

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## Climate-Talk in and around Geissler/Sann's *How Does the World End (for Others)?*

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From mid-May to late November 2023, the Prada Foundation in Venice was the setting for *Everybody Talks about the Weather*, curated by Dieter Roelstraete: ‘the weather . . . may well be the single most inexhaustible source of conversational subject matter . . . – the alpha and omega of daily human interacting’ (2023: 23). In that context, I am concerned with how Beate Geissler and Oliver Sann’s *How Does the World End (for Others)?* placed forty-odd fragments of ‘divergent narratives in conversation, allowing for a multiplicity of emergent meanings’ (Guaraldo et al. 2023: 158). On account of Emiliano Guaraldo inviting a contribution from me as a literary geographer for a Venetian roundtable about the installation, I went about helping to ground ‘a “genuinely interdisciplinary field” . . . on collaborations and cross-disciplinary conversations’ (Hones 2015: 2). Over the years, my methodological back-and-forth between the literary and the geographical has evolved by way of diverse forms of scholarly conversation, not least through querying via email, engaging in peer review or sharing postprints. Since being recruited to Italy in 2020, I have become socioculturally closer to Marina Marengo’s conceptualisation of literary geography as the study of how space is

represented in literature (2022: 19), Fabio Lando's deliberations on literature's non-neutral mode of conveying knowledge (1996: 9), and Davide Papotti's vision of dystopian narratives pertaining to the Anthropocene (2019: 111). Whereas I used to enhance my analysis of meaning-making in poems/novels by harnessing spatially attuned frameworks, my point of departure now tends to be an environmental state of affairs on which I shed light by referring to creative texts.

Geissler/Sann's rhizomatic materialisation of Anthropocene-feeling is striking on several levels (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Beate Geissler and Oliver Sann, *How Does the World End (for Others)?*, 2022, photographic and textual installation, 1 metre x 2.5 metres, Prada Foundation, Venice (© Marco Cappelletti)

The staging of speculative geographies has to do with 'a critical worldbuilding approach, including theoretical insights regarding scale and the production of space[,] socio-historical and relational analyses of human-environment relations' (Martin and Sneegas 2020: 18). Damien Broderick's *Reading by Starlight* conveys the extent to which 'science fiction is a suitable site for complex theorised reading, . . . adopt[ing] a technique based in part on montage or collage, the postmodern device *par excellence*' (1995: xiv). Geissler/Sann's assemblage of worldbuilding materials – teeming with intertextual resonances – is grist to the mill of the strand of book history within literary geography: 'practices of printing, writing, reading, conversing, dwelling and motion knit themselves together to furnish rich textual creations' (Saunders 2009: 446). With respect to time geography, the artwork highlights the Anthropocene's function as a back-projection from a moment when an anthropogenic signal shall be discernible in the Earth's strata. Such dabbling with the *future-perfect* (Ellis and Doak 2005), i.e. something world-changing will have happened, is the bread and butter of science fiction (Heise 2019: 301). In the words of Elana Gomel's *Postmodern Science Fiction and Temporal*

*Imagination*, ‘S[cience]F[iction] is the narrative genre that . . . offers us the best access to the clashing *timeshapes* that define the postmodern fragmentation of both public and private time. . . . SF is a quantum snapshot of the multiple *timeshapes* of postmodernity’ (2010: xi). Geissler/Sann’s horizontal array of fragments reconfigures whole novels and films as a series of mini-events abounding with ‘polytemporal lures or semi-legible palimpsests’ (Mentz 2019: 37). In terms of language geography, every synoptic text is in English, integrating material originally released in French, German, Italian, Norwegian, Russian or Standard Chinese. This choice stirs up dynamics of text  $\rightleftharpoons$  text, text  $\rightleftharpoons$  peruser, peruser  $\rightleftharpoons$  peruser: (a) different cultures’ forms of exposition are brought into dialogue by the creation of a linguistic commonality that allows common threads to emerge; (b) an individual’s knowledge of the link language gives access to worlds that would otherwise be hidden behind the veil of a foreign system of expression; (c) people engaging with the installation are placed on a common communicative footing that enables interaction between discrete sensibilities.

In the pseudo-chronological systematisation of sources, the narration of future dates takes precedence over release dates, which run the gamut from the end of the 1950s to the start of the 2020s. Near the beginning is a fragmentary rendering of Jon Raymond’s *Denial* from 2022 that foregrounds conversational vectors, something of a rarity across the artwork:

The year is 2052. Climate change has had a predictably devastating effect: Venice submerged, cyclones in Oklahoma, megafires in South America. Yet it could be much worse. Two decades earlier, the global protest movement known as the Upheavals helped break the planet’s fossil fuel dependency, and the subsequent Nuremberg-like Toronto Trials convicted the most powerful oil executives and lobbyists for crimes against the environment. Not all of them. A few executives escaped arrest and went into hiding, including pipeline mastermind Robert Cave.

