

Apocalypse and Authenticity Conference, 11-13 July 2017

University of Hull

Apocalypse and authenticity are distinct ideas dominant in modern cultural experience. Accordingly, the *Religious Studies, Theology and Popular Culture Network's* conference on 'Apocalypse and Authenticity' was always going to be a multifaceted, interdisciplinary affair. Held at the University of Hull, the three-day event united scholars of religious and secular eschatology in their explorations of apocalyptic ideas and authentic experience. Questions around whether our understanding of authenticity is ever authentic, and what constitutes an authentic apocalyptic experience, were the subject of much discussion.

The variety of papers attested to the conference's commendable scope. Some, like the opening presentation, pushed the limits of what many understand as 'apocalypse'. Karen Gardiner's detailed discussion of 'Alice's Apocalypse' in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) challenged conventional uses of the term, by considering the nineteenth crisis of faith and the way children's fiction writers dealt with issues of hell and eternal punishment. This was followed by Jouni Teittinen's insightful paper 'The Eyes of a Child: Figuring Innocence and Authenticity in P.C. Jersild's *After the Flood* (1982) and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006)', which introduced the concept of the 'sur-apocalypse' to describe those characters who lack substantial experience of the pre-apocalyptic world. In such cases Teittinen argued, the author is challenged with creating an authentic characterisation to offer an anthropology of disaster through their estranging experiences.

The afternoon's parallel sessions were divided thematically between the authentic and apocalyptic. "Authentic Living and Authentic Religions" opened with Paul Moon's examination of 'Rua Kenana and the Founding of an Authentic Maori Religious Movement'. Moon's discussion revealed the complications of authenticity in the establishment of religion. Shifting to a considerably different 'authentic' experience, Chris Deacy followed with a consideration of nostalgia on Radio. His paper, 'Finding Authenticity Through the Inauthentic: Radio Nostalgia and the Interplay Between Past, Present and Future' explored the way in which radio may evoke a sense of authenticity through often ostensibly 'inauthentic' means. Concurrently, in "TV: The End in Recent TV Series", John Lynch's '*Mr*

*Robot: Hacking the Apocalypse* revealed how an apocalyptic, transformative event in *Mr Robot* draws upon contemporary anxieties around the financial crisis and global economies. Considering contemporary concerns of a very different manner, Emily Rowson concluded the session with her analysis of 'Postfeminism at the End of the World: Authenticity and Identity in *Doctor Who*'. In a well-argued and detailed piece, Rowson considered two apocalyptic scenarios in *Dr Who* which utilise contemporary conceptions beauty. Rowson demonstrated how *Dr Who* constructs a vision of authentic humanity through Rose's 'ordinary, working class femininity' and offers an overt criticism of postfeminist conceptions of beauty.

Day one concluded with the first keynote. Part plenary, part interactive experience, Michael Takeo Magruder took attendees through his 'Reimagining the Book of *Revelation* in the Information Age Digital Experience of Apocalypse in Art'. Magruder's art remixes *Revelation* into various digital or digitally rendered forms, including 3D printing, Biblical passages as scannable QR codes, and an immersive VR rendering of the 'New Jerusalem'. Binding traditional and modern, Biblical and secular, art and technology, and theory and practice Magruder's piece encapsulated the conference's open-mindedness to varied scholarly activity.

The second day opened with Natasha O'Hear's keynote: 'In Search of "Authentic" Apocalypticism: Explorations of the Apocalypse in Popular Culture, Literature and Music'. Beginning with a discussion of the way Christian imagery has influenced art and media before focussing on texts like the hugely successful *Left Behind* (Tim LaHaye, Jerry B. Jenkins, 1995) novels, O'Hear grappled with the complex tensions existing between representing apocalypse and authentic experience. Paradoxically, she concludes, works like *Left Behind* strive towards authenticity by relying heavily on scripture, yet fail to be authentic by bypassing modern theological scholarship.

Parallel sessions followed, each with an apocalyptic focus. Both Anna Boswell's ecologically focussed 'Possums in Paradise' and Eleanor Course's 'Authentic Theology and Culture in Hull 2017', in the panel "Living in the End Times", dealt with human interaction with the apocalyptic and/or authenticity. The session concluded with Steve Knowles' fascinating paper 'Prophecy, Brexit and Babylon: Semiotic Promiscuity in Late Modernity'. Knowles outlined how uncertainties affecting the post-Brexit economy offer assurance and meaning for Christian fundamentalists who understand these as the signs of the end times.

Running alongside “Living in the End Times”, “The (Post)Apocalypse in Comics and On Screen” opened with Fryderyk Kwiatkowski’s ‘A Road to Gnostic Salvation? The Ascension of the Soul in the Post-apocalyptic World of *Snowpiercer*’. Here, Kwiatkowski moved away from conventional class-based readings of the film to explore it in the light of Gnostic myth as a narrative pattern for contemporary apocalyptic cinematic. In ‘A Taxonomy and a Few Interpretations of Superhero Comic Book Apocalypses’ Kevin Wanner offered the most detailed analysis of the conference. Utilising detailed charts and overlays, Wanner charted and provided a taxonomy of apocalypses in superhero comics to illustrate trends, plots and tonal and thematic shifts in relation to contemporary concerns over globalism, nativism/nationalism, and transcultural migration.

