

## **Introduction: Hope in the Wasteland**

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The future is a wasteland. At least, we can characterise it in those terms – it shares much in common with the figurative wastelands of our imaginations. It is vast, open ended, beyond the scope of imagination. It is also under-utilised, not yet put to productive use – at least for many. For writers of science fiction, ecocriticism, petro-fiction, vi-fi (virus fiction - seeing an ‘exponential rise’ since COVID (Harrison & Wynne, 2024)) and innumerable other genres, subgenres and modes, the future is being put to a very specific use: it acts as a warning, an indication of where society’s current path is heading. It is *rarely* anywhere good.

Like all waste, the future has two paths in front of it. It can be *recycled* – put to productive use, have the best made from it – turned into something society would welcome. Or it can sit and decompose. It’s a binary, a confrontation, that is played out frequently in post-apocalyptic film and fiction; the protagonists (not necessarily a hero, we don’t need another one of those) strive to rebuild or create a new society, beleaguered by nouveau-barbarians or tyrants. It is the act of reclamation found in classics like *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* (1981), *The Day of the Triffids* (1963) and *28 Days Later* (2002). Down one path lies the rebuilding of some form of society, recycling, and if the protagonists should lose? All becomes landfill. Within this special issue one of our aims was to align discussions of ‘waste’ with that of ‘wastelands’ – to characterise apocalyptic landscapes with the same possibilities as we would household waste. As difficult as it is to imagine that something which has not yet come to pass can already be past its best before date, the apocalyptic wasteland represents just such a scenario, and thus is a nightmare twice over. Not only does the dystopian setting of the apocalypse centre peril and privation which threaten the day-to-day survival of the characters who inhabit it, so too does the poisoned entropy of the wasteland threaten any hope for a better tomorrow. Then we must also reckon with the non-human ecosystems whose collective suffering is generally subsumed under

the broader struggles of humans in a non-productive time and place. It is a future void of other futures, one in which the putrefying logic of waste seems inescapable.

Grappling with our figurative waste can be highly useful. It is perhaps unsurprising that we find it useful to imagine waste, and anticipate the apocalypse at a moment when the world is beset by numerous overlapping crises – climate change, pandemic, political instability. These dire predictions for the future are practically an industry themselves, as we crave fully-fleshed (or should that be fully-decayed?) accounts of where all this wastage might be leading us. Whether we do this to arm ourselves against the future with forewarning or comfort ourselves that the present is not as bad as it could be is a question of attitude, of whether we are hopeful of our collective ability to change before the apocalypse arrives.

One of the challenges of waste is its ability to efface itself, aided along by our own conditioned responses to turn away from it. It is only when waste threatens to become overwhelming that we are compelled to acknowledge its presence, and in such quantities – whether teetering mounds of organic garbage or electronic waste in landfills, floating across the Pacific, or registering as a measure of mercury in our blood – waste takes on a menacing quality. The very otherness and abjection that causes us to look away in small quantities terrifies as a collective mass for the threat it poses to the future. Just like any supernatural threat, waste creates a monster that our instincts often want us to simply run away from. One goal of this special issue is to curtail that impulse to look away, and to do so our authors utilize the body of literature, film, political messaging and more that looks towards the future and sees only waste. Just as the authors, filmmakers and more under consideration here sought to make use of waste and wastelands, of apocalypse and dystopia, to provide caution and entertainment in varying fractions, so too do we hope to make productive use of the mass of (mostly, but not all, still imaginary) examples that they provide, to find the patterns, the prejudices, the insights, and the cautions that come from contemplating our own waste and the futures in which it has come to dominate us.

## **Waste as Revenant**

Nightmares come in many forms, from the supernatural to those borne directly out of reality. Nightmarish waste, and wastelands, contain a little of both. Waste promises an ecological horror

