

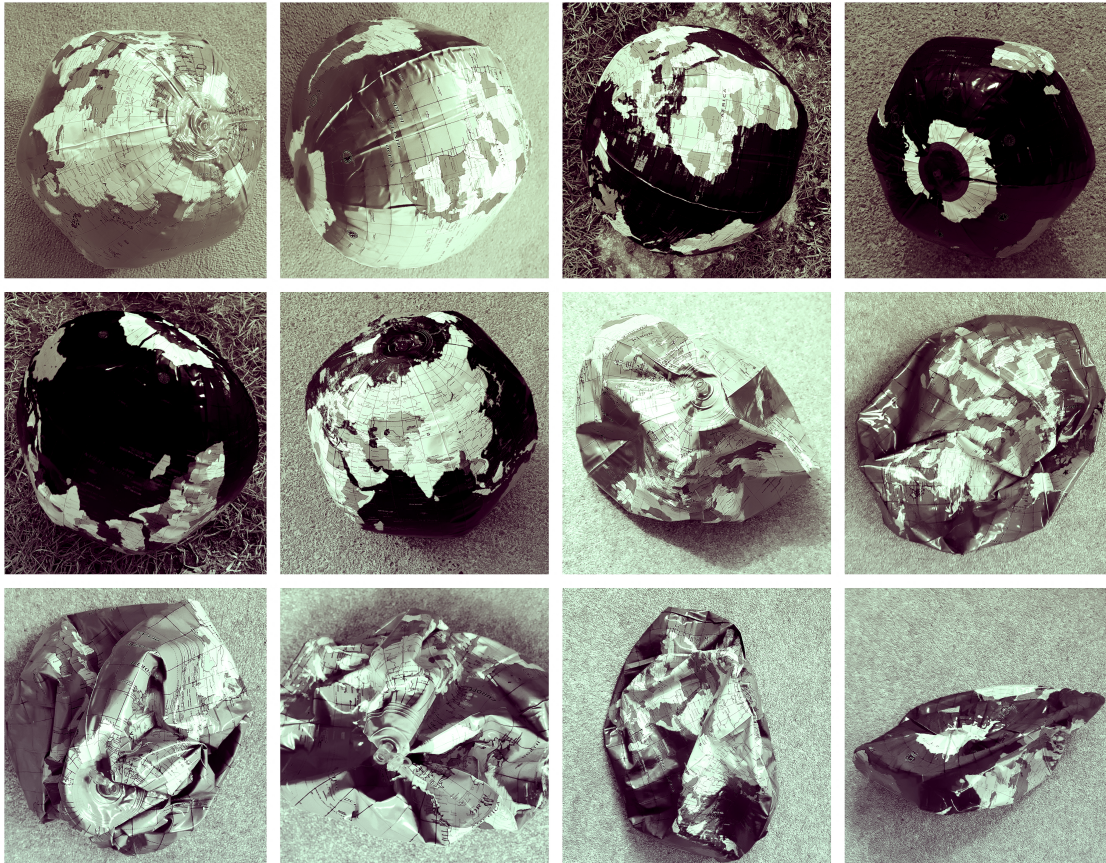
JOANNA ZYLINSKA

Interview with Benedetta Milani

Benedetta Milani: Your book *The End of Man* identifies what you call an “apocalypse habit,” a tendency to narrate the present through the lens of catastrophe. It would be fruitful to explore how this habit shapes contemporary public discourse and whether it is still possible to cultivate conceptual or affective spaces that resist this gravitational pull toward finalism.

Joanna Zylinska: In *The End of Man*, I used the phrase “apocalypse habit” to describe a recurring tendency to narrate moments of political, technological or ecological instability as terminal events – as if meaning or ethical clarity could only be secured at the point of an imagined ending. Apocalypse here functions less as a prediction of a catastrophic future than as a cultural tendency; it’s a way of managing uncertainty by compressing complex processes into a dramatic arc of revelation and closure. What is at stake in this mode of habitual expression is a desire for narrative mastery at precisely the moment when things seem to be getting out of hand. Today this habit has not disappeared but it has undergone a significant rhetorical and conceptual transformation. Specifically, the apocalyptic register has been displaced by the language of *collapse*. At first glance, collapse appears more sober, more realistic, less invested in spectacle or redemption. Yet many of the same impulses remain at work. Collapse narratives often present themselves as science-based and affectively restrained, but they too operate as techniques of epistemic control, offering certainty and inevitability in place of political or ethical ambiguity. We can thus see that finalism has not vanished, it has just been rewritten in a different key.

