**Haunted Nature, Haunted Humans:**

**Intelligent Trees, Gaia and the Apocalypse Meme**

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We are currently in a moment of radical coming to consciousness of our fragility on earth. Warnings of climate catastrophe and the irreversible degradation of our natural environment, sounded regularly since at least Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* in 1962, have reached a crescendo that most people in the developed world, apart from climate crisis deniers, take seriously. Climate anxiety and climate despair stalk activists and ordinary citizens alike. Not since the atomic era of the 1950s has the shadow of global apocalypse loomed so large in people’s imagination, except that now there is no economic golden age, no post-war boom, no presumption of progress and optimism about the future to temper the apocalyptic anxiety. We live in an age which expects its children and grandchildren to live in a far worse world than we have known. Hand in hand with this eco-pessimism is a fascination with end of the world scenarios, and more specifically, post-end-of-the-world scenarios. Like deer caught in the headlights of climate crisis knowledge, we seem paralyzed to act, yet drawn to narratives of our demise and tales of worlds, usually nightmarish, sometimes Edenic, that might follow the end of the world as we know it.

In this essay, I want to look at a specific subset of these apocalyptic narratives, namely the “apocalyptic eco-gothic.” A film and a graphic novel, both of which imagine a global holocaust engineered by trees, will exemplify my argument that ecogothic stories have evolved in recent years, away from a conventional monstrous-nature paradigm to a more ecologically-informed model of human-nonhuman entanglement. The 2008 20th Century Fox film-production by M. Night Shyamalan *The Happening* and the 2018 graphic novel *The End* by hugely popular Swiss author Philippe Chappuis, known professionally as Zep,[[1]](#endnote-1) are both explicitly environmental narratives. The first text is a hybrid tale of ecological speculation and B-movie horror, while the more recent *The End* ventures into post-apocalyptic fantasy and thereby reveals how thoroughly haunted we are by our theological history and political unconscious even when we try to imagine a new world. This essay is structured into two movements. In the first I examine the two narratives for the way they portray nature and plant intelligence with the help of various meanings of the word “haunting.” Here I explore the question of agency and ontology in relation to the notion of trees as conscious actors and/or sentient beings and argue that these recent narratives represent a significant departure from earlier ecogothic paradigms as they move towards a more science-centered ecological model, especially the most recent text. In the second part of the essay, I will consider the problem of apocalypse narratives in ecological fiction, and specifically how this meme represents another kind of haunting, that of our cultural past lingering into our present and future in subtle and sometimes invisible, but nevertheless insidious, ways. Post-apocalypse scenarios are currently haunting ecological narratives to the exclusion of almost any other imaginable plot, and are preventing us from being able to act intelligently on the knowledge emerging from science and the empirical data about the climate and pollution crises on the ground. Although apocalyptic stories of planetary disaster may have offered a useful rhetorical tool in the early days of the environmental movement, it is time to rethink their central place in this project. Not only are they no longer effective motivators for ecological transition, but they are also too often haunted by retrograde gender and race politics, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter.

**Intelligent Trees and Haunted Nature**

The common sense use of the term “haunting” refers to a place or object possessed by a spirit or ghost. The word is also often used figuratively to signify the inability to forget the past or leave it behind. In recent years, the term has been taken up and developed by scholars into a field called “hauntology,” a play on words with the term “ontology,” to signal a postmodern approach to the question of identity, persistence and being. Originally used by Jacques Derrida as a way to speak of Marx’s continuing influence into the present, hauntology has been taken up by other scholars as a way of figuring the enduring presence (and absence) of the past (cf. Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx*). Sladja Blazan explains in the introduction to this collection that the word “haunting” comes from a Middle English term “haunten,” meaning to frequent, habitually engage in or resort to. So, one of the first ways in which we can think about haunting and nature is through the environmental impact we have and will continue to have on the so-called Anthropocene. Our current practices – activities that we habitually engage in – are so toxic that they will continue to produce effects on the atmosphere and biosphere well into the next millennia. In a strictly etymological sense, *we* are going to “haunt” nature for a very long time, perhaps even after we are gone.

