

# The Epic of Survival

## The Climate Crisis and Heroic Form

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Here's my provocation: traditional performance genres are inadequate to represent the climate crisis, whose proper narrative form is the epic. The formal conventions of both tragedy and comedy elide the ongoing political conflict that is causing global heating, and their aesthetic strategies inspire affects and attitudes that encourage dangerous complacency. The epic, by contrast, in narrating the rise and fall of empires, conveys the historicity of climate change, intervening in the cultural and political formations that are producing this life-or-death moment. We can, and should, use epic genres instrumentally to help create the cultural imaginaries and the aesthetic dispositions that will move people to call for the revolution of our planet-destroying system of production and consumption. At the same time, we must isolate and neutralize the way that epic modes in popular entertainment, such as the Marvel films, are entrenching the power of fossil-fuel interests and normalizing incipient ecofascism.<sup>1</sup>

It may be hard to imagine that the epic even matters. If anything, climate change seems to be our great species tragedy. It is as if humanity, uniquely gifted with the heroic capacity to bend nature to our will, has simply followed our destiny to full technological domination, only to realize all too late that our exploitation of the living world is dooming us to death and destruction. The Tiresias of our tragic downfall in this story is, of course, the climate scientist, who with his prophetic models has attempted to warn us, to no avail, about the terrors to come if we do not recognize that using fossil fuels to power our economy is a fatal error. Although more and more of us have begun to “wake up,” *pace* Greta Thunberg (this tragedy's chorus), our full anagnorisis will not arrive, it seems, before the action has resolved itself into a full-on global catastrophe.

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1. Ecofascism is a strain of right-wing thought that acknowledges the climate and ecological crisis, but identifies overpopulation and immigration rather than fossil-fuel production and consumption as the causes. Ecofascism seeks to restrict immigration and “ethnically cleanse” the United States and European countries of brown and Black people in order to “conserve” increasingly scarce resources. In the US it finds its roots in the Malthusian environmentalism of John Muir and Garrett Hardin. It finds its most extreme expression in the manifestos written by neo-Nazi vigilante mass murderers, such as 18-year-old Payton Gendron, who killed 10 Black people in Buffalo, NY, in May 2022: the “left has controlled all discussion regarding environmental preservation whilst simultaneously presiding over the continued destruction of the natural environment itself through mass immigration and uncontrolled urbanization” (in Joselow 2022). Yet ecofascism also informs both Republican and Democratic federal climate policy at the southern border, where a militarized border control separates children from their parents and denies the rights of refugees under international law. For the nexus between neo-Nazi mass murder and national immigration policies in Europe, see Malm et al. (2021). See also Forchtner (2020) and Hultgren (2015).

The pun embedded in “catastrophe,” both the apocalypse and the conclusion of classical five-part dramatic structure, captures how easy and pleasurable it is to conflate the climate crisis and tragic dramatic form. But we must resist the siren pleasure of this tight conflation. It misrepresents both the causes and the real effects of the climate crisis. Who is the tragic hero here? Who is “humanity” anyway? As Kathryn Yusoff has argued, the “planetary analytic” of the species-focused Anthropocene “has failed to do the work to properly identify its own histories of colonial earth writing, to name the masters of broken earths” (2018:2). The false universality of the category “humanity” fails “to name the masters of broken earths”: it fails to name the villains among us who are doing everything they can to keep the fossil-fuel system running—capturing and distorting the democratic process, and enabling the ecological devastation that attends economic growth because growth augments their own power.

Are we supposed to pity these people? Surely not. They are the cause, more than any human nature or fate, of our downfall. This is the problem with tragic pity and fear: they respond to guilt as preordained, eliding historical culpability. (You have to read deeply against the grain to view Hamlet, for example, as an abusive boyfriend.) Further, tragic pity and fear excuse cruelty by responding to the form’s premise that even highly powerful, heroic men and women are subject to a radical lack of agency, a fundamental inability to shape history, the polity, or even just their own actions. That in Hegelian terms the hero’s negation is the antithesis that enables the historical sublation enacted by the tragedy is hardly the point. Tragedy hides power behind doom, and turns doom into pleasure. And the pleasure of doom is the last thing we need to enjoy right now—while, for who knows how long, it’s still not too late to halt global heating.

The urgent need to reject the pleasure of doom is obvious. And that’s why so-called climate communicators—from climate scientists, to activists, to journalists—tend to use narrative forms that enable them to end their climate stories on a note of hope. The idea is that ending with hope will fight feelings of climate despair, producing an aesthetic sense of “self-efficacy” that will increase the desire for “climate action.” But even as it avoids the Scylla of tragic despair, such narration falls into the Charybdis of turning global heating into a tale that *already has* a happy ending—indeed into a comedy. Look at the pattern of the climate story that dominates the communications literature: climate change is real; it’s us; it’s bad; but *we can solve it* because we have the solutions. What is this pattern but that of a comedy? A social order is disrupted by a crisis (“it’s real”); in the ensuing chaos the protagonist learns salutary lessons about himself (“it’s us”); and just when things seem darkest and most hopeless (“it’s bad”), a kind of *deus ex machina* appears (“we can solve it because we have the solutions”), and the play we’re all in turns out to have a happy ending.

