

Calypsis. Submerged Worlds and the Post-Apocalyptic Imaginary in Contemporary Italian Comics

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Abstract

This paper examines contemporary post-apocalyptic comics centered on the aquatic element. It builds on three Italian graphic novels: *La terra dei figli* by Gipi (2016), *Celestia* by Manuele Fior (2019), and *Troppo facile amarti in vacanza* by Giacomo Bevilacqua (2021). It aims to investigate how water assumes a theoretical, aesthetic, and symbolic role in the narrative articulation of the Anthropocene crisis in recent comic book production, beyond its literal diegetic functions. The analysis takes an interdisciplinary approach combining ecocriticism, visual semiotics, comics studies, and media theory. We introduce the theoretical category of ‘epicalypse’ to describe a mode in which the post-apocalyptic condition is inscribed within the present, haunting its imaginary with the idea that the catastrophic event has already occurred. Within this framework, water becomes a medial metaphor and a cultural grammar through which contemporary comics articulate life after the end – simultaneously evoking destruction and generation, concealment and revelation, the dissolution of entrenched institutions and the potential for posthuman subjectivities.

Keywords

Comics, Anthropocene, Water, Post-Apocalypse, Imaginary

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1. Introduction

Post-apocalyptic narratives have witnessed significant expansion and increasing prominence within the contemporary cultural imaginary, traversing diverse genres, media, and contexts. In their various forms, stories of pandemics, environmental catastrophes, and technological or societal collapses have become recurring narrative archetypes, contributing to a discursive horizon marked by the urgency of disaster and the perception of its inevitability². Within this broader framework, a more specific strand can be identified, centred on the imaginary of submerged worlds, inundation, and water as an agent of crisis and transformation. We argue that submerged worlds provide a key example of a shift in the (post-)apocalyptic imaginary: a narrative displacement of focus from the catastrophic event to its enduring consequences, and a symbolic one from a projected future that can still be prevented to the immediacy of our present condition.

In this thematic constellation, water emerges as a privileged aesthetic and semantic element, simultaneously functioning as a diegetic vector and a critical device. In contemporary post-apocalyptic narratives, the aquatic element is a conceptually charged space, capable of catalyzing diverse representations of social dissolution, ecological transformation, and the

¹ The article has been conceived, discussed, and edited together. However, Lorenzo Di Paola has originally written the introduction and sections 4 and 5; Giorgio Busi Rizzi has written sections 2, 3, and 6. The coda has been written jointly. Giorgio Busi Rizzi's work is supported by an FWO senior post-doctoral fellowship (grant 1284024N), Lorenzo Di Paola's by an FNRS post-doctoral grant.

² See Hart – Holba 2009; Heise 2016.

crisis of the human³. When considering these premises, the trope of the submerged world must be seen as more than a merely dystopian backdrop, instead becoming a complex theoretical node that conveys profound reflections on the Anthropocene, the impermanence of cultural forms, and the emergence of new subjectivities.

Among the various media contributing to the proliferation of this imaginary, comics stand out for their dual function: on the one hand, as a conceptual and symbolic laboratory of the contemporary cultural industry⁴; on the other, due to their multimodal nature and low production costs, as a particularly apt medium for conveying complex aesthetic articulations – such as those linked to climate crisis⁵ and catastrophe more broadly⁶.

This paper builds on three contemporary Italian graphic novels – *La terra dei figli* by Gipi (2016), *Celestia* by Manuele Fior (2019), and *Troppo facile amarti in vacanza* by Giacomo Bevilacqua (2021) – which explore the relationship between the crisis of the Anthropocene and the trope of the submerged world. The contribution will situate them within the broader contemporary comics production, tracing the thematic recurrences, narrative tropes, and aesthetic genealogies that articulate the post-apocalyptic aquatic imaginary.

