



KÄTE HAMBURGER CENTRE  
FOR APOCALYPTIC AND  
POST-APOCALYPTIC STUDIES



UNIVERSITÄT  
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ZUKUNFT  
SEIT 1386

APOCALYPSE  
QUARTERLY  
4/22



# APOCALYPSE COMPETENCE

# DEAR READERS,

The year comes to an end – bringing with it our last Apocalypse Quarterly and a variety of topics. Guest author Alexander-Kenneth Nagel calls for a new Apocalypse Competence to receive and deconstruct the ever increasing number of apocalyptic scenarios in a critical way (pp. 2-6). We introduce several of our new CAPAS fellows, and are proud to share a selection of publications and talks by our researchers, including feminism and apocalypse by Jenny Stümer (pp. 26-27), and Extinction Rebellion Buddhists by Rolf Scheuermann (pp. 27-29). Also included is an interview with filmmaker Jenny Perlin on her documentary “Bunker” (pp. 23-25) and another interview with curator Dora Strahm from

the Natural History Museum Bern about the exhibition “Apocalypse – End without End” (pp. 13-14). Furthermore, this issue contains a report on a new art and science collaboration of CAPAS: the performance “How Soon is Now?” by DAGADA dance company (pp. 7-10), as well as the second part of the introduction of the CAPAS Scientific Advisory Board (p. 11). Finally we also want to take a look beyond CAPAS and interviewed colleagues from two other newly established Käte Hamburger Centres about their work (pp. 30-31).

The CAPAS team wishes you an interesting and inspiring read and a joyful Christmas holiday for those who celebrate!

If you have feedback concerning the newsletter, please let us know: [capas@uni-heidelberg.de](mailto:capas@uni-heidelberg.de)



**In crises, fear of the end of the world can be paralyzing. But apocalyptic visions open our eyes to the big picture – and thus to opportunities for change.**

The present appears to be particularly rich in crises: from the financial crisis to the climate crisis and the so-called refugee crisis,

and from the corona crisis to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the third millennium seems like a single crowded succession of global threats.

For all their differences, these global crisis situations have one thing in common: they imagine the end of the world as we know

it. The common interpretation of this experience of crisis repeatedly draws on religious categories, such as qualifying a crisis phenomenon as *apocalyptic*.

But how is it that of all the many unwieldy expressions of religious history, the apocalypse is so present in our everyday understanding of late modern societies? The basic meaning of the word – revelation – is unlikely to be familiar to anyone outside theological circles today. Even the content and structure of the Revelation of John, the last book of the New Testament, can probably only be reproduced by very few.

### **GOD'S SALVATION DOESN'T MATTER**

In everyday language, apocalypse usually refers to the end of the world or catastrophe par excellence. On the other hand, redemption through a heavenly Jerusalem sent down by God, portrayed briefly yet

quite powerfully in the Revelation of John, hardly plays a role in everyday use of the word apocalypse.

Sociologically, it is highly interesting that in modern societies an independent genre of *apocalyptic* crisis interpretation exists which structurally resembles the tradition of biblical apocalypticism, although not necessarily content-wise. The hallmarks of this genre include worldwide catastrophes ranging from A for atomic threats to Z for zombies. These are usually combined with a gesture of revelation, being at a historical turning point, or an acute imminent expectation.

Interpretations of apocalypse can be anchored in the everyday knowledge of individual people and can shape their determination of a situation and their actions, like when preppers arm themselves for emergencies of various kinds by hoarding

food or building shelters. But it can also be used for political mobilization, as in the case of the climate protest movement *Letzte Generation* (*Last Generation*).

How are secular apocalypses different? In his 1988 book *Die Apokalypse in Deutschland* (*The Apocalypse in Germany*), literary scholar Klaus Vondung attempted to capture general features of apocalyptic narratives. Based on biblical texts, he distinguishes between apocalyptic images (such as cosmic or natural disasters and the collapse of social order), style (the typical sequence of crisis, judgment, and redemption), and rhetoric (for example, a tendency to exaggerate). Modern apoc-

“And when he opened the fourth seal I heard the voice of the fourth beast say: come and see. And I looked and behold a green horse and his name that sat on him was death and hell followed after him and power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth to kill with sword and with hunger and with death that cometh of vermin of the earth.”  
Revelation 6:7-8

*The Revelation of Saint John the Divine*

Albrecht Dürer, The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, 1498



apocalypses tie in with this tradition, but have some characteristic differences.

On the level of images, man-made catastrophes come to the fore. We can see this in the classic tale of technological achievements turning against their creators. Nuclear power is being recommended as a low-emission energy source, but at the same time carries the risk of total self-extinction. Global economic interdependencies promise prosperity, yet exacerbate the pandemic situation.

At the level of style, the perspective on redemption shifts – or is completely lost: just as man is responsible for the crisis, he now also becomes the guardian of salvation. While the early Christians welcomed the end of the world as the prelude to future salvation, today the crisis is usually invoked in order to avert it.

This also shifts the rhetorical gesture: If classic apocalyptic storytellers wanted to comfort their listeners and urge them to be patient, modern apocalyptic scenarios are usually calls to action. In addition to visually stunning stagings of doom, what unites classical and modern apocalypses is above all the gesture of revelation and urgency as well as the tendency to dualistic exaggerations.

**“The early Christians greeted the end of the world as the prelude to future salvation, today the crisis is invoked to avert it.”**

In this mixture of simplification and imminent expectation lies a totalitarian element of apocalypticism that is diametrically



opposed to a democratic culture of debate. In order to deal with it productively, it is important to better understand the enduring fascination of apocalyptic interpretation.

What is the appeal of apocalypse? Under what social and psychological conditions do doomsday narratives thrive? One central aspect is the processing of uncertainty and crises. Under conditions of social differentiation and fragmentation, the totalitarian optics of the apocalypse bring back the central perspective and promise orientation.

**“A kind of existentialist thought experiment to imagine oneself out of the tepid mediocrity of everyday life.”**

A second aspect is what the psychoanalyst Michael Balint has called *Angstlust* (a sort of *counter philia* or an *appetite for angst*) defined by the conscious abandonment and regaining of security by exposing oneself to a dangerous situation in a controlled

manner. Apocalyptic narratives would therefore be a strategy to reduce fear or develop resilience against future crises.

A third aspect of apocalyptic visions could be a response not just to precariousness, but rather to saturation. In this sense, modern apocalypticism would be a kind of existentialist thought experiment to imagine oneself out of the tepid mediocrity of everyday life and to orient oneself towards the essential.

There is no single social situation or social location for apocalyptic narratives. Accordingly, they are not suitable as a kind of differential diagnosis for the state or mentality of modern societies in the sense of: “The apocalypse is the last warning sign before collapse.”

#### **APOCALYPTICISM AS AN EXPRESSION OF BOURGEOIS FEARS OF DECLINE**

The key to understanding apocalypticism lies in relative deprivation, i.e. the concern that one will be worse off in the future and in relation to others than now. Unlike the early Christians, most of us are not in a situ-

Cultural scientists have repeatedly pointed out the aesthetic quality of apocalyptic scenarios. The visually stunning evocation of doom and the fact that it is all-encompassing create a natural tension together.



ation of acute distress. The concrete present threat is replaced by the abstract fear of future loss. In this sense, apocalypticism can also be an expression of bourgeois fears of decline.