There is a second reason why the concept of haunting is particularly relevant for analyzing these two stories. Both loosely play off the classic trope of the “haunted woods,” seemingly alive with mysterious and usually malevolent forces. And indeed, in both, the trees are active and reactive to the presence of humans and *do* actually mean to harm them. However, both narratives interrogate and deconstruct the traditional meaning and agency involved in haunting. In traditional hauntings, natural spaces and objects such as trees and woods are possessed by the spirits of humans who have died. Thus, traditional haunting is the projection of *human* will and “energy” or spirit onto objects or beings which would otherwise remain inanimate. In the traditional view, non-haunted woods seem somewhat “dead” insofar as they are passive, quiet, seemingly “empty.” This is the modern, post-Enlightenment view of Nature that has defined it as inert matter, and consequently, as a resource to be used by humans. The two narratives I am focusing on are careful to distance themselves from this notion, insisting instead upon the *autonomous* agency and intelligence of nature. In other words, the living world of plants and animals is not empty and inert, acting meaningfully only when possessed by human spirits or ghosts, but possessing sentience and agency. As vital and intelligent beings, trees in these two stories are not so much *haunted* as ontologically – or *hauntologically –* equal to human beings. They are beings with the same ontological status as humans and operate with intelligence, discernment and force of will. Unfortunately for the humans in the story, their will is to kill most humans on the planet.

At first glance, then, both stories would seem to be straight-forward instances of ecophobia, as defined by Simon Estok in his 2009 essay, “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia,” where he argues that “representations of nature as an opponent that hurts, hinders, threatens or kills us – regardless of the philosophical value or disvalue of the ecosystemic functions being represented – are ecophobic” (209). His larger point is that fear of nature and a desire to control it have been ingrained in human attitudes towards “the natural world” since the “evolution of the opposable thumb,” that is, since earliest humanity (210). In short, he believes that it is hard-wired into our bodies and minds as a species to want to dominate nature and worry that it will dominate us. In contrast to this tendency, Estok sees eco-criticism as countering with an “ecological humility” that recognizes the irrelevance of human beings to the well-being of the planet, unlike, for instance, the importance of fungi to the biosphere. Both *The Happening* and *The End* incorporate aspects of both positions – ecogothic and ecocritical – and actually enact the move from one to the other within their narrative. Both begin by evoking the conventional ecogothic premise of a mysterious and hostile Nature as threatening Other, and then gradually invite the reader or spectator to consider the trees’ actions as reasonable and necessary from the biosphere’s point of view. Slowly but surely, both texts develop their fictional stories as an accumulation of reasons for taking trees seriously as agents.

The premise of *The Happening*, written and directed by Shyamalan, is that plants and trees are communicating with each other to release a neurotoxin that makes people kill themselves. First they stop stock-still, then they walk eerily backwards for a moment, and finally they look for the closest, and often most gruesome or spectacular way, to die, such as hurling themselves off rooftops or lying down in front of lawn-mowers. The main plot follows a young science teacher, Elliot Moore (played by Mark Wahlberg), and his wife (Zooey Deschanel), who flee Philadelphia as it becomes clear that large urban centers are being somehow targeted for what initially seem to be terrorist attacks. Along with the gradual revelation that it is plants and trees killing people, the film tacitly suggests that they are acting more in self-defense than in aggression. We hear in an early scene in Elliot’s high school classroom of the still mysterious disappearance of bees in hives across North America (what scientists call Colony Collapse Disorder), possibly caused by pesticides, and we see a steaming nuclear power plant looming over a suburban home in a later scene, making it clear that humans are affecting the natural world in toxic ways, indirectly explaining and justifying the trees’ actions.

Figure 8.1 *The Happening* shows invasive human populations and pollution, such as these nuclear reactors looming over a suburban neighborhood. Screenshot by author.



Zep’s *The End* is also quite unsettling while being even more sympathetic to the trees that kill off most of humanity in the world of the story. The story opens much like *The Happening,* with two hikers in the Spanish Pyrenees suddenly falling dead one after another, then a frame showing a whole village littered with bodies on the ground. This is not explained right away, remaining mysterious like the first part of *The Happening,* and only later do we learn that this was the trees’ test run of a deadly air-born toxin. The main story follows a young man, a former eco-militant named Théodore, who has come to work at a remote research laboratory in Sweden, where he meets a woman scientist named Moon and her boss, a paleo-botanist named Richard Frawley, based explicitly and by permission on the French botanist Francis Hallé, who is a well-known advocate of tree intelligence and communication. Frawley has discovered that trees have a “secret codex” in their DNA which they erase when humans are near. He had stumbled upon this discovery by sequencing the genome of a pre-historic leaf preserved in a glacier, a leaf from an era before trees began to deliberately conceal their codex from humans. He also found that this extra DNA sequence, which serves as an archive of the history of the planet since its beginning (predating even the existence of trees, hence a kind of planetary memory bank), indicated a change in its chemical structure 66 millions years ago. This leads Frowley to conclude that a concerted global intervention on the part of trees across the world had caused the extinction of dinosaurs. He speculated that they had stopped evolving and had become a nuisance, no longer “participating” in the “general equilibrium” of the Earth, a choice of words that clearly is meant to evoke James Lovelock’s theory of Gaia as a planetary “thermostat,” maintaining systems of life on earth in balance and “capable of self-regulation” (57-68).