While differing in tone, style, and narrative organization, the three texts share a new stance concerning the environmental collapse and the disintegration of modern cultural structures. Significantly, and despite their positioning within the (post-)apocalyptic paradigm, they neither define the temporal coordinates of the futures they imagine, nor explicitly represent the catastrophic event itself, which is instead left implicit and suspended. This underscores disaster as an ongoing existential condition, articulated through post-event geographies, practices, and relational forms.

By intersecting comics studies, ecocriticism, and media theory, this article investigates the role of water as a liminal figure and conceptual threshold (in both the senses of separating *and* connecting two diverse

³ See Oppermann 2023.

⁴ Di Paola 2019; Frezza 2017.

⁵ In this regard, the year 2024 notably saw the publication of Roberto Grossi's non-fictional graphic novel *La grande rimozione*, centred on climate change and its now irreversible effects. A precursor to Grossi's work is Squarzonzi's *La saison brune* (2012: see Gardiner 2018). For an overview of the phenomenon in Anglophone comics, see Perry (2018); Menga and Davies (2020); Olsza (2022); Classon Frangos (2024); Alaniz (2025).

⁶ See Chute 2016; Earle 2017.

states), illustrating how post-apocalyptic comics provide tools for reflecting on the entanglement amongst human beings and the environments in the Anthropocene era.

2. *Drowned world: water as a theoretical framework*

To fully grasp the specific significance of the imaginary standing at the intersection of aquatic and post-apocalyptic narratives, we must first unpack the epistemological and symbolic density of the water trope in post-apocalyptic visual culture. This implies situating our reflection within a broader critical framework, drawing on ecocriticism, posthuman theory, and insights from Blue Humanities.

Within the theoretical paradigm of the Blue Humanities⁷, water is not merely an ecological or environmental object; it emerges as a narrative medium and a material space charged with cultural, symbolic, and political significance⁸. Unlike land, which in Western tradition has been associated with stability, ownership, and historical linearity, water challenges the foundational epistemological dichotomies of modern thought – solid/liquid, inside/outside, human/non-human, nature/culture – and asserts itself as a dynamic, interstitial, and metamorphic element.

In this perspective, water represents a shifting threshold that destabilises not only the physical environment, but also ontological and narrative structures. In her *Bodies of Water* (2017), Astrida Neimanis articulates a posthuman feminist phenomenology, leveraging the concept to describe the posthuman condition as one of radical immersion and relationality, where subjectivity is no longer enclosed and stable but viscous, porous, and traversed by material, affective, and symbolic flows. Neimanis' reflection moves from the literal fact that our bodies are primarily composed of «wet matter» (2017: 1), which, against the myth of «discrete individualism» (2), are constantly engaged in processes of intake, transformation, and exchange through «drinking, peeing, sweating, sponging, weeping» (2).

Essential for the survival of life on Earth – or, more precisely, for most life forms, including the human – water in ecocritical and cultural theory is a symbol of ambivalent semantic charge. It simultaneously evokes generative force and destruction, change and stasis, devastation and rebirth. It is, in this sense, the quintessential liminal element, oscillating between life

⁷ See Mentz 2022; Oppermann 2023.

⁸ See Oppermann 2023; Steinberg – Peters 2015.

and death, origin and end. This symbolic tension extends across biological, philosophical-spiritual, as well as political and economic domains. Indeed, as Mark Bould reminds us, Hegel celebrated water – particularly the sea – as «the natural element of industry» associating it with the progressive drive of nations: «Hegel, unashamed apologist for capitalism-colonialism, claims that ‘all great progressive peoples press onward to’ the sea» (Bould 2021: 73).

This modern conception intersects with the legal history of maritime space: Ugo Grotius’s *Mare Liberum* (1609) established the principle that the sea, as a fluid and unoccupiable entity, should remain a collective, inalienable, and internationally accessible territory. This idea would later be challenged by John Selden’s *Mare Clausum* (1635), where water becomes an object of national appropriation and geopolitical control.