What interests me most about this shift is how these finalist narratives shape our affects as much as our understanding of the status quo. Apocalypse mobilized fear and urgency but it also promised transcendence; collapse more often produces anxiety, fatigue, and resignation. Yet both narratives can foreclose imaginative and political possibility by insisting that the horizon is already fixed—either by celestial revelation or by historical inevitability. The key question for me is how to loosen the grip of such catastrophic narratives. This involves mining their affective register in search of some openings, or even cracks. In my current work on collapse, I am more interested in practices that resensitize rather than reassure us. This is to say, I want to pursue approaches that stay with uncertainty and fragmentation, while opening room for different ways of inhabiting and responding to a world which, historically, has always been in a state of collapse. (Even if the experience of collapse hasn’t been felt by various ethnic or social groups within the same temporality, or with the same intensity.)



Joanna Zylińska, *Planetary Exhalation*, 2021. © 2021 | Joanna Zylińska

BM: Throughout your critique of the Anthropocene, you show how its ostensibly universal subject often re-centers the figure of the “White Christian Man,” reinstating a historically privileged vantage point. I would be interested in discussing how this gendered and racialized subject continues to structure ecological imaginaries, and how feminist theory might intervene in—or even dismantle—this epistemic formation.

JZ: Here I would emphasize that the Anthropocene’s supposedly universal “we” has always been a very particular figure, historically overcoded as White, Christian, male and proprietorial. What we are currently witnessing, in the “Trump 2.0”-sanctioned political landscape in which tech-bros are running amok, is an intensification of this figure. It adopts a performative masculinity that mistakes domination for strength and withdrawal from diversity for a way of reclaiming authority. The explicit rolling back of all sorts of inclusion initiatives is framed as a return to objectivity and expertise, yet it in fact exposes the fragility of White masculinity when confronted with planetary and social complexity. Feminist theory matters here not only as a critical diagnosis of this weird political moment but also as an intervention across different registers. Through irony, pastiche or what the English aptly call “taking the piss,” feminism can puncture the pomposity of oligarchic, and increasingly war-driven, technocapitalism, revealing its fear of being laughed at—and thus its dependence on posture as a shield.

BM: In several chapters, you outline the resurgence of secular eschatologies within techno-futurist narratives—from promises of immortality to interplanetary escape. It could be illuminating to examine how these visions, emerging from Silicon Valley culture, replay classical salvation motifs and maintain their cultural power despite (or because of) their blind spots regarding material inequality and embodiment.

JZ: I see these secular eschatologies as another symptom of the fragility we touched on earlier, one that takes the form of a narcissistic denial of what I would call “existential realism.” Silicon Valley futurism is saturated with salvation motifs—immortality, escape, transcendence—yet it remains stripped of any serious reckoning with shared vulnerability that implies finitude. Tech bros, often enabled by hubristic political leaders, treat death as a technical glitch: a hackable problem at which one can simply throw more data, more compute, more capital. What is striking, though, is how narrow and impoverished these imaginaries are. Despite their universalizing rhetoric, they reveal a profound immaturity, a refusal to grow up into the ethical demands of living with others, human and nonhuman alike. Ultimately, these projects by our Strongmen of Today amount to an attempt to save themselves alone, hauling their own increasingly optimized bodies toward eternity on the fragile bootstraps of capital and delusion.

BM: A thread running through your analysis concerns contemporary anxieties about aging, mortality, and biological limits. Building on your critique of anti-ageist technoutopianism, I’d like to consider how a feminist counterapocalypse might reframe this “paranoia of the body”—not as a technical and biological failure to overcome, but as a relational and ethical condition from which alternative imaginaries of life could emerge.

JZ: A feminist counterapocalypse would begin for me by refusing the fantasy that existence could or should be extracted from time. Aging is not simply a story of biological decline to be optimized away: it is part of life which is inseparable from loss, fragility and, eventually, death. It can also be a site of sedimented experience, of a certain hard-won wisdom, although feminism needs to be careful not to romanticize this experience. Importantly, feminist theory in its different guises points out that we are embodied and relational beings, always already entangled with other bodies—in pleasure as much as in vulnerability. In this sense it punctures the fascist fantasy of the perfect, sealed body, a body that no one actually has. It thus spoils the fun of technoutopianism by reintroducing decay, illness, porosity and leakiness into the discourse of the disembodied mind, reminding us, quite literally, of milk and shit. We could go so far as to say that the Other’s body becomes a site of ethical demand, issuing a call to response and responsibility. Many of the current dominant political strategies are aimed at deafening this call.