Frowley and the protagonist later discover that the trees have now programmed another mass extinction, that of humans, because not only are we not participating in the earth’s equilibrium, but, as Frowley observes, we’re actually creating imbalance: “nous, nous créons le déséquilibre” (*The End* 36). The plot initially involves some diversionary suspense while Théodore pursues a suspicion that a pharmacological company nearby is dumping toxic waste in the forest but it eventually turns out that it is the forest itself creating and stocking toxic chemicals in preparation for the mass extermination of humans. When this occurs, it happens simultaneously all over the world, leaving Théodore alone to begin a lonely journey south, where it is warmer, though a quiet, peaceful post-human landscape. He eventually meets another survivor – a young girl – and discovers a village of survivors where he will make his home.

We can see from these two summaries that both films begin in a self-consciously eco-gothic mode, presenting the death of humans as a terrifying mystery, gradually revealing that plants and trees are responsible. This falls squarely in the tradition that Dawn Keetley identifies in “Introduction: Six Theses on Plant Horror: Or, Why are Plants Horrifying,” where she convincingly argues that plants (conventionally) represent an “absolute alterity” (6) in their lack of emotion and “indifference” (9). She argues that it is precisely their great difference from us, and their seeming lack of emotion, that makes their harm all the more horrific, citing *The Happening* as an instance of a horror film that relies on the presence of something “ineffable that lies outside the boundaries of known narrative structures” (23). While I fully agree with this characterization, and see it operating throughout classic plant horror films like *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), *The Ruins* (2008), or the British found footage horror film *Hollow* (2011) – which all feature plants that are both affectless and malevolent – I would argue that *The Happening* and *The End* deliberately move away from this familiar paradigm to something significantly different, more akin to the humility that Estok attributes to eco-criticism.

In fact, both authors explicitly cite a desire to dislodge humans from their belief that they occupy the top rung of some planetary hierarchy and to gesture towards a more balanced, integrated, perhaps we could even call it an “animistic” or vitalist paradigm of planetary co-existence. In both cases, there is a deliberate effort to challenge the modern view of humans as qualitatively better, and more important, than any other species. In an interview with *Newsweek*, Shyamalan says that he always felt an affinity for “the American Indian culture and their relationship to nature.” He explains that:

worshipping the sky, the earth, the rock, the bear, that relationship felt correct then as a kid and it feels correct now as an adult. It's interesting that in all of our religions so little is said about how we should feel towards nature. *It's an interesting thing to get the hierarchy back in line with the way that it is. We're just one of many living creatures on the planet*. (my emphasis; *Newsweek*)

We can note the explicit desire to modify “the hierarchy” to a more horizontal model. Similarly, Zep said in an interview with a French television station in 2018 that “it’s important for us to rethink the place of humans on the planet, and to return to our place, which is not at the center.” In other words, he continued, “we are not the masters of Earth, but one of many species on earth” (Zep, Interview).[[2]](#endnote-2) Like Shyamalan’s point about getting the hierarchy “back in line with the way that it is,” Zep cites the notion of humans as one of “many species” and express a need for them to “return” to their “place.”

Both authors use the ecogothic in order to imaginatively interrogate the idea that humans are exceptions from, or superior to, or masters of other beings on the planet. In *The Happening*, this is done mainly by undermining the difference between non-human nature and people in subtle but unmistakable ways. First, people become like plants as a result of the airborne toxin. As mentioned before, the deaths begin by rendering humans immobile (as plants seem to be) before activating them to silently and unemotionally seek out self-destruction (lack of affect being another conventional attribute of plants). Moreover, the film denies its human characters the nobility and altruism that have traditionally been used to rank humans above all other animal species on the plant. Shyamalan takes pains to show people acting selfishly and aggressively, turning upon one another, almost tacitly justifying the trees’ dispassionate disposal of them. In contrast to this, the trees work in concert with a wind that volatizes the poison (as well as with the animals and insects which fall silent during the happenings), seemingly activated by human motion, but only if there is more than a handful, hence modulating their poisoning operation according to the size of the group. It appears as if the trees communicate, assess situations intelligently, adapt their actions accordingly, and even seem to spare the protagonist and his family at the end.