Not only is this comedic storyline almost entirely apolitical, it is also fundamentally antirevolutionary. As C.L. Barber (1963) argued, correctly—fully 60 years ago—comedic happy endings reinforce the social status quo by uniting aspirants with the powers of the established order through marriage. Here the aspirant is the “climate solution,” e.g., solar energy, that we can just slot into our current social and economic systems that the climate crisis is threatening. Never mind about resource extraction, the overconsumption of the rich, the mounting economic costs of the externalities of economic growth, or the loss of biodiversity leading to the ongoing sixth extinction. No one using this form of comedic climate storytelling would ever propose immediate degrowth and the international coordination of a circular economy as a “climate solution” because the building of that new system is not a “solution,” but the ongoing revolutionary project of decades or indeed generations. This current generation and those in the future will have to fight not only the villains who are trying to prevent them from saving their only home (as the illegitimate suitors try to prevent Odysseus from returning to his household), but also the personal temptations of apathy and doomism that can entice people to abandon the fight in the very pitch of action (as Edmund Spenser’s Acrasia entices Verdant—ironic name in this context—to take off his arms and lay down in her bower). Indeed, the comedic form actually produces emotional *release*—the aesthetic experience of a gratifying resolution—rather than the ongoing tension and



Figure 1. A medieval manuscript illumination, from circa the first quarter of the 15th century, depicting ancient Greek warriors attacking Troy. (© British Library Board, Stowe 54, f.82v)

uncertainty that drives both narrative and political change. Joseph Meeker was surely right to argue in *The Comedy of Survival* that the *content* of comedy enacts ecological wisdom—in that “the comic mode of human behavior represented in literature is the closest art has come to describing man [*sic*] as an adaptive animal”—and that our “survival depends upon man’s ability to change himself rather than his environment, and upon his ability to accept limitations rather than to curse fate for limiting him” (1974:39). Yet Meeker surely could not have anticipated how large and powerful the political and economic opposition to enacting this wisdom would prove to be. In the face of this historical moment, we must recognize that our survival equally (or even primarily) depends on divesting that opposition of its power and putting new stakeholders and systems in place. This is one of the myriad challenges that makes the climate crisis so fiercely complicated: we both need to cultivate new habits of mind in which the heroic individual loses his glamour *and* we need to read and think and talk in ways that will enable us to take heroic action against—at the very least engage in extended political conflict with—the people who are despoiling the fundamental material conditions of our survival.

The genre that offers us this pattern of extended political struggle is, of course, the epic. Its sweeping, episodic, iterative form attempts to narrate the labor of overthrowing an old or illegitimate order and building a new world. It tells stories about fighting to shape history. (If the idea

of shaping history seems impossibly naive to you, then you may be part of the problem.) For all its oppressive uses as the literature of empire, the epic can equally be the literature of resistance. From David who ingeniously describes how to topple Goliath, to Tolkien's hobbits who leave their cozy holes to become unlikely yet triumphant warriors, to the band of rebels in the first three *Star Wars* films who build a coalition of misfits to bring down the Empire, the revolutionary vein runs throughout epic tales. The Greek examples, in particular, provide models for imagining how to endure the fight to end the fossil-fuel economy against apparently insurmountable odds. We can cathect and emulate Odysseus's cunning, courage, and disdain for convention. Or Aeneas's embrace of duty, self-restraint, and endurance. And we can contextualize this individualistic, characterological reading in the epic genre's clear demonstration that all effective politics is collective, requiring the organizing of coalitions and allies to defeat the forces that oppose us. Even when it stages the intervention of divine forces, the epic turns the apocalyptic impulse away from the metaphysics of tragedy and places it in the contingencies of history, where it belongs.

Reading and using epic narratives in this way requires conscious effort. It's an active form of cultural resistance. Not least because the epics that are being produced in our new climatic regime, these decades when it has become impossible to deny the planet has started to cook, are not about the triumph of the climate movement. On the contrary. The decadent, deformed epics of our culture—such as the Marvel film series based on the Marvel comics, or the HBO *Game of Thrones* series—directly engage the apocalyptic threat of climate change, but only to justify a militaristic fascism marshalled to destroy environmentalist revolutionaries, whom these narratives construct—in a remarkable, almost psychotic reversal—as apocalyptically genocidal. Marvel's *Infinity War* casts the mass-murdering environmentalist as the super-villain Thanos, who disintegrates half the people in the universe in order to save the natural world from overpopulation. (It's important to note here that what threatens us is not overpopulation, but consumption. People in the Global South have some of the largest families and emit the least carbon of anyone on the planet.) Having posited the White Walkers as an allegory of climate change, and having suggested that only the global alliance of the warring Kingdoms plus the liberatory firepower of Daenerys Targaryen, the Mother of Dragons, will be able to stop them, *Game of Thrones* dispatches the Walkers in one small, anticlimactic battle at Winterfell, a downplaying of the climate threat that amounts to denial, and it turns Daenerys into a genocidal sociopath, who murders everyone in King's Landing in an apocalyptic blaze of dragon flames for no discernable reason whatsoever—besides the ideological one, of course.

As grim as their politics might be, these films and TV shows suggest that the epic is already central to the way the climate crisis is produced for mass consumption. But in their extended, iterative narratives, they demonize the climate movement in a projection of the genocidal impulse behind continued fossil-fuel development, and they prepare our cultural imagination for a militarized ecofascism that the US is already enacting on its southern border. That these films marshal epic tropes to shape the cultural politics of the climate crisis is precisely why we must take up the epic not only as the ground of a new reading practice that will help inspire people to join the climate movement, but also as a site of dangerous ideological production where the struggle over the possibility of a future is already being waged. We must turn all our attention to this struggle—and not allow ourselves to look away. For on it, yes, everything depends.

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