“Christian Music: Apocalypse, Eschatology, Authenticity” and the more broadly titled “Authenticity” comprised the next parallel sessions. In the former, Ibrahim Abraham’s ‘Evangelical Popular Musicianship and the Burdens of Sacred and Secular Authenticity’ discussed philosophical perspectives in relation to Evangelical punk, hip hop and heavy metal. On a more traditional note, Daniel Thornton’s paper ‘It’s The End Of The World As We Know It: How Authenticity and Eschatology Cohere in Contemporary Congregational Songs’ examined the musical framing of apocalyptic lyrics to communicate ‘an authentic contemporary Christianity’ in some of the most popular congregational songs used in worship today. Kathryn Kinney offered a more focused examination of a similar topic in ‘Born Again Apocalypse: Secularity and Religion in the *Eve of Destruction*’. Kinney’s discussion of Barry McGuire’s 1965 hit song revealed how it encapsulates an interplay between a secular apocalyptic ethos and evangelical eschatology. As with many of the papers at the conference, Kinney’s work drew attention to the intersections between religious and secular eschatology in contemporary cultural experience. This was also found in the opening paper of the concurrent ‘Authenticity’ Panel. Bina Nir’s ‘Western Apocalyptic Time and Personal Authentic Time’ argued that modern Westerners live according to a linear, historical, and cultural timeline directed towards the Biblically influenced “end of days” and a more personal, ‘authentic’ timeline. Sheng-Yu Peng’s ‘Toward Aesthetics of Apocalypse: A Nostalgic Approach of Authenticity’ focussed on theological aesthetics to uncover how humans lost their ability to perceive the beauty of apocalypse. Given the conference’s consistent focus on cultural obsessions with apocalypse, this was a particularly thought-provoking paper. The panel concluded with an entirely secular examination of myth creation.

In ‘Slender Man’s Authentic Face: Issues in Communal Re-creation and Online Mythology’. Vivian Asimos offered an engaging account of the creation of the Slender Man mythos and the way a sense of an ‘authentic’ yet constantly shifting digital supernatural presence was established. The conference’s second day concluded with Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati’s keynote ‘Staging the Future and Enjoying Disasters: Apocalyptic Imagination and the Quest for Authenticity’ which discussed apocalyptic motifs and authentic cultural representation in science fiction films like *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009).

The final day’s opening parallel sessions divided focus between “Popular Music” and “Apocalypse and Transformation:”. In ‘South African #FeesMustFall Protest Songs as the Sound of Apocalypse’ Marie Jorritsma explored the social context of music to reveal apocalyptic themes. With a more mainstream focus in ‘Apocalypse as Critical Dystopia in Modern Popular Music’ Javier Campos discussed apocalypse as a self-referential category in the collective imagination and its utilisation in rock music. In ‘Apocalypse and Transformation’ both presenters discussed secular literary works that utilise cataclysm for change. Jennifer Woodward’s paper, ‘Totalitarian Opportunism: J. J. Connington’s *Nordenholt’s Million* (1923)’, examined the way in which literature can utilise an apocalyptic event to critique contemporary culture and offer alternate socio-cultural systems. Stephanie Bender similarly argued that literature can reveal the utopian potential of apocalypse, in her insightful discussion of ‘Apocalypse in Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam Trilogy* (2013)’.

The afternoon was divided between panels focussing on art and religion. In “Art: Imagining and Imaging The Apocalypse”, Sandy Lunau discussed the relationship between literature and reality in ‘The Ends of Literature – Apocalypse and the Power and Boundaries of Art’. Tom Bromwell’s excellent paper, ‘Authenticity and Millennium in Stanley Spencer’s *Resurrection Paintings*’ argued that Spencer’s artistic conception of the resurrection was the means by which he articulated his desire for renewal and reconciliation after the Great War.

“Apocalyptic Religions” was a diverse panel that included Simon Cross’ ‘The Slovenian Zombie Apocalypse’ which examined the creation of ‘The Trans-Universal Zombie Church of the Blissful Ringing’. Moojan Momen’s ‘Apocalyptic Thinking and Process Thinking: Managing Apocalyptic Expectations’ dealt with religion and end times more directly in its examination of how the Baha’I Faith’s founders used hermeneutic methods in to claim their religious movement fulfilled the prophecies of the end times.

The conference closed with Robert Geraci's superb keynote 'Waiting for the End of the World: Technology, History, and the Indian Struggle for Independence'. Geraci offered an alternate perspective on 'end times' by examining Indian notions of cyclical eschatology and cultural authenticity. This revealed how conceptions of 'endings', 'truth' and 'history' can be complicated by the idea of cyclical time. Here, endings signify change, what is new is conceived of as old, and myth becomes a means of recapturing previous cyclical cultural iterations. This alternate cultural and conceptual perspective meant that while the conference closed with Geraci's paper, the subjects of apocalypse and authenticity felt far from concluded.