In *The End,* the trees are imagined not only as intelligent beings but like planetary stewards, killing off species – in concert with the Earth (“la Terre”) itself – when they no longer contribute positively to the system. The Earth acts rationally, dispassionately, almost scientifically, having done a “test run” three months before the actual extinction event: the deaths in the Pyrenees at the beginning of the story. We learn later that these were caused by a volatile substance produced by the trees which is chemically similar to the chemical weapons used on Kurds in Syria. Hence humanity is poisoned by a compound it has already used upon itself, suggesting that the trees have a sense of poetic justice in addition to acting for the planetary common good. The fact that the trees carry out this population reduction –

or rather “adjustment” (as the French verb “régler” suggests) all over the world simultaneously, which requires planning, coordination and the externalized storage of the compound by mushrooms, also shows their great intelligence and communication abilities, as well as possibly a desire to spare humans the distress of a gradual demise. Their natural superiority is evident not only from their actions but also in the way they are drawn, such as on the cover, as larger and brighter and more detailed and complex than the human figure.

Figure 8.2 Cover of *The End*, by Zep (Philippe Chappuis). With permission by Rue de Sèvres.

A person standing next to a tree

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Unlike previous ecogothic narratives of killer plants, both texts are deeply indebted to a new and growing body of research on plant intelligence and communication that has emerged since the 1990s. Although this evidence is now quite robust and widely accepted, the idea of intelligent trees has been circulating in the media for over thirty years, suggesting an interest and even an eagerness or desire for confirmation that plants are smarter than previously believed. As a reminder, the “intelligent tree” story began as an anecdote that first appeared in 1984 when South African zoologist Wouter Van Hoven noticed a sudden spike in mortality among kudu, a large antelope, on game ranches in the Transvaal during the dry season due to a concerted rise on toxic tannin levels in acacia leaves, which the kudu normally eat without harm. Discovering that the acacia trees all produced inordinately high levels of tannin, enough to inactivate the liver enzymes of kudu, killing them within a couple of weeks, when the populations of kudu became unnaturally dense – mainly to please tourists and game hunters – and then returned to normal after the kudu stopped grazing, Van Hoven concluded that the trees were communicating with one another and temporarily stepping up tannin production in order to reduce the antelope numbers.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The persistence and increasing fascination with this one incident in South Africa suggest there is a willingness and even desire to believe that trees are intelligent. One can see this as a frustration with the loneliness and emptiness of believing that we are the only intelligent creatures on the planet and a readiness (among some people at least) to enter into a more balanced relationship with nonhuman life on the planet. Jane Bennet has recently written about “vital materialism,” which is “the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it” and the importance of our need to cultivate this faculty (*Vibrant Matter* 14). We might consider this as yet another form of being haunted: this time, by our premodern and animistic past. Perhaps seeing other living beings as important and valid, their existence as ontologically and epistemologically significant as ours, is a habit from an earlier time, a lost but familiar mode of thinking and perceiving, and one that has been reawakened as we plunder the underground tombs of the prehistoric era, stealing the fossilized bones of our collective ancestors to fuel our cars and industries.

Much research has emerged in recent years to confirm the proposition that plants and trees are far more capable, aware and active than previously thought, and the kudu story is no longer the only evidence of this phenomenon. Francis Hallé, a world expert on trees, has claimed that trees can even learn and remember. Originally a skeptic, Hallé has now become the best-known French defender of plant communication and resourcefulness, not shying away from the word “intelligence,” which remains controversial in scientific circles (Lebrecque). In the English-speaking world, the single most important and influential book in recent years was Peter Wohlleben’s *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate* (2015; originally in German), which represented a veritable paradigm shift in thinking about trees. Not only do they communicate, according to Wohlleben, often through vast underground networks of fungi and roots, but they also feel pain when cut, they make group decisions about things like acorn production, they care for their kin, they altruistically channel nutrients to ill or weak members of the community and much more. In short, trees are sophisticated and highly social organisms.