as real and pressing as any other when looked at literally, but figuratively possesses an even greater power to scare. Ecological horrors are common within Gothic and horror fiction, even before the rise of eco-Gothic. It is well established that ‘landscape plays a central role in the [Gothic] genre’ (Yang & Healey, 2016: 5). The earliest Gothic landscapes are themselves wastes; medieval and pre-medieval ruins characterise early Gothic novels as do structures ‘weak with age and dissolution’ (Yang & Healey, 2016: 6). The Gothic mode, and Romantic writers generally, recognised the liminal, evocative power of these spaces, and the impact they had upon the imagination. They are themselves waste; locations that are not able to fulfil their original purpose. As Townshend notes, Gothic ruins become objects of beauty only once they have ‘been purged of the Catholic history it once contained’ (2014: 379). Writing on haunted landscapes, Heholt notes they come in ‘diverse’ forms: from ‘haunted houses to wilderness spaces’ as spaces that ‘heed the echoes left by the terrible traumas of the past’ (Heholt, 2016: 14-15). Most importantly, particularly in the context of this issue, waste is also a revenant. We discard it, we cast it out, we try to erase it from our consciousness; but in one way or another it frequently returns. This, too, is a similarity with Gothic landscapes, which Yang & Healey call ‘a lens by which cultures reflect back their darkness hidden from the light of consciousness’ (Yang & Healey, 2016: 5). Whether it is as a floating mass in an ocean, a reeking mound of a landfill or a ‘fatberg’ causing havoc in a sewer, waste returns like a sin visiting upon the future generations. Even when it is not causing disruption, recycling and upcycling are forms of resurrection, necromancy: it brings objects back from the dead.

Beyond the initial prompt, what this issue meant by *Apocalyptic Waste* was left deliberately open-ended so that contributors would provide their own interpretation of what these terms meant and how they related to another. As a result, the diversity and insight of the essays that make up this special issue demonstrate the expansive scope of texts, influences and paradigms that engage with the interrelated ideas of waste and apocalypse. This collection demonstrates the inherent feedback loop between these two notions, as the detritus of yesterday threatens to become the master of tomorrow, a gateway through which both past and future observe one another with a mutual suspicion of contamination and dystopianism. Expansive, too, are the types of waste covered by our contributors. Waste is physical, organizational, and linguistic. It is both matter and ideology. It is both inherently human and radically Other.

Modern-day waste contains within itself the potential for the apocalyptic, as detailed in the work of Goad, Fryers, and Perczel: it threatens to infiltrate our bodies and our ecosystems, to leave us unanchored by erasing our past and poisoning the future, or simply overwhelm us by its paradoxical simultaneity of persistence in decay. The tipping point wherein waste becomes apocalyptic, or in which the apocalypse turns much of modernity to waste, comes to light in the work of Cochran and Lombard, as well as in this issue's creative pieces by Steen, Davey and Garcia Vaca. Waste acts as both cause and indicator of a catastrophic mode of being, as Skiveren and Asselin examine physical manifestations of waste in cinema and fiction respectively, while asking whether this superabundance of waste desensitizes us to its presence, or whether the human definition of waste is even applicable in a radically transformed world.

A further set of authors also deal with the presence of waste in the apocalypse but expand that conception of waste beyond the physical to investigate the persistence of ideological forms which are often long past their utility. Morrison and Morris examine the way language and its representations extend into apocalyptic time and hobble attempts to adapt to a wasted world. For Wales and Lee and Wiggins, it is organizational structures, governmental and otherwise, which become akin to waste by enduring into the apocalypse long after the benefits such structures were meant to provide have vanished, swept away by calamity. Finally, returning to the question of how we recognize a wasteland, Cox-Strong shows how even utopia can be read as apocalyptic if it entails the wastage of time, of potential – and most of all, of hope.

Perhaps the most surprising emergent aspect of the manifold discussions of waste and apocalypse in this issue is a sense that the end is not necessarily the end – or at least, that there are benefits to be found in wastage, as confronting it forces a radical re-evaluation of our priorities. While many apocalyptic scenarios are inherently regressive, imagining repressive social structures and placing humanity in conflict with the natural world, the fatalism that comes from always looking at the future through the gritty lenses of our failing struggles against pollution and war may itself be regressive. If we become habituated to hopelessness, it becomes all the easier to herd us towards the apocalypse we are already trained to expect. Without minimizing the loss of life and knowledge that any of catastrophic scenarios imagined in the texts under consideration entail, a number of our contributors have found cause for hope in the idea of getting back to basics, and in the possibility of discarding some of the practices, structures, and beliefs that led to the wastage that ultimately caused their respective apocalypses.

Even amidst the waste, some of these characters find the hope to (re)build – and to do so in a more honest fashion.

