

Apocalypse now. Time, Historicity and Worlds After

Conveners:

Pablo Blitstein, Alessandro Stanziani (EHESS Paris)

Barbara Mittler (CATS Heidelberg)

While periodization—the partition of time into segments with a specific beginning and end—is integral to historical method, it cannot be dissociated from a wider reflection on a key issue: the relation between *emic* time (time as perceived by historical actors) and *etic* time (time as



established by the scholar's historical narrative). The relation between *emic* and *etic* times is an essential methodological question within human, social, and even natural sciences. In this seminar, we will come back to this question through a particular lens: the "end of times" or "apocalypses." How do historical actors perceive it? What happens to historiographical narratives when actors talk about the future, as the "end" of time? How has such a vision of the future shaped narratives and periodization schemes? By focusing on "ends of times" and "apocalypse," we intend to discuss the tensions between time, temporalities and time horizons, both methodologically and empirically, in specific contexts. This year, we will examine these questions in three main areas: 1. political history—the history of revolutions; 2. religious history—the history of last judgements and

revelations; and 3. natural history—the history of pandemics, cataclysms and disasters.

The first block (Political History) will discuss the link between revolution and the end of time, starting with revolutions at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including the Russian and Chinese revolutions.

The second block (Religious History) will consider perceptions of the end of time within some of the main religions, considering different takes on apocalyptic revelations, universal floods, millenarianisms and messianic movements.

Finally, the third block (Natural History) will discuss natural disasters and epidemics, and will feature the controversies over geological eras (such as the Anthropocene) and collapsology

Venue

Centre for Asian and Transcultural Studies (CATS)

010.01.05 (CATS Auditorium) Voßstraße

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69115 Heidelberg

24.10.2024 | 14:30 – 16:30

Political eschatologies in late 19th- early 20th century China

Pablo Blitstein

In this session, I will explore a key aspect of late 19th and early 20th century Chinese political thought: the relation between political projects and the capacity to plan and even foresee the future. How did the perceptions of the future shape political projects and how did they connect to a larger history of time representations in Chinese intellectual history? Focusing on some political projects and ideals, I will attempt to show how ancient ideas about salvation merged with contemporary efforts at social and political planning.

31.10.2024 | 14:30 – 16:30

Revolution and the End of Time – Russian Perspectives

Alessandro Stanziani

The conviction that a transmutation of the worldview inexorably leads to the metamorphosis of the socio-political reality lies at the foundation of the philosophical Renaissance, such as formulated by Pico della Mirandola in his *De hominis dignitate* and *Conclusiones* (1486). This world-shattering project, reuniting mystical theology, Platonism, Kabbalah, Hermeticism and Messianism, nurtures a profusion of ethical-political treatises ('utopias') and urges for creative strategies of dissemination. The Rosicrucian Fraternity and its subsequent Freemasonic adaptations epitomise the most original among these strategies, and will serve as a case study for manner in which apocalyptic and mystical elements become a revolutionary driving force.

14.11.2024 | 14:30 – 16:30

Rosicrucian Apocalypticism and Freemasonry: on the Mystical Sources of Modern Political Thought

Cristina Ciucu

The conviction that a transmutation of the worldview inexorably leads to the metamorphosis of the socio-political reality lies at the foundation of the philosophical Renaissance, such as formulated by Pico della Mirandola in his *De hominis dignitate* and *Conclusiones* (1486). This world-shattering project, reuniting mystical theology, Platonism, Kabbalah, Hermeticism and Messianism, nurtures a profusion of ethical-political treatises ('utopias') and urges for creative strategies of dissemination. The Rosicrucian Fraternity and its subsequent Freemasonic adaptations epitomise the most original among these strategies, and will serve as a case study for manner in which apocalyptic and mystical elements become a revolutionary driving force.

21.11.2024 | 14:30 – 16:30

Population Bomb: Apocalyptic Imaginaries, World Hunger and the Threat of Revolution

Alys Moody

Paul Ehrlich's 1968 bestseller, *The Population Bomb*, is animated by a vivid apocalyptic imaginary, which links a neo-Malthusian anxieties about mass starvation and overpopulation to lurid fears of global revolution. Beginning with a close reading of this book's use of apocalyptic imagery and narrative, this lecture proposes an account of how an emerging

discourse about world hunger was mobilised to link environmental and natural limits to anticommunist discourse. Setting Ehrlich's virulently anticommunist text against alternative accounts of world hunger that sought systemic changes to the world economy and agricultural practices, this lecture poses questions about the political uses of apocalyptic rhetoric in the context of Cold War world hunger discourse.

