

**Book Review – *The Discourse of Environmental Collapse: Imagining  
The End*, Edited by Alison E. Vogellar, Brack W. Hale and  
Alexandra Peat.**

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The *Discourse of Environmental Collapse: Imagining The End* calls for urgency in discussion as well as action. The book under review effectively captures this immediacy in tone and spirit and dwells upon the various facets of collapse related to, or emerging from, climate change. At the very outset, in the introduction to this interesting collection of essays, the editors proclaim that this volume “explores . . . our current moment of crisis as an age of collapse” (p. 1). The collected essays aim to discuss patterns of collapse and the visibility of collapse in contemporary media narratives, an objective in which they are mostly successful. The book draws discourses on collapse from different disciplines, time zones, and points of view to establish an interconnected understanding of imagining the end.

The book is divided into three parts: “Doc Collapse”, “Pop Collapse” and “Craft Collapse”. The first part of the book primarily documents as well as highlights the measurability of climate change occurrences. The second part dwells upon the communication of environmental collapse in mainstream popular media. The third part focuses on creative interpretation, framing and crafting of the collapse narrative. The first part comprises of four chapters and the second and third parts comprise of three chapters each.

The first chapter, titled “Culture and collapse”, is written by Michael Egan and focuses on slow disasters and the Anthropocene. It explores, in detail, the connection between Voltaire and Rousseau’s debate between good and evil, and neoliberalism, increasingly visible natural disasters and the onset of contemporary collapse narratives. In the process, Egan points out that catastrophe is inevitable, continuous and permanent.

While Egan observes the inevitability of collapse, the second chapter, by Jesse Peterson, titled “Are dead zones dead?”, focuses on the “collapsed and collapsing” (p. 33), specifically within human-water relationships. Peterson points out the tendency to specify dead zones by human consumption rates and not ‘life’ at sea. He also discusses collapse as a “timed” event that is precipitated by climate change and geoengineering. This chapter introduces the reader to the concept of human-water relations and the tendency to hyphenate a vital resource such as water with the Anthropocene.

The third chapter, by Joanna Nurmis, is titled “Can photojournalism steer clear of the siren song of collapse?”, and deals with photography as it is used to communicate climate issues and its significance in the climate change narrative. While the earlier chapters discuss the continuity of collapse and the precipitation of such collapse in contemporary times, documenting climate change and the resultant collapse is Nurmis’ central concern. Considering the reach of photography to the general public and the impact it can thus create, this chapter is timely, particularly due to its discussion of the changing impact of climate photography since 2006 to date. The only omission this chapter can potentially be accused of is the non-inclusion of even one actual photograph in it.

The omission of graphic images or photographs in the third chapter is somewhat compensated by Ann Gardiner in the fourth chapter by the many graphic pages extracted from Philippe Squarzoni’s (2012) graphic comic *Climate Changed: A Personal Journey Through Science*. Titled “Environmental collapse in comics”, Gardiner extends the discourse on graphic representations and documentations of collapse by focusing on the French comic writer’s documentary comic about climate change. Gardiner also takes into account Squarzoni’s use of unusual narrative tools, such as data visualization, in his portrayal of the issue of climate change. The chapter discusses in detail the clever, evidence-based narrative strategies adopted by Squarzoni in his comic art to bring home the point of environmental deterioration. It specifically focuses on the construction of a meta-narrative with respect to climate change in Squarzoni’s comic art.

Part II of the book, titled “Pop Collapse”, begins with a discussion of the avalanche of apocalyptic environmental imaginings in pop culture, a phenomenon quite aptly termed “collapse porn” (p. 91). The discourse on graphic content on climate change and collapse continues with Guy D. Middleton’s essay, “This is the end of the world as we know it: narratives of collapse and transformation in archaeology and popular culture”. In terms of both content and sheer

readability, this is undoubtedly one of the book's best chapters. The author analyses a range of images of the end of the world from magazines spread over a hundred years and several continents. The central focus of the article is on the "narratives generated by archeology" (p. 108). Middleton, through the example of popular documentaries from BBC and History Channel, aptly summarizes the mainstream tendency to dramatize collapse narratives based on interpretations rather than facts, and the pitfalls of such practices.