The impact of Wohlleben’s work can be felt in the difference between *The Happening* and *The End*, and in the shift from mystery to science that occurs between the first story and the second. *The Happening* is more like a traditional horror film. Shyamalan cites Hitchcock’s *The Birds* as an inspiration and specifically the fact that we never know what causes the birds to turn on people. The “happening” – as it is called in the film – remains mysterious even as it threatens to recur around the world as the film ends. Science is acknowledged but given a marginalized role in the film. Elliot, the protagonist is a high school science teacher who discusses the collapse of the bee population with his class like an entomological who-dun-it. He dismisses the theory of pollution and global warming and settles on the non-explanation of the witless jock: “an act of nature and we’ll never fully understand it.” This gesture towards the unknowable, the ineffable, the scientific sublime is what Elliot finally accepts, saying “Nice answer, Jake. He’s right. Science will come up with some reason to put in the books but, in the end, it will be just a theory. I mean we will fail to acknowledge that there are forces at work beyond our understanding. To be a good scientist you must have a respectful awe for the laws of nature.” Here we see Shyamalan’s attraction to religion as a gateway for understanding the natural world at work. The invocation of mystery and “awe” tacitly evoke a supernatural paradigm, even if Elliot is discussing science. Before Wohlleben’s influential study, it made sense to frame plant intelligence in terms of mysterious and possibly mystical forces, the unknown – literally a form of haunting. Plant intelligence certainly once seemed as no less far-fetched a notion than spirits. Now, however, it is conceivable to speak of trees communicating, learning, remembering and behaving in recognizably sentient ways without invoking mysterious forces.

Accordingly, *The End* not only focuses its plot on researchers and scientists (and not just teachers), itis extremely well versed in the recent discoveries about plants. Clearly familiar with Wohlleben’s work, Zep uses the German forester’s term the “wood wide web” in the dialogues among characters (*The End* 19). He also has the scientist based on Hallé explicitly recount the kudu-acacia story to Théodore as an example of tree communication (12). Between the two of them, Théodore and Frowley discover the truth of the secret codex and the trees’ plan for humanity. The trees themselves are portrayed like scientists, keeping data in genetic archives, testing substances in small controlled experiments and finally executing a plan, the purpose of which is not so much to harm humans out of some malevolent or aggressive urge as to maintain the health of the biosphere.

Whether leaning more towards mystery or more towards science, both texts push the ecogothic formula far into a new direction. Clearly aware of recent research developments, both stories attempt to imagine new ways of depicting the biosphere and especially trees as vital, active and conscious beings. Imagining plants as “conscious” or “active” is so alien to most of our current paradigms, in which vegetation is little more than inert biomatter, that any attempt to do so might appear uncanny and frightening. Something conceived of as inert will appear unnaturally possessed by volition and sentient if it begins to appear active, i.e. it will appear *haunted.* This is especially present in *The Happening,* where the events and the agents causing them (the plants and trees) are allowed to remain essentially strange, unknowable and Other. The only thing the film makes clear is that the “happening” is deliberate and purposeful. It is not a mere chemical reaction to human presence. The main “happening” in the plot, which takes place over roughly 24 hours, is synchronized in several cities across the Northeastern states of the U.S., and it seems to be intended as a warning. As such, it is ignored, and at the end of the film people have resumed their previous lives and the protagonists are planning to have a baby. A scientist speaking on television explains that “we have become a threat to the planet” and that more happenings will occur but the protagonists are not listening. Yet his words are corroborated in the last scene, where we see the same events happening in Paris. In this way, the film ends on an ominous note, itself performing the work of warning while suggesting that humans are not the only beings with agency and power on the planet.

**Apocalyptic Endings and Haunted Humans**

Both stories, *The Happening* and *The End,* are decidedly apocalyptic. In the former*,* this is more subtle, as we only see people dying in a specific area of the U.S. (though more such events seem to be in store for humanity at the end). In *The End*, mass death also comes first as a local event, in Spain, then only later as a global one. In common parlance, an apocalypse is a destructive cataclysm, implying the end of the world. The word etymologically comes from the Greek and signifies an unveiling or revelation, and is commonly associated with the New Testament, the Book of Revelations, which prophesies that God will destroy the corrupted world and raise up a new kingdom of the righteous. Although this narrative is central to Christianity, the idea of the end of the world followed by a new beginning actually dates back to the teachings of Zarathustra and occurs also in Sanskrit scriptures depicting cycles of global destruction followed by renewal (Cohn, 77-104). But the teleological model which imagines a single timeline with a catastrophe followed by an earthly paradise is uniquely Christian and has permeated Western culture for centuries.