**Alexander-Kenneth Nagel** is Professor of Religious Studies with a focus on social science research on religion at the University of Göttingen. In 2021 his book "Corona and Other Ends of the World: Apocalyptic Crisis Hermeneutics in Modern Society" was published.



Regardless of the sociological location, cultural scientists have repeatedly pointed out the aesthetic quality of apocalyptic scenarios. The visually stunning evocation of doom and the fact that it is all-encompassing create a natural tension together. The fact that the end is announced to the knowledgeable by signs encourages decipherment and turns the world once again into that *Magic Garden* which, according to the sociologist Max Weber, it used to be in pre-modern times.

To better understand the end-time spirit of modern societies is one thing, but to live with it is another. In conclusion, the question arises as to what practical consequences might result from the insights of social and cultural science.

**“Today we need a special *Apocalypse Competence*.”**

In order to channel and classify the never-ending flood of apocalyptic scenarios, a special *Apocalypse Competence* is needed. First and foremost, this includes the

ability to receive and deconstruct apocalyptic scenarios in a critical way. Those who are familiar with the structural logics and mobilization techniques of apocalyptic scenarios do not allow themselves to be so easily overwhelmed by fears (often pushed forth in popular media discourse) and in this way provide themselves with an intellectual open space to properly weigh up the arguments put forward.

### **DEBATES MUST BE REOPENED**

Closely related to this *Apocalypse Competence* are the two levels of introspection and self-reflection: Where do my own existential fears lie? When do I feel overwhelmed by the prevailing circumstances? A third level, which presupposes the other two, concerns the competence to intervene – namely, the ability to recognize the discourse-breaking potential of certain apocalyptic forms of thought and speech and to reopen the debate.

The aforementioned competencies refer primarily to the dark sides of apocalyptic crisis interpretation - dualistic foreshortening, exaggeration, hyperactivity - and how to cope with them. But perhaps we can also find an opportunity in the apocalyptic vision of fundamental change? The apocalyptic perspective zooms the viewer far out of the minutiae of everyday life and reclaims a view of the bigger picture.

Herein lies a possible source of inspiration for processes of social change. In order to leverage this visionary potential, it is necessary to listen to the concerns and goals of apocalyptic speakers, and at the same time to resolutely oppose any revolutionary rhetoric of coercion. ●

A German-language version of this work first appeared in the [Tagespiegel](#) on 1 September 2022.



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#ART  
APOCALYPSE

## HOW SOON IS NOW?

### PREMIERE OF DAGADA DANCE COMPANY

**“Who determines apocalypses? Is the apocalypse a threat or an opportunity? How do we find out about apocalypses? Why does humanity need research on the apocalypse? How useful is a scaring doomsday construct from biblical times to move us to action?”** A few months ago, the DAGADA dance company approached CAPAS with these questions and more from their team, along with local citizens of Freiburg whom DAGADA dubbed the “movement choir”. It was the start of a collaborative exchange for their first production of a multi-year research cycle that looks at individuals in the face of a multitude of global crises and societal problems. The questions were part of several discussions between the dance company and CAPAS fellows, directors, and team members.

Freiburg, December 1st. The time is shortly after 8 pm. The audience is gathering in the foyer of the E-WERK Freiburg, listening to safety instructions by [DAGADA dance company](#) dramaturge Sabine Noll. Shortly after, people begin entering the room and searching for a free seat on the blocks standing on stage. By then, it becomes clear to everyone that they are in for a truly

immersive dance performance, a truly individual experience for each person. The transition to the unknown is unsettling and frightening. We live in uncertain times. Will there be a radical (ecological) paradigm shift – or will everything just go on as before? Artistic director and choreographer Karolin Stächele and the team see the evening as sensual-aesthetic food for thought.

In the following minutes, fog fills the hall, and the audience finds itself in the midst of loneliness, albeit togetherness, which is a central theme in the roughly 90 minutes of performance and talk. Suddenly three dancers appear in the fog: One writhes on the floor like an insect, and one stands around helpless, torn between the willingness to move forward yet almost glued to the floor, incapable of change. The last one moves confidently, pushes back and forward, and collides or unites peacefully with the other ones during the piece, while the electronic sounds of Paul Tinsley captivate the hall.

**“Is the apocalypse a threat or an opportunity?”**



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Sound collages and light compositions create phases of perseverance in the opacity of the space. The critical gaze of the observer is being thrown back on oneself. Sound collages of statements from the “movement choir”, composed of local citizens of Freiburg, begin to fill the space: “So everything comes for a reason, and if we become extinct then so do we ...”, “The world is always coming to an end for someone” or “I waste precious time thinking and still don’t get to any action!”.

Then a group emerges from the fog, hesitantly the five or six feel their way forward, pressed close together, and those who fall are pulled up again. Everywhere, on the right and on the left, in front and behind, something is stirring the mop. More and more, the dance expands to less foggy spaces, to exchange, to unification, to common movements. Later they run in loops, which can be interpreted as an attempt to escape as well as a rebellion against an impending catastrophe.

**“We live in uncertain times. Will there be a radical (ecological) paradigm shift – or will everything just go on as before?”**

A fictitious space is created in which dancers and audience approach the impending paradigm shift sensually, animate it, play out the consequences, and find a new direction. Subsequently, the performance ends with the metaphorical interpretation of the end as the beginning.

At last, the light fades into black, and the audience is at first reluctant to applaud, clearly overwhelmed by the performance



The dramaturge Sabine Noll and DAGADA team invited the audience to a discussion with CAPAS, either with one of the directors, Thomas Meier (left), or with science communicator Philipp Schrögel.

and the associated emotions. The dramaturge Sabine Noll and DAGADA team invite the audience to a discussion with CAPAS, either with one of the directors, Thomas Meier, or with science communicator Philipp Schrögel. The brief insights into research perspectives from CAPAS merge with a wide variety of audience perspectives: Every evening, the voices of the 100 persons in the audience are torn between hopelessness, criticizing capitalism, and pointing out that another world is possible.

**“The voices in the audience are torn between hopelessness, criticizing capitalism, and pointing out that another world is possible.”**

On each of the three evenings, the discussions and questions went in very different directions: from individual responsibilities to political action to communication about crises. Taken together with the emotional and aesthetic impressions from the performance, this show presents a rich and inspiring experience that we bring back and into our work at CAPAS. ●

- Watch an interview with the dance team:  
<https://youtu.be/Z4vDCO8VI4o>
- Listen to a radio interview (German only) with artistic director Karolin Stächele & dramaturge Sabine Noll:  
<https://rdl.de/beitrag/how-soon-now>





#PEOPLE  
APOCALYPSE

# THE CAPAS ACADEMIC ADVISORY BOARD

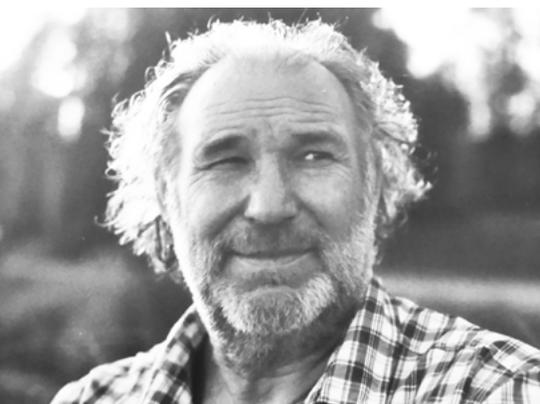
PART II

In the last newsletter, we introduced three of the six renowned international scholars who constitute our CAPAS academic advisory board. Now we are following up with the other three outstanding personalities who form a core part of the selection and admission process for new fellows, and are furthermore tasked with providing advice to the CAPAS board of directors on the strategic orientation of the centre.



