Joanna Zylinska

Postcards from the End of the World

Postcards from the End of the World arises out of my work as a theorist-practitioner with a longstanding interest in "the end of the world". This interest has been fuelled by the multiple crises of our times: the climate crisis, the environmental catastrophe, the accelerated extinction of various species – including the possible elimination of the human, be it by natural forces or artificial intelligence. But it is not so much trying to figure out how the world will end that preoccupies me. Rather, I am intrigued by the way apocalyptic concepts and images are mobilised to tame our fears about what is going on right now – and to help us imagine a better tomorrow. Using different media (writing in the short book *The End of Man: A Feminist Counterapocalypse* [2018], photography and video in the film *Exit Man* [*2018*]), for the last few years I have been working on providing critical-creative responses to the circulating narratives and images of various world crises. *Postcards from the End of the World,* produced in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, is another attempt on my part to engage with present-day apocalyptic scenarios. It is also a way of framing my own anxiety in relation to the pandemic disaster unfolding across the globe in 2020.

In all of these projects, including the present one, I am using the combined toolkit of a theorist and artist to raise suspicions about the dominant mode of representing the apocalypse in popular culture and art: one that can be described, somewhat playfully, as "ruin porn". With antecedents in romantic landscapes of ruined abbeys and paintings, present-day "ruin porn" draws on photography and CGI to show dilapidated landscapes, abandoned buildings and soon-to-expire civilisations. This mode of display allows viewers to wallow in images of decay while experiencing a sense of relief. Sheltered from having to face the apocalypse directly, viewers of "ruin porn" access it via a canvas or screen (see Zylinska 2017, 9, 86), offsetting any pain with the delight at their survival, their sense of remaining unaffected – at least for now.

It troubles me that many narratives accompanying images of apocalyptic disasters espouse a conservative gender politics, proclaiming the end of humanity while elevating the white Christian Man as a dominant species and a key subject of history (see Zylinska 2018). But the apocalypse is never distributed equally. Many ethnic groups, tribes and nations throughout history have experienced vital threats to their existence, via environmental or socio-political means. There is thus something politically disabling about adopting this all-encompassing apocalyptic tenor to describe the fate of the world for "us all". The Covid-19 pandemic created a new enactment of the end of the world as "we" know it, while creating a temporary illusion of a unified global humanity. Yet, like with the previous crises, the corona-apocalypse did not affect everyone with the same intensity, with geographical, ethnic and class fault-lines delineating numerous zones of exclusion and exception.

When the pandemic hit my home city of London, UK, I was in the process of working on a project on photography and vision, investigating how media practice could help us reframe the way we see the world and the way we understand "seeing". A non-gamer taking first tentative steps into video game worlds, I was beginning to get involved in the photographic practice of in-game photography, aka screenshotting, a practice that involves the player "cutting" into the media flow of a video game to collect mementos from it and make a record of the scenes visited. As a photographer, I was more interested in capturing the enthralling, if unsettling, visuality of the game worlds than in trying to play the game properly. In an uncannily prophetic way, which also ended up being a form of therapeutics, the games I had chosen for my first ever foray into video-gaming were *The Last of Us Remastered*, an adventure-survival game set in a near-future U.S. taken over by a deadly fungus, and *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture*, a walk-around story game set in an English village from which all people had disappeared all of a sudden. This meant that I was exploring the game worlds that had been abandoned by their inhabitants as a result of some vaguely specified global-scale pandemics, while becoming increasingly aware of the Covid-19 epidemic shifting from China to Europe and beyond.

The images I ended up making were captured from multiple angles around various scenes and locations I had come across, using the embedded camera function in the two games. Each image had been produced from overlaying views of the same scene shot from several different angles and then editing it according to my own aesthetic preferences. Retaining the traces of multiple singular shots within the images was an attempt to show the process of navigation between seeing movement and enacting cuts in the optical flow, a process that our visual apparatus constantly performs as part of what we know as "seeing". (Hence the name *Flowcuts* given to the series.) Such visions inscribe themselves in the schema of "nonhuman photography" (Zylinska 2017, 5): a mode of producing images that are not *of, by* or *for* the human, and in which human agency and human vision are revealed to be intrinsically entangled with that of nonhuman entities, be it machines, particles of light or viruses.