Apocalyptic thinking has been particularly popular in American culture, with the nineteenth century seeing a surge in apocalyptic movements and discourse, a phenomenon which was both religious and scientific (influenced, for instance, by the discovery of deep time). The first apocalyptic novels in English appeared at this time, including Mary Shelly’s *The Last Man* (1826), which imagined the population of the world killed by a pandemic. In the twentieth century, both world wars had their apocalyptic dimensions and certainly the invention of the atomic bomb awakened anxious fantasies of mass destruction (as well as the hope of survival for a lucky few). Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), which can be regarded as having launched the environmental movement, portrayed an apocalyptic landscape silenced by pesticide which has killed off all the insects and birds.

Since then, apocalypse has been a key trope in the rhetoric and discourse of ecologists trying to bring attention to the destruction of the natural world. As Lawrence Buell puts it “Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal” (285). He wrote those words in 1995, and since then the apocalypse trope has been the subject of intense debate. Many scholars have come to doubt its efficacy, and even to wonder if it may be “counter-productive” as a rhetorical strategy for the environmental movement (Adams189). While tales of disaster and death may have initially grabbed attention and spurred discussion, the long-term effects of apocalyptic rhetoric seem to include psychic numbing, banalization and a feeling of helplessness. These are all impediments to climate action, as discussed by Scott Slovic in *Numbers and Nerves*, his examination of the psychological obstacles to taking global warming seriously*.* In short, as Doug Henwood writes in his introduction to *Catastrophism,* appeals to catastrophe and apocalyptic doom “can be paralyzing, not mobilizing” (Henwood x).

Bruno Latour has a more subtle but equally devastating critique of apocalyptic thinking, also blaming it for our collective failure to act on climate change. His critique is less about apocalyptic *rhetoric* and more about the way the Christian apocalypse meme permeates modern culture more generally. To ruthlessly simplify his complex and multi-pronged argument, Latour observes that being “modern” is experientially lived by Westerners as a condition of living in a post-apocalyptic era. The pre-modern is the world that has been destroyed and so, according to Latour, so-called modern people feel they are *already* living in the post-apocalyptic kingdom of the righteous. He links this up to the modern assumption that humans are not part of the natural world around them but qualitatively different from and superior to all the life and matter that surrounds them. In this supposedly “modern” view, people see themselves as fundamentally separate from Nature.

Latour’s argument in *Facing Gaia* links apocalyptic thinking to the destructive modern worldview in which Nature is treated with contempt and/or as a limitless resource to extract, and concludes that it makes people utterly unable to take the earth seriously as something vital, alive and important. As an alternative to this paradigm, he hails the work of James Lovelock on Gaia but flags the error of taking Gaia as super-organism or divine being, a version of Mother Nature, as some of Lovelock’s readers have done (Latour280). The problem that this mistake produces is that it makes humans into either rebellious children that need to be punished, or good children, or respectful gardeners. In none of these roles can we respond appropriately and maturely, recognizing that we and the earth are fundamentally the same: “both parties share the same fragility, the same cruelty, the same uncertainty about their fate” (Latour 281). Neither apocalyptic scenarios nor “Mother Nature” as concepts allow for the serious work of rethinking our society – both politically and scientifically – and for changing our economy and culture to stop the destruction that has already started.

Although Latour is critical about the paralyzing role apocalypse has had in our overall relation to the world and in our modern “cosmology,” he is not opposed to apocalyptic *rhetoric* in ecological discourse. He believes that seeing Gaia as a threat may be an effective way to “make us conscious, tragically conscious of the New Climate Regime,” by which he means the current state of danger in which we find ourselves (Latour244). Unfortunately, I believe, Latour underestimates the power of corporate media to transform everything into spectacle and entertainment, draining it of any significant critical impact. The Hollywood blockbuster film *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) exemplifies how the trope of the ecological apocalypse is used and misused as a warning strategy. The film imagines the earth reaching a tipping point from global warming and its planetary thermostat being thrown off kilter, triggering several massive superstorms in the northern hemisphere which kill millions with subfreezing temperatures. Although the premise is hyperbolic, it is nevertheless plausible enough to be effective as an ecological cautionary tale; and it was initially credited with significantly raising public awareness (Reusswig and Leiserowitz 43). Nevertheless, the film squanders this opportunity by focusing almost entirely on rescuing not the earth, but the masculinity of its two white male protagonists, a father and a son. The plot devolves into the father heroically saving his son who is trapped in New York, while the son heroically saves a handful of people. The end of the film shows the family reunited, the separated mother and father probably reconciled, the U.S. military helping to rescue survivors, the chastened remainder of the political class ready to rebuild, and astronauts in space marveling at how clear the sky on earth looks. In other words, the slate has been wiped clean, the earth’s population drastically reduced, and the white nuclear family, the U.S. government, and its military, are ready to start over on a beautifully purified planet. This may not be what the producers had in mind, but the fact that the film concludes with what seems like a happy ending is jarring and profoundly trivializing, considering the tragic loss of life that has occurred in the film. The logic here is also that of a radical culling of the human population rather than a significant change in our behavior and culture.