The historical and political evolution of symbols is far from neutral, and the progressive anthropogenic transformation of the marine environment has complicated, rather than neutralised, its figurative potential. Water, once an emblem of communication and interconnection, was re-configured as «a zone of potential expansion determined by asymmetrical access to capital and technology» (Bould 2021: 73), inscribed within the historical processes of colonialism and accumulation. The sea has thus not only been a mythical *topos*, but a deeply ideologized space where material and symbolic conflicts converge.

The semantic and ideological density of water surfaces with particular force in contemporary post-apocalyptic narratives, where the liquid element functions as a figurative device through which to render ecological collapse and socio-cultural crisis as tangible, ongoing, and diffuse. Aquatic post-apocalypses situate themselves at the crossroads of multiple theoretical and cultural genealogies: from ecocriticism in its narrow sense⁹ to eco-dystopias¹⁰, from Blue Humanities to contemporary genre hybrids merging horror, climate fiction, and posthumanism.

Within this framework, the submerged assumes a dual function, symbolising both erasure and transformation – of territories, memories, cultures, and subjectivities. Water is both threat and promise, trauma and possibility. On one hand, it represents the destruction of the human and its material and symbolic infrastructures; on the other, it serves as a symbolic resource that prompts us to reimagine identity as porous, relational, and fluid – as a “body of water”.

⁹ See Garrard 2004.

¹⁰ See Malvestio 2021a, 2021b, 2022.

In this light, aquatic post-apocalyptic narratives reveal their symbolic functioning as enantiosemes – structures whose meaning encompasses both a concept and its opposite. In fact, whereas apocalypse (from the Greek *apokálypsis*) means ‘revelation’ or ‘unveiling’, water acts as a contrary signifier: it covers and veils, inscribing within reality through a *calypsis*, a concealment. Moreover, the verb *kalýpto* is etymologically linked to the notion of submerged land.

Post-apocalyptic waterscapes are therefore oxymoronic articulations, structures of meaning that are sustained by a continuous renegotiation of their symbolic mechanisms in relation to the present. The recurrence of water in these narratives is thus symptom, sign, and symbol of a deeper paradigm shift traversing the imaginary of the post-apocalypse. To fully understand the articulations of this imaginary and before considering its implications with the post-apocalyptic genre, it is necessary to map our case studies against the broader comics production foregrounding water as the vector of societal (dis)continuities.

3. *Waterworlds*: genealogies, typologies, and discontinuities

The relation between comics and the aquatic element is still understudied¹¹. It is thus necessary to contextualize our case studies within the international comics landscape and a broader time span, starting in the second half of the 20th century. This makes it possible to delineate a fluid typology, a heuristic based on the articulations of the aquatic theme in relation to environmental trauma, civilizational collapse, and the transformation of subjectivities. We argue that five main narrative tropes can be identified:

1. *(Post-)deluge scenarios* depict worlds reshaped by a catastrophic water-related event, where survivors navigate flooded or submerged landscapes. Beyond the three Italian case studies that we will discuss in the next section, notable examples include the precursor *Blue Submarine No. 6* by Satoru Ozawa (1967); the comic adaptation of the film *Waterworld* (Reynolds 1995) titled *Waterworld: Children of Leviathan* and created by Chris Golden and Tom Sniegoski (1997);

¹¹ A significant exception is Poll’s application of the Blue Ecology framework to discuss the allegoric role of water in comics through the case study of *Aquaman* (2022).

FreakAngels by Warren Ellis and Paul Duffield (2008-2011); *Grand Océan* by Fabien Grolleau and Thomas Brochard-Castex (2019); and *Here* by Richard McGuire (1989/2014), which juxtaposes pre- and post-catastrophic moments within a disjointed, solastalgic temporality (see Busi Rizzi 2023). Also fitting within this constellation is *The Massive* (2012-2014) by Brian Wood and Kristian Donaldson, set in a world ravaged by ecological disasters.