Delivered from behind numerous windows and screens, the *Flowcuts* images then made their way into another form of dispatch: a series of virtual postcards, remediating my earlier writings on the apocalypse (Zylinska 2018) and my attempt to capture it in images. Originally sent by email to an artist-friend of mine in Warsaw, Poland, they became a way of sharing images and affects across the (closed) international borders. But they also took on the function of virtual messages addressed to many others I knew and didn't know – others who, like me, were sheltered behind multiple windows and screens. My *Postcards from the End of the World* thus also became a form of a digital caress, a way of reaching out at a time when touching itself began to carry a menace of death.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note

Joanna Zylinska is a writer, lecturer, artist and curator. She works as Professor of New Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London. The author of a number of books on art,

photography and philosophy, she is also involved in collaborative publishing projects, such as *Photomediations* (Open Humanities Press, 2016). Her art practice involves experimenting with different kinds of image-based media. She is increasingly attempting to blend "theory" and "practice" as part of the same work process.

References

Zylinska, Joanna. 2017. *Nonhuman Photography*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Zylinska, Joanna. 2018. *The End of Man: A Feminist Counterapocalypse*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. (Includes short film *Exit Man*.)

Apocalyptic thinking
is an aspect of
'the tragic worldview':
a cognitive framework
that stands for the human's
ability to reflect
on life's finitude,
coupled with the human's
inability to come to terms
with this finitude.

To Those Behind

Windows

& Screens

Joanna Zylinska

The End of Man, 2018 (text)
Flowcuts, EGR-1, 2020 (in-game photography, composite image)

The story about the end
of man has been used
to aggrandize Man
as both subject
and species,
covering the foundational
emptiness at its center
as well as obscuring
the very gesture
of Man's erection
as man.

To Those Behind

Windows

& Screens

Joanna Zylinska

The End of Man, 2018 (text)
Flowcuts, EGR-5, 2020 (in-game photography, composite image)

Disavowing his kinship
with women and those
of non-binary gender,
with animals, microbes,
and fungi,
Man separates from 'nature'
to emerge standing,
yet already threatened
with contamination,
shrinkage
and evanescence.

To Those Behind Windows & Screens

Joanna Zylinska

The End of Man, 2018 (text)
Flowcuts, EGR-7, 2020 (in-game photography, composite image)

Apocalypticism thus
reveals itself to be
nothing more than
an exercise in narcissism:
a denial of the 'feeling
of being the animal
you are, born of other
animals, made of
mirroring them'.

To Those Behind

Windows

& Screens

Joanna Zylinska

The End of Man, 2018 (text)
Flowcuts, TLOU-1, 2020 (in-game photography, composite image)

The populist promise
today
involves the prospect
of a land of plenty
from a time long gone.

To Those Behind Windows & Screens

Joanna Zylinska

The End of Man, 2018 (text)
Flowcuts, TLOU-2, 2020 (in-game photography, composite image)

The post-Enlightenment
mode of thinking that
demotes the White
Christian Man
from his position
of the subject of reason
and the telos
of our planet
entails a promise
of decolonizing
our established
frameworks of thought.

To Those Behind

Windows

& Screens

Joanna Zylinska

The End of Man, 2018 (text)
Flowcuts, TLOU-3, 2020 (in-game photography, composite image)

If unbridled progress
is no longer an option,
what kinds of
coexistences
and collaborations
do we want to create
in its aftermath?

To Those Behind

Windows

& Screens

Joanna Zylinska

The End of Man, 2018 (text)
Flowcuts, TLOU-9, 2020 (in-game photography, composite image)