

## Introduction

### *Saying and Picturing the End of the World*

The idea of the end of the world has an air of banality. Aren't we drifting along a neverending flow of sci-fi books and catastrophe films with whirls of special effects, in which the world ends in a sea of flames, in nuclear radiation, in a technological Armageddon?—Drifted along by, but not drowned, for don't we also trust that the world is actually not at its end but only purified, reduced to another nuclear family who will start out a better world that is actually more pure and honest than our rotten civilization. Nothing really distinguishes these stories from the ancient myths of Utnapishtim, Noah, or Deucalion and Pyrrha. The point is really to tell a reassuring story of hope of a better future.

Maybe it is in reaction to this imagery (and not by poltroonery) that many philosophers today tend to reject the thought of the end of the world. After all, philosophy has spent much effort to settle its affairs with a teleological notion of the end that was important in the middle of the twentieth century (the important debates on the end of history, the end of man, the end of philosophy, etc). But in reality, the problem of the end of the world is not the same as the problem of the the *telos* of time and human endeavors: The question of the world's end does not boil down to the question of meaning but it refers to the thought of the possibility of the impossibility of the world itself, in which meaning can take place or not. The width of the world is illuminated by the thought of its end, which actually shows how the world is made, and along what lines and fractures it can therefore be unmade.

Whatever the position of philosophers, modern and contemporary film and literature have dug into the notion of the end of the world in many ways. Instead of just telling new stories with old means, a number of works have problematized the means that are capable of seizing the subject, asking how the idea of the end affects writing and imaging themselves. In this dossier we have brought together three texts that study the figure of end of the world, not as a subject, but as artistic means in literature and film. The examination of the end of the world in singular works lets us follow the workings of the end much more closely than any philosophical generalities.

Tora Lane, in "The Language of the End and the Language of the World in *The Poem of the End* by Marina Tsvetaeva," lays out a careful reading of Marina Tsvetaeva's poem *The Poem of the End* but also of *The Poem of the Mountain*. They rise from a multiple experience of the end: the end of the old regime in the revolution, the end of comfortable life in exile, and the end of love after her lover had abandoned her. Lane shows how all these endings also put an end to something in poetry. If the "masculine" *Poem of the Mountain* shows how modernism, instead of relating to the end in a classical lamenting mood, seems to feed on endings because they lead to new beginnings, the "feminine" *Poem of the End* revolts against the productive use of endings and attempts to

create another poetic language, in which language offers a home in the words only if it bespeaks the utter homelessness of the disintegrated and dismembered inner self. This is how language itself becomes the place of a transformation of our relation to the end: instead of turning its negativity into a useful resource, it becomes a means of inhabiting the end's groundlessness, homelessness, and aimlessness.

Artemy Magun, in "Viktor Pelevin's Postmodern Apocalypse," shows how the apocalypse has been a central feature of Russian and Soviet literature since the advent of modernism, but especially since the 1970s and 1980s, until Viktor Pelevin provides a kind of a postmodern summit of this tendency. Pelevin's apocalyptic plays mix reality with elements of fantasy (from vampires to cyberpunk) in order to feature the simultaneous meaninglessness and spectacularization of the world especially in art and media, so that the manifestation of catastrophic absurdity becomes a political commentary of the situation in Russia and beyond. Magun shows how the repeated fantasy of the end of the world makes the text denounce itself as a mere hallucination. Simultaneously Pelevin's text often stages a creator (e.g., a spin doctor) who invents the hallucinatory world like the writer invents his fictional apocalypse. However, the text refuses to be a simple harmless hallucination, for it invites the reader to actively destroy the position of the author as well as the illusion of the world it projects, thereby claiming that the world needs to be reduced to chaos for regeneration to be possible.

Serge Margel, in "The End of Film. Montage and depth of time in Béla Tarr's *Werckmeister Harmonies*," interrogates the cinematic language of the end. While well-known Hollywood catastrophe movies face the end only in order to promise a new beginning (and all of this in a perfectly conventional cinematographic language), Béla Tarr often makes films of endings, like a popular revolt, but above all he examines the work of ending in the cinematic medium itself. Reading the end of the world in its connection with the end of the film, Margel asks how the end of the film, that is by no means its last image but its eschatological sense, is inscribed in the very progression of the film. He digs into this question by examining Tarr's exceedingly long and slow takes. He shows how Tarr already invites the end in the very texture of the take by inscribing the outside of the film in the film itself by producing countertemporal interruptions within the image. The watching eye faces ruin, not only of the subject of the film but of the film itself, when cinematic time is converted into the space of the take: the time of the film meets its end when its temporality is interrupted by its own spatiality.

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