**Prof. Susan Prescott, MD, PhD**, is a pediatrician and an immunologist, internationally recognised for her work on the early environmental determinants of health and disease, and promoting mutualistic value systems for ecological and social justice. In addition to more than 350 scientific

publications, she is also an artist and award-winning author of several books. She is President of inVIVO Planetary Health, and Editor-in-Chief of Challenges journal which promotes interdisciplinary discourse. She holds a Professorship of Pediatrics at University of Western Australia, is a physician at Perth Children's Hospital, a Scholar at the Nova Institute, in Baltimore, USA, and Director of The ORIGINS project.



**Prof. Dr. Christof Mauch** is director of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society and Chair in American Culture at LMU Munich. He is President of the Foundation for Transatlantic Culture and Politics, an Honorary Professor at Renmin University in China, a former Director of the

German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C. and a Past President of the European Society for Environmental History. Mauch

holds a Dr. phil. in Modern Literature (from Tübingen University) and a Dr. phil. habil in Modern History (from Cologne University). His current research interests include global and US environmental history and US culture and politics.



Esther Horvath

**Prof. Dr. Antje Boetius** is a polar and deep-sea researcher and director of the Alfred Wegener Institute Helmholtz Centre for Polar and Marine Research. She is also Professor of Geomicrobiology and Head of the Joint Research Group for Deep-Sea Ecology and Technology at the Max Planck Institute for Marine Microbiology. Her recent research focuses on the effects of climate change on the Arctic Ocean and the biodiversity of the deep sea. She is the recipient of the DFG's Gottfried-Wilhelm-Leibniz and Communicator Prizes, the German Environmental Award 2018 and was awarded the Federal Cross of Merit in 2019. She is member of the National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina and an active science communicator. ●

## IN THE SPOTLIGHT ELKE SCHWARZ

### What is your fellowship trying to achieve?

**Elke Schwarz:** Contemporary apocalyptic narratives, in the technology world in particular, are filled with contradictory possibilities and impossibilities – a state that the early philosopher of technology, Günther Anders, referred to as one of “eschatologi-

cal ambiguity”

(*eschatologische Vieldeutigkeit*).

In this project, I am interested in examining the structural parameters of current apocalyptic Artificial Intelligence (AI) narratives and asking: Who are the

key actors involved in articulating these?

In what ways do apocalyptic narratives around AI and posthumanism differ from their religious predecessors? In what ways do they mirror familiar accounts? And given that apocalyptic ideas always shape political practice, I examine the ‘eschatological ambiguities’ around AI further and ask how power circulates and is wielded through these narratives. Or, in short, what kind of power is produced through apocalyptic technology narratives and how?

### How does the fellowship project build on or connect to your previous career?

The project is a continuation of my work on political theory, technology, and ethics. In the past decade or so, my focus has been on military technologies, specifically military

Artificial Intelligence and lethal autonomous weapon systems (LAWS), taking seriously how technologies shape our practices and modes of thought as much as we shape technologies. Here, the narratives that shape the ethos of Silicon Valley increasingly find their way into discussions about how military operations and thinking should be structured, and the argument one always encounters is that in order to stay competitive, to not fall behind, or indeed to not lose a great power war with Russia or China (which would be an apocalyptic scenario of sorts), one must invest increasing sums into digital technology, including LAWS. My work focuses on the logic of the technology permeating discourses and consequently practices, policies, and institutions, and that is something I am continuing in this project as well.

### What are the aspects you are looking forward to at CAPAS?

Any work on such large concepts as the Apocalypse or Post-Apocalypse is by default subject to interdisciplinary study and so the CAPAS Fellowship is an exciting opportunity to shed the shackles of disciplinary silos and consider one’s own contribution as a small piece to a very, very large puzzle. I look forward to the unexpected which will undoubtedly come out of this exchange with other Fellows from other disciplines. I look forward to having my views unsettled by approaches and perspectives that I had otherwise no access to. A bit like a great free jazz concert, when you never quite know what will happen but it will somehow be inspiring and productive.



**Elke Schwarz** is Senior Lecturer in Political Theory at Queen Mary University London (QMUL) and Director of TheoryLab at QMUL’s School of Politics and International Relations. Her research focuses on the intersection of ethics, war, and technology, especially in connection with autonomous or intelligent military technologies and their impacts on contemporary warfare.



#ART  
APOCALYPSE

# APOCALYPSE – END WITHOUT END

In the course of Earth's history, natural disasters have already triggered at least five major mass extinctions. We are probably currently experiencing the sixth, triggered by human influence.

In November 2022, the five-year-long special exhibition “[Apocalypse – End without End](#)” in the Natural History Museum Bern, Switzerland, did eventually come to an end. It brought together apocalypse-related images, objects, and narratives from science and art. It was divided thematically into seven sections, ranging from factual analysis to prophecies, speculation, and undisguised delight in man's downfall. The result was a rollercoaster ride along the fault lines between nature and culture, human life and the universe. Visitors were forced to confront their own beliefs and experiences, and left reassured and disconcerted in equal measure.

In the final days of the exhibition, we were able to visit and speak with Dora Strahm, the exhibition curator of the

Natural History Museum Bern, who developed this special exhibition in collaboration with three external curators.

**The exhibition shows various different perspectives on**

**catastrophes, end of the world scenarios, and apocalypses. Is there one area that you associate most closely with apocalypse?**

**Dora Strahm:** Perhaps the classic cinema space with the Hollywood-influenced apocalypse. That has to be part of the conversation about the end of the world of course. Many people first think of these apocalyptic, staged images. But maybe even more important, though much more subtle, I find it is well represented through the room “The Endangered Earth”. These are the “real” apocalypses, natural disasters



with unimaginable global effects, like the eruption of a super volcano, for example. Of course, there is also the term apocalypse with its biblical origins: the seven seals of the revelation, the apocalyptic horsemen – not just a “boring” volcanic eruption. This religious, Christian occidental background is already deeply ingrained in many of us and shapes us – and that certainly also applies to Hollywood.

At the beginning, the exhibition presents an immersive light installation by the Berlin media agency TheGreenEyl addressing the only end of the (physical) world that is certain. In about two billion years, it will be so hot on Earth that all life will vanish, and in four and a half billion years, the sun will inflate and burn into a red giant.

**What would you like visitors to take away with them when they leave the exhibition?**

I would like them to take away some hope, an awareness that the future can develop in many ways. They should not be too hung up on the idea that we are inevitably heading for a singular catastrophe. It may sound strange that you should draw some hope when you visit a doomsday exhibition. But we want to show the breadth and heterogeneity of the topic and depict that people have

actually always feared doom. Our intention was to make visitors question, despite all the worries about changes and threatening developments, whether this really is the end of the world.