There is a central irony in the definition of the wasteland as a place of absence – of life, of resources, of civilization, etc. From another point of view, the wasteland is a place of superabundance, but a superabundance of the non-productive: trash, toxicity, and the impassive remnants of the past. The characters who find hope in the wasteland have learned to live with less and find creative uses for what seems to the reader and viewer as mere detritus. For a civilization producing by the tonne the very waste we fear will overwhelm us, it is incumbent upon ourselves to learn to live with less as well – to produce less (and thus waste less), and through reuse and recycling to make productive what is not currently designated as such, rather than making more (and in so doing make more waste). We should choose to do this, in hope, before the apocalyptic potential contained within waste forces us to do so bereft of hope for tomorrow.

### **Trash Talk: Summary of Contents**

Jill Goad looks at the apocalyptic potential of waste in fiction of the American South, particularly as connected to the element of water, in the fiction of Ron Rash and the poetry of Natasha Trethewey. Water is key to life but has become implicated in politics, capitalism, class, and crime in ways that often obviates its ecological necessity and leaves water open to contestations over who may profit from the use of water – and, by the same token, who is cut off from the life-giving properties of water. Attempts to stamp property and progress onto a fluid body leaves water open to wastage through pollution or overuse. In these narratives, water becomes apocalyptic both in its potential to destroy and erase the past, via flooding, but also in its ability to reveal that past when it retreats and exposes what characters had sought to conceal.

Mark Fryers' examination of the British television series and film *Doomwatch*, an early eco-thriller which draws on the repertoire of the horror genre in its representations of waste, showcases the challenges involved when contamination from waste is concealed and what is then required to detect it once more. Here, waste is a creeping threat that infiltrates bodies and renders them Other through depictions of contaminated humans as monstrous, even as the corporate and governmental structures that unleash multiple, local catastrophes demonstrate the callous disdain

towards its victims and the broader environment that speaks to current ecological anxieties over global climate change. Fryers finds that the series offers a graphic warning of such behaviour, even as it conditions viewers to view the contaminated environment with fear.

The choices made in representations of waste, both fictional and otherwise, are the goal of Julia Perczel's ethnographically-inspired examination of electronic waste and its apocalyptic implications. Perczel finds a mutually constituting relationship between the literature of apocalypse that relies on ecological degradation and the presence of waste within environments and bodies, using Chen Qiufan as an example, and the advocacy that surrounds modern-day dumping and sorting sites for electronic waste in the Global South. As with the use of horror, attempts to use science-fiction as a narrative framework to deal with current waste crises has the capacity to both galvanize public and governmental actors through fear of the ecological apocalypse, but also hamper those self-same efforts by layering fiction over a practical reality of electronic waste that does not neatly ape the plots and settings of fiction. Fear proves a potent weapon to raise awareness, but its consequences are unpredictable, and may reinforce the structures that led to waste rather than rescuing the victims of waste.

Waste as a gateway into apocalypse is at the centre of James Cochran's examination of Jennifer Eagan's a collection of short stories *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. The insistent presence of waste as a result of a calamity like 9/11 translates into a global environmental catastrophe that demands a reckoning with waste both as a substance and as a cultural habit. Cochran argues that the compulsive rejection of waste, the refusal to acknowledge its presence stemming from a conditioned hygienic response, guarantees the successful onslaught of neglected waste. It is characters who embrace the wasteland that already exists – expressed by their embrace of punk rock culture and its delight in everything dirty – who show the necessary adaptation to a world that is wasting away. The repurposing of waste – both as material, and characters who have been dismissed as wasting their lives – challenges the definition of waste, but also the notion that a life free of waste is possible or even desirable.

David Lombard also explores the manifold responses to waste – whether rejection, embrace, or a transition from one to the other – in Maureen F. McHugh's collection *After the Apocalypse*. Lombard looks at the way aesthetics and sensoria, especially taste and smell, are deployed to mediate the characters' relationship to trash and discarded objects and/or people under a variety of apocalyptic scenarios, often serving as a means to designate what is wasted,

and therefore dangerous, but also as a potential bridge to reconciliation with waste. Indeed, the onrushing Anthropocene and its many crises threatening apocalypse require a new relationship towards waste, one that does not automatically treat waste as an intrusion or contamination of a world that would be otherwise pristine. Lombard uses theories of the sublime to find that the alterations brought about by the presence of waste and the apocalypse must be matched by a concomitant alteration in our aesthetic and affective responses to our environments, or else leave us maladapted to the world we live in.