Figure 8.3 *The Day After Tomorrow* ends with a clear new day, as the US military rescues survivors, and the protagonists are reunited for a post-apocalyptic “happy ending.” Screenshot by author.



The endings of *The Happening* and *The End* are also problematic, and, as I have been arguing, haunted by an inability to let go of old habits of thought, old racial and gender assumptions while portraying mass death as inevitable. *The Happening* is more self-aware and explicitly critical of the post-apocalypse renewal fantasy, but also utterly pessimistic and unable to imagine any alternative future or change. In the final scenes, everything seems back to normal, even better than before (slyly alluding to the promise of a post-apocalyptic paradise so common to the trope). The hero has saved his family and his marriage, and he’s about to be the father of two children. Yet, the very last scene suggests that more death is in store, as “the happening” begins again, this time in France. The final shot is of the darkening sky, and the credits roll over an accelerated image of a storm cloud roiling agitatedly. The threat is both clear and ambiguous. Clearly, humans are toxic and “nature” is acting to remove them, but there is no clue about how humans could stop being a threat in order to avoid being exterminated.[[4]](#endnote-4)

*The End* also has a white male hero, and he is the only survivor of the initial cast of characters, but the ending is troubling in an entirely different way. It is troubling because it is made so attractive. Unlike the gruesome suicides of *The Happening,* the deaths in *The End* are quick, painless and simultaneous all over the planet. As soon as Théodore realizes that everyone around him is dead, he goes into an internet café and sees webcams from around the world, showing capitals littered with bodies, a conceit that has become popular in recent years.[[5]](#endnote-5) Then the electricity fails and he is in the dark, represented by two pages of black with only a couple thought bubbles. Several more pages are devoted to his journey southward, to warmth, through ruined cities and landscapes where animals roam free in a kind of post-apocalyptic pastoral. Moving south through Germany and Switzerland to Italy, the protagonist arrives in a village of people who have survived and converged there from all over Europe. Théodore concludes that the Earth has given them “a second chance, to start over, humbly” (89).[[6]](#endnote-6) The final scenes are unmistakably Edenic. Like Théodore, all the survivors seem serene, stoic and even grateful for this second chance.

The first problem with this scenario is the characters’ sanguine acceptance of a global holocaust, which is part of a larger tendency in contemporary culture to feel resigned to or even welcome an apocalyptic scenario as a chance to start over. I can only imagine that most people instinctively hope or assume that they would be among the handful of survivors and not among the mass of people to die. Perhaps it is a preference for the simple drama of destruction and rebirth over the hard and tedious work of gradual political, economic and cultural change. Whatever the reason, the apocalypse trope is too often not recognized for the horror that it is. The dream of wiping the slate clean, of purification by fire or flood, is a dangerous fantasy, and environmentalists should not succumb to its murderous seductions. The death of millions of people is a nightmare scenario to be avoided at all costs, not the easy answer to environmental crisis.

Secondly, the scenarios depicted in both stories dot not equalize the relationship between humans and trees so much as reverse it. Perhaps human beings have used and abused their own power so ruthlessly that we fear that we will be treated as we have treated the natural world and destroyed on a mass scale. In any case, the final move of both of these texts is not to restore a balance but to swing the pendulum far the other way: instead of masters of the planet, we are the victims of a global holocaust. The earth is shown to be like an all-powerful parent or god, to which only an attitude of trusting and passive reverence is appropriate. Neither narrative imagines any kind of co-existence or evolution in our current behavior and culture. This seems to be the one unimaginable scenario: that we change our ways.

One final way in which we are haunted by our cultural past involves the gender and racial unconscious of these fantasies of post-apocalyptic renewal. I have already discussed the conservative gender dynamics of *The Happening*, with the white nuclear family strengthened by their ordeal. Admittedly they adopt a Latinx child, but a white baby is also on the way. The gender politics of *The End* are even more troubling. The new Eden seems to have the old gender roles: the persons setting the table and caring for children are mainly women, the children playing soccer are all boys. The main protagonist arrives with a partner, she is a child. Far from being an innocent character choice, children are often preferred over adult women by the survivalist imagination. Adult females being rarely of any interest except as mothers and homemakers, girl children often stand in their place as more desirable partners: they are presented as more pliable and non-threatening than adult women. The alternative partner, the young scientist Moon, was corrupted by sexual unreliability and prior possession by another man, both of which are qualities that traditionally make women and their sexuality threatening to men. In contrast, Ute is pure, untouched, a child but on the threshold of puberty. Théodore does not adopt her as a father but as a friend, so it is easy to imagine this relationship eventually becoming romantic.