**The exhibition has been running for five years now, a time in which new global crises have come and gone. Has anything changed in the reactions of the audience and the public to the exhibition over this period?**

In the beginning there was a lot of interest, as is usually the case when a new exhibition starts. After that, however, there was actually quite a quiet phase with only a few enquiries. But recently, there has been more interest in the exhibition again. The topic is in the air again, people are very afraid. I think we could actually extend the exhibition for another three years because of the relevance of the topic.

●●● **read more online**  
[capas.uni-heidelberg.de](https://capas.uni-heidelberg.de)





## IN THE SPOTLIGHT SIMON JOHN

### What is your fellowship trying to achieve?

**Simon John:** My project focusses on how the crusades – a series of papally-sanctified military expeditions carried out in theatres in the Near East, Europe and the surrounding regions from at least the late eleventh century to the late sixteenth – stimulated ideas about the Endtimes among Christian thinkers in the Middle Ages. Much of the source material that survives from that era was produced by learned churchmen, a literate elite whose concerns did not necessarily reflect the ideas held by the rest of society. For my project, I'm looking at a corpus of *chansons de geste* – verse texts composed in 'Old' (medieval) French and directed towards audiences of aristocrats rather than churchmen – and exploring the extent to which they articulate eschatology. In brief terms, I am interrogating how far beyond that learned elite of churchmen ideas about the Endtimes may have permeated medieval Christian society.

### What are the aspects you are looking forward at CAPAS?

As a historian, much of my work today has revolved around primary source material: uncovering, identifying and deciphering it. Coming from a broad range of disciplinary backgrounds, the fellows at CAPAS collectively have experience in applying myriad theoretical approaches to probe particular points about apocalyptic thought. That being the case, I'm looking forward to learning from other fellows about how I might draw from a wider theoretical toolkit to enhance my methodological approach towards the key sources for my project.

### What are some of your favourite popculture references to the (post)apocalypse?

My absolute favourite cultural output that evokes the apocalypse, that is to say, the output that has had the most significant impact, is the 2013 video game *The Last of Us* and its 2020 sequel *The Last of Us: Part II* (which was, interestingly, released near the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic). Set in a post-apocalyptic world in which most of mankind has been turned into zombie-like creatures following the spread of a fungal-like virus around the globe, these games are underpinned by immersive narratives that I find myself turning over in my head years after last playing them. I won't give any spoilers, though!

For another output that deals with a zombie apocalypse, but in a rather more light-hearted way, I'd recommend the 2009 film *Zombieland*. Again, no spoilers, but the character played by Bill Murray in this film has figured out a tremendous answer to how to survive in a post-apocalyptic world...

**Simon John** is a Senior Lecturer in Medieval History at Swansea University (Wales, GB). Before, he was a Departmental Lecturer in Medieval History at the University of Oxford and a Junior Research Fellow at the Institute of Historical Research, London. His research specialisms include the Central Middle Ages (c.1000 – c.1300) with a particular expertise in the history of the crusading movement and the development of crusader thought and memory in the Middle Ages.



●●● [read more online](https://capas.uni-heidelberg.de)  
capas.uni-heidelberg.de

## IN THE SPOTLIGHT TERESA HEFFERNAN

### What does the apocalypse and/or post-apocalypse mean for you?

**Teresa Heffernan:** Growing up in a nuclear age and aware of the environmental crisis, I think it was hard to ignore the sense that we are living in some version of an “end time.” If traditional apocalyptic narratives have held out hope for a better world, since the 1950s the term apocalypse has increasingly come to mean only catastro-

phie. I wanted to understand the reasons for that change, which was the focus of my first book: *Post-Apocalyptic Culture: Modernism, Postmodernism and the Twentieth-Century Novel*. It explored how twentieth-century fiction responds to living in

a world that has a diminished faith in the existence of an inherently meaningful end, and it considers the political implications of living in a world that does not rely on revelation as an organizing principle.

My second book *Veiled Figures: Women, Modernity, and the Spectres of Orientalism* works with the etymological origins of apocalypse – to “unveil” or “reveal.” It asks why veiling and unveiling are such highly charged acts and traces these debates about the figure of the (un)veiled woman across three centuries of the East/West divide, from the rise of Western secularism to racialized nationalism to the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.



**Teresa Heffernan** is Acting Chair and Professor of English Language and Literature at Saint Mary's University, Halifax, NS. Her current area of research is on how the field of robotics and artificial intelligence is shaped by fiction.

Around the early 2000s, I started to follow some of the claims about human-like artificial intelligence and the coming of a “superintelligence” that had the potential to either destroy and/or renew the world. I wanted to understand the basis of these apocalyptic claims, and so I travelled to labs around Japan, Europe and America and, amongst other things, stayed at a hotel staffed by robots, hung out with a geminoid (a robot that looks like its owner), and interviewed people in the field. I returned from these travels more than a little skeptical about the claims, so I organized a workshop with academics working on the AI industry from various disciplines, which resulted in my edited collection *Cyborg Futures: Cross-disciplinary Perspectives on Artificial Intelligence and Robotics*.

### What is your fellowship trying to achieve?

I have been exploring the ethical and existential questions that emerge from the entanglement of the science and the fiction of AI and the ways in which apocalyptic rhetoric has shaped the field of AI from its early days as proponents look forward to such things as casting off the biological body in exchange for an “eternal” machinic or virtual body. Some of my questions: What is at stake when science, fiction, and myth are entangled as they so often are in this field? What is the difference between language and code? Why are animals (including humans) so often compared to machines and what are the limits of that metaphor? What are the dangers of apocalyptic rhetoric? And what happens to knowledge in the age of AI?

# CAPAS EVENTS

MONDAY

09  
01

🕒 07.30 PM 📍 Karlstorkino

Apocalyptic Cinema

## NOAH

Directed by: Darren Aronofsky (2014 | OV English with German subtitles | PG: 12). Scientific commentary: Konstanze Kupski (Heidelberg University, Faculty of Theology).

*Part of the Ruperto-Carola-Ringvortrag „Vom Ende als Anfang“ in the winter semester of 2022/23.*



TUESDAY

10  
01

🕒 04.15 PM – 05.45 PM 📍 Universität, Hörsaal 14  
CAPAS Lecture Series

## “POST-APOCALYPTIC IMAGINARIES IN UK AND US TELEVISION, 1970s TO PRESENT DAY”

Public Lecture by Christine Cornea (University of East Anglia, United Kingdom).

[Digital stream available here](#)

SATURDAY

14  
01

🕒 04.00 PM 📍 Kunstverein, Heidelberg  
Finissage

## SIMON DENNY – MERGE / EXTRACTIVISM & APOCALYPSE & BOARDGAMES

Finissage for the [exhibition “Merge”](#) with a boardgame session of the game Extractor developed by Simon Denny, and researcher perspectives on extractivism and apocalypse.

TUESDAY

17  
01

🕒 04.15 PM – 05.45 PM 📍 Universität, Hörsaal 14  
CAPAS Lecture Series

## “WORLD FINANCIAL VOID”

Public Lecture by Amin Samman (City University of London).