Waste can be both cause and indicator of calamities that ruin civilizations. Nicolai Skiveren takes the presence of waste as a mark of the apocalyptic, examining the multiple forms such waste adopts – whether as mounds of trash, unwanted humans, or even entities that are in the process of becoming waste themselves – in dystopian cinema. Skiveren provides a useful scheme by which to evaluate what is both a recurrent visual motif and long-running theme of the apocalyptic imaginary. Waste fulfils an epistemic role in communicating dystopia by its very promiscuity in apocalyptic landscapes, just as it signals deviation and contamination when juxtaposing humans and monsters (and of course humans turning into monsters) with the wasted environments they are forced to inhabit. In so doing, waste becomes a mark of the Otherness critical to the genre, signalling not only the movement into dystopia, but also the designation of characters as Others – to be treated as threats, or through alienation brought back to humanity, by characters and viewers.

To assess who gets to designate an environment as a wasteland in the first place (and why), Steve Asselin examines two narratives by Wells and Hodgson set at the supposed end of the world, far into Deep Time, where the workings of geology and astrology have brought about a slow apocalypse. The narrators of these texts, one a time traveller and the other a representative of a branch of humanity unaffected by millions of years of evolution, find these environments utterly inimical to human life and designate them as wastelands. Yet at the same time, these unreliable narrators describe the oft-predatory ecosystems they encounter there, putting lie to the idea of the wasteland as barren and without a future. Instead, the wasteland is described as an environment that fails to offer any utility for humans specifically, and is thus anthropocentrically recast as waste physically, morally, and aesthetically. The authors allow us to see beyond the biases of the narrators, and as such the apocalypse is also a moment in which to think beyond ourselves and consider that even supposed wastelands have inherent ecological value.

The atrocities of the past and the apocalyptic threat of the future unite in Susan Morrison's examination of pilgrimage motifs in two novels by W. G. Sebald and Cormac McCarthy. In one landscape the treatment of human beings as waste is a historical haunting interrupting the promise of modernity. In the other it is that very modernity which haunts a narrator whose recollection of a now wasted civilization persists into the apocalyptic present, dredging up a linguistic and imagistic catalogue that is mere waste to a child who has no memory of the world before it was consumed by calamity. In both cases, the past is a revenant that clings to the characters as they go on their pseudo-pilgrimages in the hopes of either outrunning these ghosts or putting them to rest through a sacralised practice that is, itself, an archaic vestige. Morrison, like the subsequent contributors, challenges the normative idea of waste is by expanding it beyond the material and into the ideological, looking at the ways that modes of thinking not only lead to waste but are themselves detritus, especially once the apocalypse has come.

The language of the past is likewise out of place in the two postapocalyptic narratives examined by Catherine Morris. Examining the use of grapholects, the way the language of the future is written in the text itself, Morris finds that H. G. Wells and Russell Hoban purposefully render language as unhomey to reinforce the alienation of the reader from the future wastelands encountered in these narratives. Modern language becomes just another form of refuse persisting into the future, often with little understanding on the part of characters who need to rework linguistic artefacts to match their apocalyptic present. Language becomes a tool of control in environments where class-based divisions are reinforced by the designation of certain language as waste, as opposed to the useful language of the elite. But Morris, like several of our contributors, finds a potential for renewal in the apocalypse – in this case, discarding prejudices surrounding language and embracing the fragmentation of civilization as opening a revolutionary moment to reframe class and control.

For Mason Wales, it is state apparatuses that persist in decayed forms into the apocalypse. Recovering the neglected concept of *putropia* – a society in decay – articulated by Raymond Williams, Wales examines three films that together provide a sequence through which governance, under pressure from apocalyptic events, is susceptible to rot and eventually becomes as toxic and persistent as any physical pollutants. An organic conception of the state as a body – one that is capable of failure, death, and decomposition – provides a metaphor that conceives of



the state as a temporary being, one that may well reach bodily and ideologically senescence, and can indeed be killed by catastrophe or revolution. Here, repressive politics are conceived as the waste of failed political bodies, which continue to produce wastage in turn as the broader structures the state represents are cannibalized by survivors looking to replicate the power structures of the world prior to the apocalypse.