2. *Submarine settlement narratives* can be divided into two subcategories. The first imagines humanity being forced to live beneath the ocean's surface in response to altered environmental conditions. This is the case in *Aquablue* by Thierry Cailleteau and Olivier Vatine (1988), where a distant planet serves as an oceanic analogue for Earth's crisis, and *Low* by Rick Remender and Greg Tocchini (2014-2020), set in decaying underwater cities. The second postulates the existence or discovery of a non-human, underwater civilization. This is a long-lived trope, most famous thanks to the long-running *Aquaman* franchise (1941-present), created by Paul Norris and Mort Weisinger. Recently, the trope has been reframed and reimagined in very diverse ways, for example in *Kaikisen (Tropic of the Sea)* by Satoshi Kon (1990), *Kaijū no Kodomo (Children of the Sea)* by Daisuke Igarashi (2005-2011), and *Aquatlantic* by Giorgio Carpinteri (2018).
3. While the submarine settlement trope incorporates, to varying extents, mechanisms that belong to the fantastic, the thematic premise of the underwater realm equally allows to articulate a distinct frame, centered on the *re-emergence of submerged horror*, where marine depths become sites of the reawakening of ancient civilizations, unknown species, or monstrous entities¹². This category includes Junji Ito's horror classic *Gyo* (2001-2002), *The Wake* by Scott Snyder and Sean Murphy (2013), *Aqualung* by Jacopo Paliaga and French Carlomagno (2016), and *Deep Beyond* by Mirka Andolfo and Davide Goy (2021).
4. We regroup under the idea of *figural and posthuman abstractions* the heterogeneous works in which the aquatic element first and fore-

¹² Of course, the link between water and the horror genre precedes and extends beyond this collective dimension, and can be found in Italian comics in the oneiric tone of *Le voci dell'acqua* by Tiziano Sclavi and Werther Dell'Edera (2019), or in the pair *Lavennder* (2017) and *Lavennder: la caccia* (2024) by Giacomo Bevilacqua.

most functions as a conceptual, metaphorical, and philosophical articulation. Genealogically, these stories are those most closely related to the new weird genre, which in turn bears a strong relation to Anthropocene fiction¹³. Notable recent examples include *In-Humus* by Linnea Sterte (2018) and *La Baleine blanche des mers mortes* by Wellenstein and Boiscommun (2021).

5. Finally, *thirsty worlds* are those staging water scarcity, for different reasons: drought in *Les Eaux de Mortelune* by Patrick Cothias and Philippe Adamov (1986-2000), *Wasteland* by Antony Johnston and Christopher Mitten (2006-2015), and the comic adaptation of *Mad Max: Fury Road* by Mark Sexton, Nico Lathouris, Leandro Fernandez, and Riccardo Burchielli (2015); glaciation in *Snowpiercer* by Jacques Lob and Jean-Marc Rochette (1984) and *Winterworld* by Chuck Dixon and Jorge Zaffino (1988); and contamination in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* by Hayao Miyazaki (the manga was published from 1982 to 1994).

It is worth noting that, despite the relatively small size of the Italian corpus that fully intersects post-apocalyptic themes with the aquatic element, these issues reverberate across a wider array of post-apocalyptic Italian comics spanning over several years and multiple genres. It is particularly striking that most works situated within this conceptual area come significantly earlier than the ones discussed in this article, and conspicuously adopt tropes and mechanisms of genre fiction, often resulting in a less philosophically speculative flair, yet arguably in more experimental, anarchically creative works. Notably, in the 1980s, dealing with post-apocalyptic scenarios was a recurrent narrative strategy to stage stories that delve deeply into violent and/or sexual imagery, consonantly with a certain European wave of underground sci-fi comics: one may mention *Ramarro* by Giuseppe Palumbo (which debuted in 1986 and was collected in a volume in 2017) and *Druuna* by Paolo Eleuteri Serpieri (1985-2018). This chronological divide suggests that a rupture has occurred between distinct imaginaries, pointing to a potential paradigm shift in the cultural representation of crisis.

¹³ See Ulstein 2017; Poller 2023.

4. *Mondi sommersi*: three Italian case studies in post-apocalyptic comics

Before moving to theoretical considerations, let us then examine how these dynamics unfold within the selected case studies.