[Digital stream available here](#)

WEDNESDAY

18  
01

🕒 07.00 PM 📍 Karlstorkino  
Apocalyptic Cinema

## REY

Directed by: Niles Atallah (2017 | OV Spanish & Mapudungun with German subtitles).  
Scientific commentary: Niles Atallah (director) & Robert Folger (CAPAS).



19/20  
01

📍 Marsilius Kolleg Heidelberg  
Workshop

## NAVIGATING INTERDISCIPLINARITY

Interdisciplinarity has long been championed as the go-to solution for meeting today's global challenges. Supposed to both harness the strength of individual disciplines and transcend their perspectives, it is deemed to provide more comprehensive and complementary analysis. However, there are concrete challenges to realize goal-oriented interdisciplinary cooperation as in many cases neither goal nor method of interdisciplinary inquiry are clearly defined or agreed upon.

The workshop “Navigating Interdisciplinarity” seeks to actively engage with and reflect on theoretical and practical problems of interdisciplinarity and collectively develop guiding tools for the interdisciplinary space. It is organized jointly by the CAPAS, the Marsilius Kolleg (Heidelberg) and the Käte Hamburger Kolleg: Cultures of Research (c:o/re) (Aachen).

TUESDAY

24  
01

🕒 4.15 PM – 5.45 PM 📍 Neue Universität, HS 14  
CAPAS Lecture Series

## “MESOAMERICAN APOCALYPSE: AN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE APPROACH TO STUDY THE EPIDEMICS OF EARLY COLONIAL MEXICO”

Public Lecture by Patricia Murrieta-Flores (Lancaster University, United Kingdom).

[Digital stream available here](#)

THURSDAY

26  
01

🕒 09.00 PM 📍 Rote Sonne, Munich  
Symposium

## DOOMCORE CONTINUUM

“The techno club as a place of transition, as a breeding ground for visions and resignations, community and save space for revelations and disclosures.”

Science & Art Symposium by [Rosa Stern Space](#) with a Keynote Lecture „Here and now - anything else?“ by CAPAS director Thomas Meier.



TUESDAY

31  
01

🕒 4.15 PM – 5.45 PM 📍 Neue Universität, HS 14  
CAPAS Lecture Series

## “A POLITICAL HISTORY OF BUNKER PLANET: DOOMSDAY PREPPING AS CONSUMER CULTURE”

Public Lecture by Robert Kirsch (Arizona State University).

[Digital stream available here](#)

TUESDAY

07  
02

🕒 4.15 PM – 5.45 PM 📍 Neue Universität, HS 14  
CAPAS Lecture Series

## “BEYOND THE BUNKER: COLONIZING SPACE, BUILDING OFFWORLDS”

Public Lecture by Emily Ray (Sonoma State University).

[Digital stream available here](#)

FRIDAY

10  
02

🕒 11.00 AM – 12.30 PM 📍 MPIA, Lecture Hall  
Königstuhl Colloquium

## “THE FIRST ASTRONOMERS: HOW INDIGENOUS ELDERS READ THE STARS”

Indigenous Elders of the world are expert observers of the stars. They teach that everything on the land is reflected in the sky, and everything in the sky is reflected on the land. These living systems of knowledge challenge conventional ideas about the nature of science and the longevity of oral tradition.



© Southwest Research Institute/Don Davis

In his talk, CAPAS fellow Duane Hamacher will explore the scientific layers of Australian Indigenous star knowledge with a focus on observations of variable stars, cataclysmic stars, stellar scintillation, the motions of planets, and transient phenomena, showing how this can guide modern scientific research. The lecture is part of the Königstuhl Colloquium, organized by the Max Planck Institute for Astronomy (MPIA) and the Landessternwarte Heidelberg (LSW).

[More information](#)

WEDNESDAY

15  
02

🕒 07.00 PM 📍 Karlstorkino

Apocalyptic Cinema

## ENDZEIT

Directed by: Carolina Hellsgård (2018 | OV German with English subtitles | PG: 16). Scientific commentary: Lars Schmeink (film and media researcher).



WEDNESDAY

01  
03

🕒 07.00 PM 📍 Kurzpfälzisches Museum, Großer Saal  
Palais Morass

[DE] Vortrag mit Podiumsdiskussion

## VISIONEN VOM ENDE DER ZEIT AUS DER MITTE DES MITTELALTERS: DIE BAMBERGER APOKALYPSE

Die Bamberger Apokalypse zählt zu den berühmtesten Handschriften des Mittelalters. Nun liegt sie in einer neuen aktuellen Faksimile-Ausgabe mit umfangreichen Analysen und Erläuterungen zu ihrer Entstehung und ihrem Kontext vor. Bernd Schneidmüller, einer der Autoren, präsentiert in seinem Vortrag die neuesten Forschungsergebnisse und widmet sich dabei u.a. der Frage, wie die Handschrift spätere Vorstellungen vom Ende der Welt und der Wiederkehr Christi prägte.

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**19.10.**  
7.00 PM

**THE  
TERMINATOR**

**15.12.**  
7.00 PM

**ANNA AND THE  
APOCALYPSE**

**31.10.**  
6.00 PM

**BUNKER**

**18.01.**  
7.00 PM

**REY**

**31.10.**  
9.30 PM

**DER BUNKER**  
BUNKER-SPECIAL

**15.02.**  
7.00 PM

**ENDZEIT**

**16.11.**  
7.00 PM

**BRIEFE EINES  
TOTEN  
MENSCHEN**

**28.11.**  
7.30 PM

**ARRIVAL**

**09.01.**  
7.30 PM

**NOAH**

PART OF  
RUPERTO-CAROLA-  
RINGVORLESUNG

#PUBLIC  
APOCALYPSE

# KILLER ROBOTS AND THE TECHNOLOGICAL CONDITION

REFLECTIONS ON *THE TERMINATOR*



On October 19, 2022, *The Terminator* (1984) was screened by CAPAS at the old Heidelberg Karlstor-kino. It was, somewhat ironically, one of the last films to be seen at the venue before the cinema moved to the new cultural hub at the Kulturhaus Karlstorbahnhof in the Südstadt. But, as apocalyptic unveiling has long taught us, with all endings come new beginnings. *The Terminator* was the start of the regular [apocalyptic cinema](#) programme at CAPAS for the Winter semester 22/23. Elke Schwarz, one of our current CAPAS fellows, addressed the audience with a scientific commentary on the classic film and its relation to our troubling times. On our online platform PubPub we have published a revised version of said commentary.

●●● [read more on PubPub](#)  
[capas.pubpub.org](https://capas.pubpub.org)

#PUBLIC  
APOCALYPSE

## THE PATHOLOGICAL INNER WORKINGS OF AN AMERICAN PHENOMENON ON THE RISE

### *BUNKER 2021*

AN INTERVIEW WITH FILM DIRECTOR JENNY PERLIN

There couldn't be a more apocalyptic way of spending the scariest night of the year with discussions about preparing for survival. On October 31st the Apocalyptic Cinema presented a bunker special with the screening of *Bunker* (2021) by Jenny Perlin and *Der Bunker* (2015) by Nikias Chryssos during the opening week of the new Karlstor-kino location. Afterwards, CAPAS fellow Robert Kirsch commented on the 'Bunkerization' of (American) society as a kind of neoliberal logic. Among others, he addressed the fact that prepping and bunkering is a continuation of class society via conspicuous consumption, and that at some point the home becomes a bunker instead of the bunker becoming the home. During the event, both film directors discussed their experience working on the topic, and Jenny Perlin answered the following questions:

**How did you get inspired to make a documentary about bunkers? Why did you choose this topic?**

**Jenny Perlin:** I've been interested in the Cold War for decades. In 2012 I made a film called *The Perlin Papers* about declassified Cold War documents. I decided to make *Bunker* in 2016 when the election of that president (who will not be named) crashed into my country like a meteor we all knew was coming but couldn't do anything about.

