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Hanna E. Morris
Apocalyptic Authoritarianism: Climate Crisis, Media, and Power
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Hanna E. Morris's *Apocalyptic Authoritarianism: Climate Crisis, Media, and Power* argues that U.S. climate journalism has come to frame environmental crisis through a narrative logic that resonates with exclusionary and authoritarian political tendencies. The book centres on the concept of 'apocalyptic authoritarianism', a formation in which climate change is narrated as a totalising crisis that can legitimise elite control, marginalise dissent and narrow democratic possibilities. Drawing on a multimodal analysis of prominent U.S. media between 2015 and 2023, Morris traces how recurring tropes (nationalist appeals, technological solutionism, the elevation of elite 'visionary' figures, and the devaluation of racialised others) structure climate reporting. The book is organised thematically, with chapters examining these tropes across visual and textual media, followed by a conclusion that gestures towards alternative journalistic futures.

The book reconstructs how apocalyptic narratives operate within mainstream journalism. Morris does not treat apocalyptic language as merely rhetorical excess; instead, she situates it within a broader political and historical context. The discussion of 'total crisis', particularly in Chapter 2, 'American Earth: Planetary Optics of Control', shows how climate change is folded into broader anxieties about political instability and how planetary-scale representations can position viewers at a distance from the crisis. By reading climate reporting alongside discourses of democratic decline, Morris demonstrates how environmental and political fears are reinforcing one another. She shows that the problem is not simply exaggeration, but the ways in which crisis narratives tend to obscure structural analysis. As she suggests, the apocalyptic framing 'ignites an intense longing' for a return to imagined stability, thereby obscuring the historical conditions (colonialism, racial capitalism and extractivism) that underpin both climate change and contemporary inequalities. In this way, apocalyptic framing not only shapes how climate change is understood but also narrows the range of responses that appear politically imaginable.

The book pays sustained attention to nationalism within U.S. climate reporting. Rather than approaching climate communication as a global or planetary discourse, Morris foregrounds the persistence of national myths within U.S. reporting. Her discussion of the 'myth of American exceptionalism' in Chapter 1, 'A New Marshall Plan for the Climate: Reclaiming National and Journalistic Authority Through the Myth of American Exceptionalism', shows how the coverage of U.S. climate policy tends to present domestic innovation and leadership as central to global solutions, positioning the United States as both a responsible actor and a potential saviour. Such narratives appear in reporting

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on federal climate initiatives as well as in profiles of national industries, where technological progress is tied to ideas of renewal and competitiveness. This is not limited to overtly conservative outlets; Morris demonstrates that centrist and liberal publications often reproduce similar logics, albeit in different forms. By linking contemporary climate discourse to longer histories, including the 19th-century ideology of Manifest Destiny, she highlights the deep cultural roots of these narratives.

The book identifies the 'visionary sage' figure as a recurring trope in climate journalism. In Chapter 3, 'Tyrant of a Trope: Visionary Sage Figure', Morris shows how reporting tends to centre individual, typically male and elite, actors as the agents of planetary salvation. These figures are portrayed as uniquely capable of delivering large-scale solutions, often framed in technological or market-based terms, and frequently positioned as pragmatic problem-solvers able to act decisively where political institutions appear slow or constrained. In such depictions, complexity is condensed into questions of innovation and leadership, while collective or grassroots approaches are marginalised. The discussion of this trope is sharpened by attention to visual culture, including magazine covers and feature imagery, which reinforce the authority and charisma of such figures. By contrast, those advocating for more transformative or justice-oriented approaches, Morris argues, are often depicted as obstructive or naïve.

Morris turns a sharp eye to the representation of figures such as young activists and women of colour, who are often cast as disruptive or threatening within apocalyptic narratives. In Chapter 4, 'Climate Death-World and Life-World', she draws on specific examples, including coverage of political figures and activists, and illustrates how 'processes of othering' operate across ideological lines. For instance, reporting on climate activism can contrast 'reasonable' policy actors with more confrontational figures, framing the latter as disruptive or unrealistic. In such cases, emphasis on tone or perceived radicalism can overshadow the substance of their demands, shaping how their political legitimacy is assessed. The suggestion that such representations contribute to a broader 'politics of enmity' is well supported, especially when read in relation to the book's wider analysis of authoritarian tendencies.

The book adopts a multimodal approach, examining both textual and visual elements of media coverage to capture dimensions of climate communication that are often overlooked. Through close readings of magazine covers and feature spreads, Morris illustrates how images of solitary figures set against planetary backdrops, or landscapes rendered in stark, high-contrast tones, work alongside headlines to produce a sense of urgency and authority, shaping how the climate crisis is perceived. This attention to visual form also highlights how scale, perspective and composition can subtly position viewers in relation to the crisis, reinforcing particular assumptions about responsibility, vulnerability and agency.

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At the same time, the book does have its constraints. The book's focus on prominent national publications provides a coherent dataset, but it also raises questions about scope. Local journalism, alternative media and non-U.S. contexts receive limited attention, which restrains the ability to assess how widespread the identified patterns are beyond elite outlets. Also, cross-national comparisons might have clarified how far these dynamics travel across political settings. The concluding discussion of alternative journalistic futures is suggestive rather than fully developed. Morris calls for a 'reckoning' with existing structures of power and for more democratic forms of climate reporting, but the practical implications of this shift remain somewhat open-ended.

Taken together, the book offers an insightful account of the relationship between climate journalism and political power. It demonstrates how narrative forms, particularly apocalyptic ones, shape not only public understanding but also the range of possible responses to environmental crisis. In doing so, it invites reflection on how contemporary climate communication draws on longer histories of representing crisis, authority and social order. By linking media representation to these broader historical and political dynamics, the book provides a framework of interest to scholars and students working at the intersection of environmental history, media studies and political sociology. It could also serve as a teaching text in courses on environmental communication, critical media analysis or the politics of representation.

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