28.11.2024 | 14:30 – 16:30

Apocalyptic Visions and the Language of Power: Bolshevik Revolutionaries and Avant-garde Poets (1918-1921)

Clemena Antonova

One of the most characteristic features of the period of War Communism (1918-1921) in Bolshevik Russia was the legitimization, among the artistic avant-garde and among the revolutionaries, of a literal language, openly proclaiming violence and destruction. Literal language is a language of power, because it implies that those who have prevailed and will prevail in the most radical political revolution in modern history do not need the cover of lies and hypocrisy. Indeed, their mission was to unveil the falsehoods of bourgeois democracy and trust the masses with the harshest possible truths. In this sense, I will suggest that the intentional use of literal language is apocalyptic in the original, religious sense of the term “apocalypse” as “revelation.”

Here, I will draw attention to the shared vocabulary of Bolshevik revolutionaries and the Left avant-garde by focusing on Leon Trotsky’s *Terrorism and Communism* (1920) and the poetry of Alexander Block, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and their circle. The language is frequently strikingly similar. Consider Trotsky’s statements such as “to make the individual sacred we must destroy the social order that crucifies him and this problem can only be solved by blood and iron” and “the proletariat will have to pay with blood [and] not only be killed but kill.” More or less at the same time, Block was fantasizing, in his poem *The Twelve*, of “drinking the blood of the bourgeoisie.” What is evoked here is an apocalyptic vision not of the end of *the* world but an ecstatically awaited end of a world, a world that deserves to go.

Finally, I would like to briefly look at the appearance of literal language as a language of power in our present – a phenomenon which has received very little attention so far.

05.12.2024 | 14:30 – 16:30

Sankofa: Radical Millenarianism and Post-apocalypticism in African American Religious Historiography in the Atlantic World

Aaron Pride

This lecture provides a survey of the scholarship on the literature of millennialism, apocalypticism, and post-apocalypticism in African American religion. This work aims to establish a criterion and understanding of the occurrence of radical millenarian belief in African American Christianity from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century. This article argues that African American Christianity produced a militant millennial movement in the early twentieth. This lecture also asserts that we can identify a black militant millennial tradition that spans across two centuries from the slave insurrections of Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser, and Nat Turner to William Monroe Trotter’s civil rights activism in the early twentieth century. In making the case for the importance and existence of a black militant millennial tradition, this work also asserts that this millennial tradition included a substantive vision of the post-apocalyptic world that for black militant millennialists of the nineteenth century comprised a world devoid of racial slavery, while militant millennialist of the twentieth envisioned a post-apocalyptic world that repudiated racial segregation and discrimination.

12.12. | 14:30 – 16:30

Angels of the apocalypse: cinema, religion, and the end of the world

Marika Rose

In contemporary cinema, the primary function of angels is to guarantee social reproduction – that is, to ensure the continuing existence of the social order, and therefore to ward off the end of the world. This paper will consider the role of angels in late twentieth and early 21st century apocalyptic cinema. Where the angels of romantic comedies appear primarily as suited bureaucrats, playful tricksters, or hapless humans recently elevated to spiritual status, the angels of apocalyptic films appear as warriors or cops whose primary role is to maintain the precarious balance between good and evil. In this paper, I will explore these cinematic representations of angels at the end of the world – in films such as *The Prophecy* (1995), *Constantine* (2005), and *Legion* (2010) – suggesting that these cinematic apocalypses can illuminate both the role of men and masculinity in social reproduction, and the ways in which contemporary Christianity functions alongside the state in playing the role of *katechon* – that is, as for St Paul and for Carl Schmitt, of holding back the apocalypse.