Ann-Gee Lee and Bradley Wiggins show that the past and its structures are likewise obstacles for the characters of *The Walking Dead*, struggling to survive in a zombie-ridden wasteland. While the remains of the past may threaten characters in the form of wasting-away yet animate and predatory corpses, Lee and Wiggins draw on sociological notions of structure and argue that the real threat lies in the tendency of survivors to cling to societal modes of organization that are just as surely deceased as the titular zombies. This maladaptive nostalgia frustrates attempts to build societies better suited to their environments, through a refusal to productively engage with the wasteland and impose onto it a version of the past. Despite the dystopianism of the setting, surviving in the wasteland showcases critical problems with the prior civilization and the way it wasted both resources and the untapped potential of its people. In this way, the wasteland may actually offer hope, as adaptation proves possible and new structures are implemented by the survivors.

That hope for the future is key for Jerome Cox-Strong, who finds that the absence of hope in a population can blur the line between utopia and the wasteland even amidst material prosperity. By breaking down the colonialist analogue in Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End* and comparing it to a similar scenario in Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem*, Cox-Strong argues that its description of a human civilization, which appears to have achieved utopia under the dominance of seemingly benevolent alien overlords, is already apocalyptic in its mode of thinking even before those same aliens wipe out humanity once their own goals are accomplished. Cox-Strong argues that the lack of futurity represented by a humanity no longer concerned with tomorrow because their immediate present provides all, and the audience's knowledge of the impending apocalypse, creates a lack of futurity, knowing and otherwise, and so this apparent utopia becomes more akin to the apocalyptic wasteland whose inhabitants see no hope for a better future. In this scenario, it is time and potential which is wasted, as a civilization that does not strive to better itself is one that merely awaits the apocalypse.

The creative contributions to the special issue all mark, in their way, the transition from present-day waste to ecological if not apocalyptic worlds. Rebecca Davey's short story "Ashes of a Glasshouse" presents the compromises of private grief in a world of strained resources, where waste has become so pervasive that conversely nothing can be allowed to go to waste – including the dead. Garcia Vaca's triptych of poems represent, in form and content, the fragmentation of an apocalypse derived from ecological degradation, and the worthwhile though perhaps impossible task of reconstitution – of finding our way out of the pit we have dug for ourselves and filled with our waste, even if the only solution is a rebirth that leaves little in common with what preceded it. The apocalyptic potential of the sprawling mounds of waste found in dumping sites is also evoked in Olivia Steen's mixed-media piece "The Impossible Heap," as human figures (whose visible skeletons already place them on the barrier between living and dead) seek to climb to the top of a dark mound even as they disappear into it. They may be seeking to escape the waste, climbing over the heap, but cannot escape becoming part of the heap themselves; becoming another item of waste.

### **Conclusion: Beyond the Thunderdome**

In drawing these different, initially distinct strands together, this issue shows the significance of wastes and wastelands on the popular imagination; the combination of grim fascination and oblique possibilities. Like any ghost, the ruins and waste of the past haunt the present, offering grim warning. These articles, and the fictions they engage with, say so much about not just the future we want to build, but how we want to see ourselves as a species – as a people that can change, can preserve as well as destroy. It is not by chance we named this introduction 'Hope in the Wasteland' – it embodies some of our hopes for this volume, and the future work it will encourage. An interdisciplinary approach to understanding waste, both physically and in the popular imagination, is vital to appreciating that the supernatural and the pragmatic are rarely as at odds as we might presume.

Gothic and horror are genres which are, understandably, closely associated with the supernatural. The revenants that come to mind to most readers are the most exciting ones; vampires, ghosts, zombies. Sometimes a mummy might sneak in. Where is zombie fiction without the world being destroyed and remade? How often do we encounter a vampire who is

not a dusty relic looking to upcycle himself? Examples of texts that walk this line include Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978) or Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), to say nothing of Matheson's even more supernatural *I Am Legend* (1954). These are forces that are not in direction competition; they are not locked within the Thunderdome. There is no presumption that only one will leave intact. The one thing discussing waste does have in common with the Thunderdome? *There aren't any rules*. We hope, too, that this issue will lead to wider, further discussion across the bounds of subjects and disciplines.

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