The three Italian graphic novels analyzed here (*La terra dei figli*, *Celestia*, and *Troppo facile amarti in vacanza*) diverge in technique, style, and themes. Yet, through their specificities, all three works articulate an imaginary of submersion, where the aquatic medium operates as a privileged figurative device for negotiating cultural crisis, changing identities, and ecological transformation.

In Gipi's *La terra dei figli* (2016), water is a disintegrating force that severs characters from cultural memory and social continuity. The story follows two adolescent brothers, orphaned by an authoritarian, emotionally distant father, as they struggle to survive in a post-apocalyptic world where literacy has been eradicated and reduced to a relic of a bygone civilization. Unable to read their father's only legacy – his diary – the two sons embody a subjectivity radically detached from literacy and history: they live in an epistemic void where the written word, long a cornerstone of humanist tradition, has become inaccessible.

Gipi shapes a merciless, desolate narrative landscape dramatically impacted by a long-lasting flood. Characters live in isolation or within violent and messianic tribal communities, separated by a vast – though undefined – expanse of water. As we have observed elsewhere¹⁴, the protagonists' illiteracy symbolizes a radical severance from collective history. The submerged landscape thus not only points to environmental ruin, but, most notably, to the collapse of the symbolic institutions rooted in written culture mediating cultural transmission (family and education) resulting in a novel subjectivity defined by isolation and survival.

This severance is mirrored by the visual strategies of the comic: the stark contrast between black and white, lacking mid-tones, and the large, empty expanses of water that dominate the page. This contrast-driven aesthetic emphasizes how water serves as an epistemological threshold to a past that is no longer legible and a future impossible to narrate.

Manuele Fior's *Celestia* (2019) debuts with a diametrically opposed figuration of water: not destructive, but enveloping and protective. In contrast to Gipi's nihilistic approach, Fior offers a utopian, albeit decadent vi-

¹⁴ See Busi Rizzi – Di Paola 2024.

sion. The narrative revolves around an enclosed island-city, recognizable as a transfigured Venice through its architectural and toponymic references. This aqueous heterotopia is a sanctuary for nonconforming subjectivities gifted with psychic abilities, shielded from the violence of the outside world. It is a cultural laboratory of rebirth, where an enclave community based on psychic communication and new relational forms and subjectivities is meant to replace the exhausted cultural orders of the past.

The utopian architectures imagined by the author allude to – yet distort – Renaissance and classical tropes of the ideal city¹⁵, surrounded by and suspended in an amniotic liquid. Yet, at the same time, Fior's watercolor washes dissolve the solidity of architecture into its watery reflexes. The enclosing thus reveals as a simulacral surface, an imperfect mirror, a vector of derealization, that the young inhabitants will eventually leave in search of meaning amidst the ruins.

In Giacomo Bevilacqua's *Troppo facile amarti in vacanza* (2021), the aquatic environment becomes a vehicle of an ironic commentary on contemporary Italian society. Bevilacqua adopts a sharply disenchanted tone, in which the depiction of post-apocalyptic Italy is filtered through a grotesque, distorted lens. The protagonist, a wandering, disillusioned girl, traverses a flooded urban landscape where familiar spatial coordinates are distorted or lost. She confronts a disconnected and aggressively distrustful society, where the desolation of the landscape is accompanied by stark inequalities resulting from the collapse of social cohesion and the exacerbation of consumerist impulses, economic centralization, and strategies of social control.

Within this setting, water becomes a vehicle for visual and diegetic estrangement: it destabilizes and reconfigures the geography of the Italian peninsula into a fragmented archipelago of ruins that exacerbate existing divisions and conflicts. At the visual level, despite a cleaner and more pop-oriented style than that of the two preceding authors, the work engages with grotesque deformations and manga-inspired visual solutions. Water acts as a disorientating force, a symbol of the decomposition of collective memory and shared identity, highlighting the alienation and loneliness provoked by the fragmentation of a once unified nation.