BM: Your discussion of “encystment” offers a compelling way to understand how apocalyptic rhetoric feeds into new forms of populism, borderization, and identity fortification. It seems important to explore how these defensive gestures respond to perceived threats of dissolution, and whether counterapocalyptic thinking might help articulate more open orientations toward precarity.

JZ: The politics of encystment has actually intensified over the last decade, whether in the UK’s anti-boat, anti-immigrant rhetoric or in the US through the militarization of borders via ICE. What is being staged here is a defensive fantasy of hardness and enclosure, one that responds to perceived dissolution of familiarity by promising protection through force. This politics, organized around a crude “might is right” principle, actively denies the shared condition of human vulnerability, recording precariousness as moral failure or weakness. The encysted subject is invited to imagine itself as intact and impermeable. Whether feminist theory can, on its own, reverse these hostile political trajectories remains an open question. But it can certainly function as a thorn in the feel-good techno-optimism of today’s strongmen, who seem willing to do almost anything to avoid recognizing themselves as potentially vulnerable: weak, ill, detumescent.



Joanna Zylinska still from */collapse*, 2026. © 2026 | Joanna Zylinska

BM: In *The Perception Machine*, you discuss the digital image as a distributed perceptual apparatus. How might this “machinic perception” help us generate new counter-imaginaries of apocalypse—ones that escape the clichés of melting ice caps, dystopian ruin, or cosmic catastrophe? What forms of visuality are still unthought in our attempts to “image” the end of the world?

JZ: I argue in *The Perception Machine* that machinic perception does not simply extend human seeing but rather redistributes it across spatial planes. My notion of “loser images” is key in offering an alternative to machine vision understood in terms of perceptual enhancement. These are images that fail to perform according to the dominant metrics of visibility, resolution or impact—images that are noisy, banal, misframed, or affectively flat. Precisely because of this visual and technical failure, they resist the spectacular visuality of apocalypse, with its melting ice caps and ruined skylines. Loser images do not announce the end of the world but offer a subtle counter-imaginary to ways in which all kinds of ends are typically being presented. My *Feminist with a Drone* project operationalizes this idea. Instead of using the drone as a tool of mastery or surveillance, I deploy it awkwardly, playing with a cheap toy drone featuring tiny propellers and a low-res camera to undermine the promise of total vision. The resulting images coming from this drone, which could barely fly and which kept failing on almost every take-off, refuse the god’s-eye view. They stage a situated mode of mediated perception which images the world as messy and wobbly. The project decouples planetary vulnerability from its spectacular clichés, while inviting us to look again, around and askew.

BM: In the book’s coda, you emphasize the need to “sense the Anthropocene,” arguing that visual representation alone often domesticates or pacifies catastrophic events. I am interested in how multisensory or non-visual artistic practices might contribute to a more responsive and responsible engagement with planetary change, without reducing catastrophe to spectacle. Specifically, your photofilm *Exit Man* provides a concrete experiment in counterapocalyptic aesthetics. It could be compelling to examine the role of artistic practice in disrupting both apocalyptic fatalism and techno-utopian optimism, and to consider whether art can help prefigure the “good-enough worlds” you describe—worlds that resist teleology while still holding space for ethical and political possibility.

JZ: In *Exit Man*, artistic practice functioned as a way of interrupting the all-encompassing narrative machinery of apocalypse, its demand for the grand gestures of revelation and redemption performed in a heroic tone. As part of the project on collapse I mentioned earlier, I recently made a new film titled */collapse*. Rather than stage a counterapocalypse, this film works within the affective atmosphere of the ever pervasive collapse discourse. Art here intervenes at the level of sensibility, creating—through image, sound and text—an almost immersive multisensory experience whose goal is to resensitize us to collapse stories while revealing their composition as well as their affective load. One of the limits of both apocalyptic fatalism and techno-utopian optimism is that they share a commitment to teleology: they insist that the future is already known, whether as catastrophe or as solution. */collapse* resists this by refusing narrative closure. Revisiting the dominant tropes of collapse as articulated on the Reddit forum of the same name, it probes the affective register of sober resignation, looking at what’s bubbling underneath its surface. The film stays with exhaustion and uncertainty without aestheticizing them. In this sense, artistic practice does not prefigure “good” worlds so much as it makes space for good-enough ones: worlds that are provisional, uneven and ethically charged, offering themselves to us as an invitation or even a demand. Art can help us inhabit such worlds by loosening dominant affective scripts. It can also reopen the question of how we might still live, sense, and act together amid the ongoing polycrisis.



Stills from Joanna Zylynska, *Exit Man*, 2017. © 2017 | Joanna Zylynska