Many years ago, I began researching about people who were transforming missile silos and other military infrastructures into living spaces. It is something that feels

very specific to the United States, and I found it fascinating, though I had no desire to live like that. In addition, I grew up in a small town in the Midwest, a place that appeared to be bucolic and peaceful but was, in reality, filled with uranium processing plants, hidden missile silos, and other military infrastructure. Finally, I was inspired to make *Bunker* because after 2016 I wanted to go back to the Midwest and experience a feeling of the political and social and physical landscape, because how people living in New York or LA talked about the Midwest had always been at odds with my lived experience there. It was important to me to find a lens through which I could talk about the intense social and economic forces that bunkers repre-

You can read more about BUNKER and view the trailer [here](#). BUNKER is distributed by [Grasshopper Film](#) and available to stream on demand on their streaming site [Projectr.tv](#).



**“I want viewers to understand that people move into bunkers when they feel isolated and adrift from community, and when they know for a fact (and it is the truth) that there is no safety net, no government to help you if you lose your job or your health insurance or your home to a flood or fire. But the film is also about connection, humor, and life, things that I also hope an audience sees through my journey into (and back out of) the bunker world.”**

sent in a country that has a history both of ravaging Indigenous landscapes and leaving the so-called “settlers” to their own devices. The idea of “independence” and “self-sufficiency” is so completely woven into the ideology of the United States that I wanted to look more closely at it, not only from the outside, but also as a way of understanding my own lived experience.

**The owners of the bunker are preparing to survive after things ending. For what ‘apocalypses’ did they prepare?**

Most of the bunker men had more than one “threat scenario” that prompted them to live in or try to sell bunkers. They also told me that their clients were only really convinced to buy bunkers after a number of these scenarios had piled up in their minds, so to speak. But each person you see in the film has a kind of “specialty threat scenario,” though they are not explicitly mentioned in the film. Some are more obsessed with meteors, some with water

scarcity and climate change, some with pandemics, some with a more general xenophobia. But they all have several concerns which together drove them to seek this kind of shelter.

**Has your perception of the apocalypse changed through working on the bunker production?**

While making the film, I learned a lot of things that I had never heard about, like Faraday cages, EMPs, acronyms like SHTF, phrases like “bugging out,” and perhaps I think more about how I need to buy more batteries and have more flashlights lying around. But what I think is more interesting is how the things that I thought were very niche and strange when I started making *Bunker* in 2018 became things I heard about in the news every day just a couple of years later. And the other thing I think about regarding the perception of the apocalypse is how incredibly privileged I am as a white woman living in New York.

**Jenny Perlin** makes 16mm films, videos, and animations. Her projects work with and against the documentary tradition, incorporating innovative stylistic techniques to emphasize issues of truth, misunderstanding, and personal history. Perlin’s work has been shown in numerous exhibitions and film festivals.

●●● [read more online](https://capas.uni-heidelberg.de)  
capas.uni-heidelberg.de

# FIVE THESES ON THE BUNKERIZATION OF THE UNITED STATES

## REFLECTIONS ON JENNY PERLIN’S *BUNKER*

The screening of *Bunker* (2021) by Jenny Perlin was followed by a scientific commentary by Robert E. Kirsch, a current fellow at CAPAS. He took the audience on a tour of the multiplicitous manifestations and neoliberal logics of what he calls bunkerization. On our online platform PubPub we have published a revised version of said commentary.

●●● [read more on PubPub](https://capas.pubpub.org)  
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#SCIENCE  
APOCALYPSE

# FEMINISM AND APOCALYPSE

OR, HOW TO BREAK THE WORLD AND REMAKE IT

a Talk by Jenny Stümer

On the 16th of November 2022 CAPAS's own Dr Jenny Stümer was invited to speak at Palais Rischer in Heidelberg's old town about feminism and apocalypse focusing on the progressive possibilities of end-of-world aesthetics. The event, which was part of an interactive exhibition inviting communities to explore feminist movements and discuss decolonial feminist theories through photography, videos, movies, and talks, was jointly organised by [Un Curso Propio](#), the Heidelberg University [Romance Language Department](#), and the CAPAS.

In a room surrounded by powerful pieces of activist artworks which actively explore the possibility of the body as a political medium, as well as a highly interested and avid audience, Jenny Stümer set out to interrogate the gendered and racialised catastrophes that have created apocalyptic scenarios for women all over the world on the one hand and to think through the apocalyptic intensities of feminist movements today on the other.

In the way that apocalypse is destructive yet revealing, Jenny Stümer asked the audience to reconsider the political energies of world-ending and world-building practices. Her first point of call was the so-called "overcloseness of the world" (Berlant 2022) which is felt, experienced,

and seen in the intensity of emotions and desires of rebellion as a force for change. Feminism is about ending the world in its current shape; precisely because power is written on the body but, more importantly, because this body is a structure that speaks back. Some sit comfortably in the 'world' amongst their privilege, while others are less easily received (Ahmed 2006). Feminism's stake in ending the 'world' and making it anew hence works as a challenge "to the ongoing catastrophe of ordinary violence against women", and poses a "relentlessly life-affirming scramble for survival" against these structures, as Stümer explains. The difficulty with this approach, however, is how to come together in a world that is not entirely 'built' for most? Stümer sug-

Pieces of activist artworks which actively explore the possibility of the body as a political medium.





In her talk, [Jenny Stümer](#) set out to interrogate the gendered and racialised catastrophes that have created apocalyptic scenarios for women all over the world.

gests that women and other minorities can't necessarily resolve the paradoxes that present them but they can, instead, galvanize them for action.

Feeling your way and moving together in a messy world, or "being in life without wanting the world" (Berlant 2022) amounts to a cultural politic that makes the 'world' readable, perhaps bearable, and in Stümer's sense breakable. According to Stümer the photos and artworks with which she was surrounded produce the world

affectively, invoking shared longings for transformation which so forcefully animate activist practices around the world. If feminism is about the body, bodies need to come together to create movement (literally and socially). With a nod to Elizabeth Grosz (2001), amongst others, and her understanding of 'embodied utopias' Stümer turned to futurity and the changes that can be had. However, for that to happen new shapes and structures of inclusivity and gender justice need to get a chance to impress difference onto the 'world' begging the question: what kind of futures become possible when we break and unlearn the world in its current form? Ultimately, suggests Stümer, it's about making these paradoxes productive. "There is a hole made into the world by an undefeated will," Stümer cited Ahmed to conclude, "apocalypse in this sense can become a form of politics that reorients us towards a broken a world. The end of the world, in other words, is only the beginning." ●



#SCIENCE APOCALYPSE

## A BETTER WORLD IS POSSIBLE

For some time now, activists of the grassroots movement Extinction Rebellion (XR) have been drawing attention to climate change with highly visible actions. In September, one of the movement's subgroups, XR Buddhists Germany, targeted Berlin. CAPAS scientist Rolf Scheuermann was there as a participant observer and reports on his impressions.