While Middleton furthers his argument with a thorough discussion on archaeology and popular culture, Chapter 6 from Part II, Jen England's "Survive, thrive, or perish", switches focus to contemporary engagement with end times in video games, suggesting that this medium may be a valuable way to address narratives of collapse. Popular video games *Wasteland* and *Fallout* are analysed as simulations which might prepare one for different forms of collapse in the real world. England argues that "envirotechnical disasters" (p. 120), i.e., environmental disasters caused and/or aggravated by technical failures, may add to both environmental and social collapses and that the growingly popular world of video games can be used as a medium to enhance awareness about the need to work against the possibilities of collapse.

If awareness and consequent preparedness do not bring the desired result, then there must be a plan to escape. "Zooming out, closing in", the seventh chapter of the book, written by Alison E. Vogelaar and Brack W. Hale, focuses on the scope of escape from collapse. The central point of discussion in this chapter is the concept of "spaceship ecology," which is based on collapse-oriented escape. With the help of two popular Hollywood movies, *Gravity* and *The Martian*, the authors underline the possibilities and limitations of spaceship ecology. A particularly salient discussion on the now well-known Biosphere 2 experiment enriches the argument further.

The discourse established around the various forms and manifestations of collapse in Part I and II of the book is summarised in the beginning of Part III. This discourse is then furthered in I. J. MacRae's chapter, "Imagining the apocalypse", which engages with the representation of ecological collapse through a comparative analysis of photography, art and literature. MacRae investigates the photographs of Edward Burtynsky, the art of Andy Goldsworthy and Cormac McCarthy's (2006) novel, *The Road*, to find a trope for the generic perceptions of collapse in human and non-human interactions. He further dwells on the finality of apocalyptic narratives and the need to find ways out of such scenarios for humanity. The author concludes that a thorough

comprehension of the finality of ecological disasters should ultimately lead humanity to find “new, strange paths” (p. 156) that lie beyond such possibilities of collapse.

Matthew Griffiths’ essay, “Something akin to what’s killing bees”, is the second chapter in the third part of the book. This chapter discusses collapse narratives through the unusual bee poetry tradition (p. 166). One of the key points of discussion in this chapter is the human interventions in the collapse experienced by bee colonies, and the parallels that can be drawn to the potentially largescale collapse of modern human society.

The last chapter of the book is written by Alexandra Peat and is titled “Salvaging the Fragments”. Peat takes up the metaphor of the shipwreck and, drawing from Virginia Woolf’s fascination with the same, discusses in detail Emily St. John Mandel’s 2014 novel *Station Eleven*. Peat opines that, while collapse is likely taken seriously, as is evident from the visibility it now increasingly receives in the works of literature, Mandel’s *Station Eleven* drifts away from that seriousness: instead of portraying environmental collapse as apocalyptic, it hinges on the hope of a new world that is “just out of sight” (p. 191). Peat further concludes that it is probably only in a fragmented and flawed narrative as that of *Station Eleven*’s that collapse can both be imagined and dealt with.

Overall, *The Discourse of Environmental Collapse* makes a compelling read while never letting the reader forget the grimness of the issue of environmental collapse. Barring a few chapters that falter in terms of readability, especially Peterson’s “Are dead zones dead?”, which was difficult to follow owing to a roundabout style, this book is a well-intentioned addition to the discourse of environmental collapse and regeneration. It is enriched by interdisciplinary comprehensions and perspectives on environmental collapse, contemporary discussions on human-nonhuman interactions, and policy making and awareness measures to deal with apocalyptic possibilities. Hence, this book can appeal to a vast audience ranging from scholars, researchers, and policy makers to a more general reader.

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