Now, a Pacific Northwest journalist named Jack Henry who works for a struggling media company has received a tip that Cave is living in Mexico. Hoping the story will save his job, he travels south and, using a fake identity, contacts the fugitive. The two men strike up an unexpected friendship, leaving Jack torn about exposing Cave. (Geissler and Sann 2023, n.p.)

There is a postlapsarian quality to the socioecological tribulations of the past rushing up into the complexities of the present here. The thirty-year interval between the depicted events and the date of printing does not require much extrapolation to do with locations, phenomena or entities. Raymond actualises predictions of sea-level rise and meteorological disasters in his enactment of the future-perfect that heralds the averting of a still more serious catastrophe, all thanks to climate activism and legal intervention in line with the aspirations of Extinction Rebellion or Fridays for Future. A longed-for surge against the rampant extractivism of the Age of Oil is affirmed through the branding of the ecological revolution as the ‘Upheavals’ leading to the ‘Toronto Trials’. The yoking of environmental offences to the wrongs adjudicated at Nuremberg is heavy-hitting: industrial movers and shakers are

ascribed retroactive criminality for systematic violations at the level of the Nazis' crimes against humanity, including the millions of victims of the Holocaust. Those post-war proceedings' extraordinary status in international law – laying out evidence for an individual's responsibility, with a view to capital punishment – is mobilised to delegitimise an accumulation of violent acts against Nature by the likes of the gone-to-ground 'pipeline mastermind'. The issue of '(m)Anthropocene euphoria' (Di Chiro 2017: 490) pervades the covert journalist's dilemma over his unexpected bonding with the renegade.

Regarding the contextual timeline mingling planetary phenomena and cultural production, there is much food for thought in connection with 'climate stories . . . as . . . an exchange between the teller and the audience, both parts being equally necessary' (Harris 2020: 312–313). The artists' conversations with a dozen specialists are conveyed through instances of stylistically differentiated chipping-in:

c. 1200s

Icelandic Sagas

1492

Columbus arrives in the Americas; great dying of Indigenous peoples; last fall in global temperature

1520s–1530s

Iberian transatlantic slave trade from Africa to the Americas begins

c. 1592

'The Journey to the West' (Chinese folk epic, attributed to Wu Cheng'en)

## MODERNITY

*It seems strange to me that the timeline for 'modernity' becomes so 'Western' – so singularly focused on the works of Europeans and their colonial societies, as if suddenly world history comes to spring from Europe after all those millennia. (And why is Columbus arriving in America in 1492 more important than Vasco da Gama's voyage to India two years later?)* (Geissler and Sann 2023: 46)

Such an addendum to Geissler/Sann's authorial voice replicates an iterative method of intellectual progress. The deictic marking of 'it seems strange to me' draws attention to the value of creative-critical co-thinking about the authoritativeness of any statement. A predilection for all things Western comes under the spotlight as a perspectival problem to be thrashed out, with the devastating impacts of Spain-backed conquest/slaving as a prod in the direction of a decolonial approach to the Anthropocene's 'apocalyptic futurity' (Gergan et al. 2020: 93–95). To that end, the questioning of the momentousness of Columbus versus Vasco de Gama – vying for the title of early modern Iberia's most cataclysmic explorer – is a gesture towards a broad call for introspection within a re-interpretive paradigm.

Ultimately, this article exists because of conversing with peers near and far. The constellation of ideas here is indicative of methodological exchanges within human geography

and the environmental humanities that opened my eyes to the potential for deconstructing part of the Prada Foundation's exhibition about the oh-so familiar conversational gambit of climate-talk. I was drawn to how Geissler/Sann's artwork was a locus of conversation in many ways besides the regular occurrence of perusers discussing the assemblage. At the level of genre, science fiction is recognisable as an undertaking in conversation with what tends to be canonised as traditional literature: postmodern aesthetic peculiarities are just one aspect of its creative differentiation. A speculative text's temporal functions are perceptible as a type of conversation between moments/occurrences, starting from the syntactic premise of the future-perfect as a conceptual vector tethered to an event-to-have-occurred. Instantiations of this literary device are more and more valuable as a means of understanding potential pathways through the Anthropocene, always already projected into an evolving stratigraphic record that is set in conversation with the present.

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