Extinction Rebellion (XR) is a relatively new grass root movement that began in response to the [2018 IPCC Special Report](#) on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C. The movement originated in the UK, but has quickly expanded around the globe. In the [words of XR UK](#), the 2018 IPCC report implies “that we only have 12 years to stop catastrophic climate change,” asserting “that we have entered the 6th mass extinction event.” The apocalyptic imminence is aptly reflected by the symbol XR uses, a circle representing the globe with an hour glass inside, which shows that the time horizon for humanity to act is constantly getting shorter. XR is mostly organized through local groups based on their location, but there are also community groups, which connect members based on a shared self-identity such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, profession, or faith. A subgroup belonging to the latter category is XR Buddhists. They have been active since 2019 in the UK, as well as Germany.

From September 17 – 20, 2022, the XR Autumn Rebellion targeted Berlin, and XR Buddhists Germany planned a couple of related events. During the run-up to the actions, I got into contact with the group, was able to conduct interviews with two of the organizers, and was finally permitted to join the group as a participating observer.

XR climate activists set up a tent camp in a park next to the Federal Ministry of Economy and Climate Protection close to Berlin’s main station and the government district. A colorfully arranged meditation tent served as the headquarter of XR Buddhists Germany. It was used to organize public talks on Buddhism, guided meditations, and organizational group meetings, but also offered a space for individual meditation.

On Saturday evening, September 17, a meditation ritual called “Buddhist Climate Action Puja” was held in the tent. On the next day in the afternoon, the group or-

XR Buddhist Germany walking meditation on Monday, 20 September 2022, in Berlin.





Above: Impression of the XR camp in Berlin.

Bellow: Sitting Meditation by XR Buddhists Germany.

ganized an interfaith walking meditation through Berlin that covered a walking distance of 600 m in one hour. More than a hundred participants were dressed in colored clothes that ranged from light blue (cooler) to red (warmer) to resemble the climate warming stripes used to visualize the data of long-term climate change trends. On Monday, a second walking meditation of 200 m was organized by

XR Buddhists who headed to a *Deutsche Bank* branch office. Participants were dressed in black, and had signs hanging around their necks that read “Deutsche Bank. Stop financing coal, oil & gas” to protest the bank’s practice of corporate finance. After arriving at the destination,

a letter was handed over to the bank’s branch manager. Afterward, the group continued with silent sitting meditation on the street in front of the branch office.

In general, climate activists engage in what former CAPAS fellow Christine Hentschel has dubbed *edgework in the Anthropocene*. In her paper “Stretches of imagination at the end of times: Affective workouts against apocalypse” (2022), she understands climate activism as affective workouts that “grapple with the limits of agency in the face of ecological crisis through an intense affective and imaginative exercise at the edge.” Buddhist meditation chiefly serves the purpose of inner transformation for the practitioner; however, public walking and sitting meditations or recitations of prayers in the framework of climate change protest take on a performative character that focus on a transformation of the audience. In a forthcoming article, I attempt to address this shift and other issues in detail in the context of existing Buddhist end-time narratives. ●



#KHK  
FAMILY

# THE KÄTE HAMBURGER KOLLEG MÜNSTER LEGAL UNITY AND PLURALISM (EVIR)



Stimulating interdisciplinary discussions characterised the first annual conference of the Centre.

## THE KHK FAMILY

In this short question-and-answer series, we would like to introduce you to the rest of the Käte Hamburger Kolleg family. In this issue: the KHK Münster *Legal Unity and Pluralism* (EVIR) and the KHK Aachen *Cultures of Research* (c:0/re).

## What is the research focus of your centre?

**KHK Münster:** We assume that law was plural at all times, meaning that there were different legal systems within the same society or region. At the same time, there has always been a desire to unify and standardise law in all cultures. We examine this inherent tension between legal unity and pluralism from an interdisciplinary but genuinely historical perspective. Thus, the centre opens up unusual perspectives on the understanding of law and society in general and the (legal) ways of dealing with forms of cultural diversity in particular.

## What were your motivations when you conceptualized the centre?

Today, we see that in increasingly plural societies, law is also becoming more plural. Perhaps the idea that law must be uniform and systematic is a 19th century concept that has never been fully realised and is definitely reaching its limits in our present day. If we look at the Global South, we see how different social, ethnic or religious groups are demanding recognition of their traditional

laws. But this phenomenon can also be observed in Western societies. On the other hand, there are developments towards supranational legislations, such as the regulations of the European Union, that prevail national law. In order to better assess such contemporary phenomena, it makes sense to look at legal pluralism comprehensively and across all epochs.

## What would your research look like from a (post-)apocalyptic perspective?

Fascinating question. In post-apocalyptic worlds, as we know them from literature or films, there seems to be no law at all, it's survival of the fittest. At least there is no superior authority like the nation state that guarantees legal unity. But assuming that there were different groups of equal strength, each with their own laws, they would have to find ways to deal with each other. In this respect, the post-apocalypse would be a rich field of research for phenomena of legal pluralism.

## Do you have recommendations for pop cultural items on your research area?

Legal pluralism may not have as much pop appeal as the apocalypse... but the two-part "Nuremberg" (2000) with Alec Baldwin impressively shows the birth of international criminal law during the Nuremberg trials that made it possible to prosecute the deeds of the Nazis, even if they were not considered a crime under German law at that time. ●



#KHK  
FAMILY

# THE KÄTE HAMBURGER KOLLEG AACHEN CULTURES OF RESEARCH (C:O/RE)



## What is the research focus of your centre?

**KHK Aachen:** c:o/re is an International Center for Advanced Studies in Philosophy, Sociology, and History of Science and Technology. We want to foster interdisciplinary exchange with scholars from the natural and engineering sciences, particularly in the fields of matter, life and brain research, with a focus on topics such as complexity, lifelikeness and emergence. In brief, as an interdisciplinary Science and Technology Studies (STS) research center based at a technical university, we annually host ten research fellows from various disciplines.

## What were your motivations when you conceptualized the centre?

Rapid recent technological developments such as those in digitalization and AI are shedding new light on human cognition and societies. Our goal is to look into what the humanities and social sciences can learn in this new light. We are driven by the need to make changes in contemporary societies' production of science in general, so as to better answer the looming crises we face.

## What would your research look like from a (post-)apocalyptic perspective?

The (post-)apocalyptic concern of STS scholars is technological *singularity*, namely the point of no-return when artificial intelligence, having upgraded itself through

a great amount of feedback loops, will determine human life in ways over which humans will not have any control. Post-apocalyptically, living in the *singularity*, we would stop wondering if and when *singularity* will happen. Or would we?