Even more disturbing is *The End’s* racial unconscious*.* At a moment when the far right is gaining momentum across the globe and white nationalists have rigged the internet to lure young men into their fold, Zep’s ending looks like an alt-right fantasy. The main character is Swedish, his probable future mate (Ute) is German, and the rest of humanity that has survived (with the exception of one token French-speaking Black man) is entirely white. There is no indication that anyone on any other continent was spared. The survivalist fantasy of *The End* seems to be northern European people living in a southern European climate and culture. In a charitable reading, one could hope that Zep imagined more such villages scattered across the globe, but the narrative does not explicitly allude to any (or require any for its vision of Eden to be more complete). The very last scene has Théodore and Ute hiking in a nearby forest, the village in the background. Despite knowing better than anyone how the world’s human population was exterminated by trees, Théodore seems to affectionately pat a tree as he walks past it. The scene mirrors the opening panels where the two hikers in the Spanish Pyrenees are killed along with a nearby village. The village at the end seems to replace this earlier sacrifice zone, as the two Northern Europeans replace the two Spanish characters. If the explicit message of the narrative is to decenter humans and give trees and other living beings more importance, the subtext of the narrative keeps white men and white children firmly at the center while relegating everyone else to the margins or even off the map entirely.[[7]](#endnote-7)

To conclude, as much as we are going to be haunting nature far into the future with our present practices, we are ourselves haunted far more than we realize by tenacious habits and tropes from our cultural past. Specifically, we are under the spell of the Biblical, Zoroastrian, or even arguably fascist, fantasy of purification and regeneration by mass destruction. We seem to be in thrall to the narrative of paradise following upon apocalypse, waiting for our rightful punishment or for some population fix engineered by the planet. It is much harder to imagine actually changing things. As Greg Garrard points out in his volume *Ecocriticism*: “it could be argued that the real moral and political challenge of ecology may lie in accepting that the world is not about to end, that human beings are likely to survive even if Western-style civilisation does not” (107). A first step in this direction would be rethinking our relationship to other living beings on this planet. Traditionally, when animals and plants have been attributed intelligence and agency, they have been assumed to be malevolent, cunning and vengeful. The two stories that I have examined in this essay teeter on the edge between this familiar ecogothic paradigm and an emergent vision of a more balanced cohabitation. For now, our imagination tends to overcompensate and to swing to the other end of the spectrum, where we are the species dispassionately managed and destroyed. This is perhaps our guilty conscience haunting us. Nevertheless, both texts represent valuable attempts to reimagine our relationship to the living world around us, especially to the plants and trees that research is discovering are much more intelligent and active than we have been taught to believe. Maybe they can teach us how to act more intelligently ourselves.

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1. Zep is the creator of the most popular French-language comic book franchise in the world, “Titeuf.” The “Titeuf” franchise includes 15 albums, has been translated into 23 languages, and has sold over 20 million copies. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. My translation of “reprendre notre place, qui n’est pas la place centrale […] l’homme n’est pas maître de la terre … on est une des espèces présentes sur terre.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. One thing that often gets left out of the story is that the kudu would probably have avoided the acerbic tasting high-tannin leaves if they could, but couldn’t avoid them because of drought, over-population, fencing and lack of other food. Hence one could argue that the trees did not necessarily *intend to kill* the kudu, just not be eaten so much. Nevertheless, even this reactivity to environmental circumstances is already clearly a sign of something that can easily be called “intelligence,” insofar as it involves manipulating conditions outside and around the organism. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In this reading of the ending, I disagree sharply with Joseph J. Foy’s optimistic argument that the film allows us “to draw conclusions about how to transform modern modes of living” (*It Came From Planet Earth* 181). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *28 Days Later*, *World War Z* and many other films come to mind. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. My translation of “tout était à recommencer … humblement.” [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The racial unconscious of ecogothic stories has been examined by several other scholars, including Sladja Blazan, Dawn Keetley, and Johan Höglund in this volume. See, also, Mabel Gergan, Sara Smith and Pavithra Vasudevan’s “Earth beyond repair: race and apocalypse in collective imagination.” [↑](#endnote-ref-7)