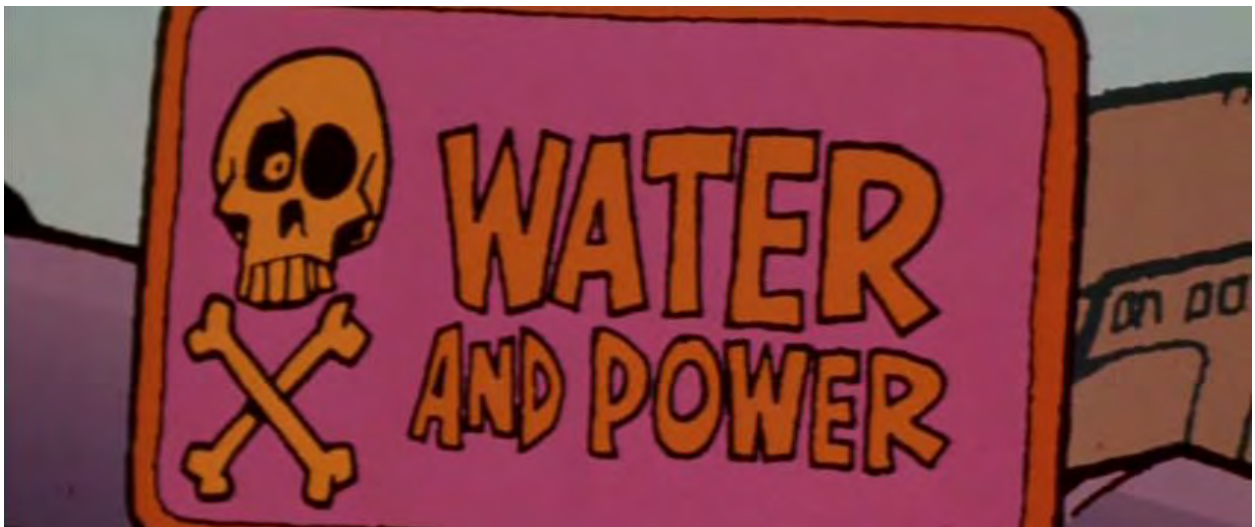


Figure 19. The sign outside of Water and Power headquarters. *Tank Girl* (Rachel Talalay, 1995).



Figure 20. Rebecca and the Rippers preparing to destroy a Water and Power shipment of weapons. *Tank Girl* (Rachel Talalay, 1995).



Figure 21. Rebecca's repurposed tank. *Tank Girl* (Rachel Talalay, 1995).



Figure 22. The end of Water and Power and the release of their stolen and sequestered water back into the wasteland. *Tank Girl* (Rachel Talalay, 1995).



Figure 23. A different sort of “last wave” completely. *Tank Girl* (Rachel Talalay, 1995).

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