19.12.2024 | 14:30 – 16:30

Chinese apocalyptic eschatologies, 1800-1950. Typologies, contexts, and circulation

Vincent Goossaert

This talk examines the modern and contemporary trajectories of apocalyptic ideas in China. It shows how these ideas (according to which the end of the world is near because the gods have decided to annihilate sinful humanity) were particularly widespread during the late Qing (1644-1911) and Republican (1912-1949) China. Events (natural or man-made disasters such as the Taiping War, the Boxer Rebellion, the 1911 Revolution, the Sino-Japanese War, etc.) were understood in this light as new episodes in a dramatic story of collective damnation and salvation. Contrary to a historiography that emphasises the ruptures of modernity, and in particular the May 4th movement, I will show that religious books composed at the end of the imperial era (including the eschatological revelations inspired by the Taiping war) continued to be widely reprinted and distributed during the twentieth century, thus maintaining the substratum on which new apocalyptic discourses could flourish. They convey a little-studied counter-discourse (but also, in a way, a complement) to the better-known modern utopias of progress; compared with secular narratives, they offer alternative visions of the link between individual and collective destiny. What is more, far from opposing two totally irreconcilable visions of the world, progressive and apocalyptic discourses have in fact coexisted and fertilised each other.

09.01.2024 | 14:30 – 16:30

Ethnofiction: a rebirth scenario for the collapse of the Mar Menor, Spain,
Mafe Moscoso

The questions that accompany my presentation aim to engage, using ethnofiction, two different cosmo-ontologies: one of my maternal lineage from Cotopaxi, province in Ecuador, and those of a group of scientists from Spain, related to the idea of the end of life. Following the collapse of the Mar Menor, I intend to explore a research methodology focused on experimentation: *cuyr andean ethnofiction*. The objective of my work is, on one hand, to develop a methodological reflection that will unfold during the writing process, focused on the act of decolonizing ethnofiction; and on the other hand, on the need to explore the fissures of Eurocentric binary scientific ontologies that separate: life/death and nature/culture. Considering the violent colonial and fascist history I bring together the idea that it is possible to open methodological thresholds of welcome and reception towards other ontologies and epistemologies, in this case, Andean ones, which are an opening to other worlds where the end of life is a restart.

16.01.2024 | 14:30 – 16:30

'Of all maladies the most common'. Explaining the 'Age of Fevers', 1770-1830
Stefanie Gänger

ABSTRACT

Few *topoi* are more persistent in the western medical literature of the period between 1770 and 1830 than that of the frequency and prevalence of fevers. Fevers were 'the most frequent of all diseases', as the Scottish physician-author William Buchan put it in 1790; 'more than one half of mankind [was] said to perish by [them]'. It was well known that 'fever alone killed more persons than all other ailments combined' wrote Spain's court physician Joseph Masdevall in a slightly different calculation in 1786; or, as one French country doctor put it, they were 'of all maladies the most common'.

This chapter exposes and seeks to explain western medical writers' untiring insistence on the commonness of fevers, between 1770 and 1830, the 'Age of Fevers' (J. Luis & Mariano Peset). The paper, in a first part, reviews the extant data on morbidity and mortality from 'fever' available to us for the Iberian, British, and French territories, to show that doctors' impression was anything but a figment of the imagination. Historic parish registers, military statistics, hospital admission records and other sources corroborate these and other writers' sense that fevers were a widespread and fatal diagnosis – the period's foremost calamity. In a second part, the paper seeks to *explain* the prevalence of the diagnosis, 'fever'. The chapter holds that the pervasiveness of the diagnosis, 'fever', around 1800 was owing to several factors, ranging from that disease category's epistemic scope to the period's changing epidemiological landscape – the encounter with new, and more virulent ailments.

23.01.2024 | 14:30 – 16:30

The Sun that never sets?
Rethinking the End of Time in natural, religious, political scenarios
Barbara Mittler

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Chinese artists and intellectuals noticed that China was sinking into deep darkness—the end of time, apocalypse. Faced with the country's weakness, which was manifested in losses in the opium wars and finally, even

against its small neighbor, Japan, writers, poets and cartoonists were reflecting on the best way to awaken China, to revive it, to bring it back to life and light by coming out of the darkness of the night—a revelation. One character who promised to bring back the light was Mao Zedong.

During his lifetime, he was hailed as “The sun that never sets 永远不落的太阳”, an epithet that continues to be evoked to this day, both in a positive and negative sense—it has become one of the most important artistic tropes in the sinophone worlds. In my work I consider the legacy of this trope in artistic discourses during the long Chinese 20th century – musical, literary and visual (such as the image by Fang Lijun above), popular and elitist – in an attempt to understand the power of the Maoist specter in determining the making of Chinese cultural heritage.