## Do you have recommendations for pop cultural items on your research area?

Oh, it's a tough choice – where to start? Probably with a classic of sci-fi, such as Stanisław Lem's *The Star Diaries*, about whom c:o/re director [Gabriele Gramelsberger recently wrote](#). The classics of cyberpunk, such as *Necromancer* and *Blade Runner*, are probably what leads many to work in STS. Series such as *Black Mirror* and *Westworld* are also illustrative of what we study. Even better than literature and movies, videogames are illustrative of our research field. Videogames are an object of study in STS. We recommend a survival horror sci-fi, such as [Soma](#). If you prefer something lighter, you can try saving organic life in the Galaxy from singularity in [Mass Effect](#).

Humans also sing about their relation with machines. The band Long Distance Calling asks [How do we want to live?](#), Jean-Michel Jarre arguably invites reflection on cyborgs, memory and sensoriality in [Touch to re-member](#) and Röyskopp's [The Girl and the Robot](#) is becoming a classic of its genre. On machines, love and God, we recommend Amor Electro's [A Máquina](#). ●

## IN THE SPOTLIGHT FLORIAN MUSSGNUG

**What were your first thoughts when you saw the call for applications for the fellowship?**

**Florian Mussgnug:** How brilliant! I could not believe my eyes. I have been interested in cultural representations of apocalypse for more than twenty years and I know that this topic can trigger strong emotions, from enthusiastic curiosity to ineradicable scepticism. But never in my wildest dreams would I have hoped to find a high-powered scholarly and creative community like CAPAS. When I saw the call, it seemed too good to be true. Once I'd picked myself up off the floor, I started writing my application.

**What does the apocalypse and/or post-apocalypse mean for you?**

Apocalypse has a reputation problem. In contemporary debates, it is often associated with reactionary worldviews: ethnonationalists, evangelical fundamentalists, tech tycoons, apologists of white male power, and so on. For these groups, events cohere as part of a familiar, universal, apocalyptic script. Actual or perceived opponents are agents of evil. Expectations of social collapse inspire fantasies of cataclysmic violence or hubristic dreams of interstellar world-making.

For me, apocalypse has a different meaning. I am interested in cultural forms and political projects that challenge the imaginative frameworks of anthropocentrism. My research also focuses on experiences of cultural diversity and exchange that run counter to Eurocentric, teleological narratives of the mod-

ern emergence of the global. In both contexts, apocalypse acquires a positive meaning that resists far-right appropriation. Christian eschatology, in its earliest forms, was an act of discursive resistance against Empire: a gesture of radical hope. This important fact might be eclipsed in social media by toxic fantasies of apocalyptic mastery. But it has never been forgotten, especially in the Global South and among the world's most vulnerable human communities.



Besides, it would be wrong to identify apocalypse only with Christian ideas of end time. Beyond this dominant tradition, we find numerous alternative ways of conceiving the end(s) of world(s): narratives that can serve – and have always served – as an inspiration for critical and creative practice. As a scholar of world literature, I see it as my role to give greater visibility to this wealth of diverse imaginations and literary and artistic traditions.

**Florian Mussgnug** (BA Oxon, MSt Oxon, PhD Scuola Normale Superiore Pisa) is Professor of Comparative Literature and Italian Studies and Vice Dean International for Arts and Humanities at University College London. He has published widely on Twentieth and Twenty-First Century literature in Italian, English and German, with a particular focus on the environmental humanities, creative critical practice, and narratives of risk, crisis, and care.

#SCIENCE  
APOCALYPSE

# PASSAGE AND FLOW OCEANIC DYSTOPIA IN THE SELF-CONSCIOUS ANTHROPOCENE

**The water is rising on us. The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has estimated that sea levels will rise by approximately half a meter in the twenty-first century if drastic cuts to carbon emission are imposed now. Without such cuts, oceans are likely to rise twice as much by 2100 (IPCC 2019). Large floods are predicted to occur with increasing frequency, especially in tropical regions. How is this troubling prospect considered in twenty-first century literature?**

In his recently published article "Passage and flow: oceanic dystopia in the self-conscious Anthropocene" CAPAS fellow Florian Mussgnug discusses two recent examples of oceanic climate fiction – Clare Morrall's "When the Floods Came" (2016) and Helen Marshall's "The Migration" (2019) – through the dual conceptual lens of 'passage' and 'flow'. He shows that twenty-first century dystopias, despite their attention to place, break with the tradition of apocalyptic telos. Their engagement with fluidity marks the emergence of a new affective register, which runs counter to both religious millenarianism and to the spatializing impulse of twentieth-century utopian and dystopian fiction.

'Passage' – a term that evokes the imperial cartographies and biopolitical violence of colonialism and slavery – is employed by Mussgnug to shed light on contemporary transnational chains of ecological, political and cultural interdependence. By contrast, 'flow' serves to explore a latent but growing desire, in twenty-first century literature, for new horizons of posthuman vitality. Oceanic dystopia echoes the fundamental unpredictability of post-holocene societies and ecologies, but it also urges us to stretch the limits of our imagination towards responsible and responsive local sensitivity. In this way, the genre formulates a critique of capitalist globalization that is always embedded in specific contexts, and that foregrounds the importance of the more-than-human world, not as a mere backdrop or context for human stories, but as a co-constitutive presence. ●

In: "[Passages – Moving beyond liminality in the study of literature and culture](#)". Edited by Elizabeth Kovach, Jens Kugele, and Ansgar Nünning. UCL Press, 2022, pp. 186-199.

## IN THE SPOTLIGHT

# ROBERT KIRSCH

**What were your first thoughts when you saw the call for applications for the fellowship?**



**Robert Kirsch** is Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Leadership and Interdisciplinary Studies at Arizona State University. His work focuses on multiple vectors of citizenship in advanced industrial democracies.

### IMPRINT

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various places. For instance, in many parts of the world, climate change has already reached apocalyptic proportions; in other parts of the world technological fixes or ideological stubbornness has blunted the impacts – for now. In that way, the apocalypse and post-apocalypse can, at least in part, be understood as a question of infrastructure, both social and material about how to (re)organize what remains.

**What is your fellowship trying to achieve?**

I want to understand the phenomenon that my co-author and I have coined the term ‘bunkerization’ for in the United States. In other words, we look at how neoliberal rationalities of individual responsibility have taken the place of what was once the role of the state to facilitate collective action to achieve public goals of maintaining a certain kind of life. In the face of state failure, individuals are invited to consume survival goods (what is called ‘prepping’) in a shelf-stable hoard that builds up individual resilience to an uncertain future (of climate change, social unrest, financial collapse, etc.). We argue that this reconceives the everyday life of the home into a bunker mentality of surveillance, stockpiling, and fear as a new way of life. Our historical analysis tries to point the causal arrow in that direction; namely that the organizing logic of bunkerization caused by the managed state absence of neoliberal governance produces fear, distrust, and prepping, rather than reducing prepping behavior to an aberrant curiosity that has no broader social consequence.

**Robert Kirsch:** My co-author and I had just secured a contract for a manuscript on ‘doomsday prepping’ in the US, so when I saw the call I was really intrigued not only with how well it fit our specific project, but also the holistic interdisciplinary approach that CAPAS takes. Once we recovered from the shock that such a center for apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic studies exists, we very quickly applied!

**What does the apocalypse and/or post-apocalypse mean for you?**

From my perspective in political science an apocalypse is when collective action and public purpose become impossible; a total breakdown of the social order. In that sense, my perspective is that apocalypse is not a singular event, but a process of uneven development and unfolding that has disparate impacts in