Despite their distinct aesthetic and thematic approaches, the three works converge in constructing an imaginary where post-apocalyptic submerged worlds function as a social and medial metaphor for crisis and

¹⁵ See Colonnese 2021.

transformation. In doing so, they leverage the water's potential to bifurcate the semantics of the post-apocalyptic genre.

5. *The End of the World as we Know it: imaginaries of the catastrophe in recent years*

As spiritual and philosophical themes, apocalypse and post-apocalypse are consubstantial with human tradition itself and respond to a strong eschatological tension. Yet it is interesting to note how both configurations re-emerge and articulate themselves in the contemporary imaginary. A chronology of the contemporary apocalyptic imaginary intersects with the evolution of ecological thought and the geopolitical transformations of late modernity. Indeed, after WWII and again from the 1980s onwards, apocalyptic themes experience a marked intensification, driven by two parallel dynamics: on the one hand, the crisis of grand historical narratives – epitomized by Fukuyama's (1992) well-known formulation of the "end of history" – and on the other, the emergence of a global ecological consciousness, catalysed by emblematic turning points such as the Chernobyl disaster (1986). In Japan, this symbolic threshold had already been anticipated as early as the 1950s, following the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which generated an entire tradition of post-atomic narratives, the most iconic of which is arguably the first installment of the *Godzilla* movies (Ishirō Honda, 1954). From the 2000s onward, however, we witness a narrative turn: the focus moves from the depiction of catastrophe as a discrete event to its framing as a diffuse presence, underpinned by a growing sense of urgency, whose visual embodiment could be the Doomsday Clock – in the comics medium, a central trope to Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (1986-1987).

As Richard Grusin observes in his *Premediation: Affect and Mediality After 9/11* (2010), contemporary media do not simply depict the future; rather, they operate through an anticipatory *dispositif* that he terms 'premediation'. This process, distinct from prediction, describes a proliferation of narratives set in a possible future not with the aim of «getting the future right» (2010: 4) but to mitigate the potential shock of future events by maintaining a constant state of emotional preparedness in the present:

Premediation [occurs] both to maintain a low level of fear in the present and to prevent a recurrence of the kind of tremendous media shock that the United States and much of the networked world experienced on 9/11. (Grusin 2010: 4)

Indeed, Grusin argues that the media intensified this tendency following 9/11 – especially in what concerns the depiction of catastrophic scenarios. The effect is not so much explanatory or cathartic as it is preventative, saturating the future that becomes with traumatic potentialities, thus preparing audiences for the inevitable. This strategy of prefiguration – which continued through the Iraq war, financial crises, terrorism, and climate change – contributes to the formation of a permanent crisis imaginary, in which the future always appears to have been narrated in advance.

Similarly, in *La macchina del mito* (1995), Gino Frezza had already pointed to the way collective traumas are both anticipated and metabolized through symbolic forms produced by media. However, it is around the watershed of 9/11 – again as emphasized by Grusin – that we can identify a shift, which Frezza (2015) later characterizes as ‘endo-apocalyptic’. Frezza defines the endo-apocalypse as a narrative configuration in which the end of the world does not arrive as a singular, definitive event, but unfolds as an internal, continuous, and unending process. He writes, in reference to *The Walking Dead*:

The endo-apocalypse takes place within a temporality suspended in a persistent paradox: it is blocked, yet it stretches forward, only to become blocked again – moving and pausing, regenerating and dissolving within a boundless instant. (Frezza 2015: 280-281, our translation)

The endo-apocalypse thus does not represent a final ruin, but rather the slow, perpetual collapse of civilization as we know it – an *endemic* apocalypse that is structurally embedded within contemporary imaginaries and narratives.

Contemporary post-apocalyptic narratives radicalize this feeling of vulnerability, no longer responding to speculative fears, but to the concrete awareness of a collapse already underway. The causes are clearly identifiable: global warming, the depletion of natural resources, the loss of biodiversity, and the increasing frequency of climate disasters like floods, wildfires, and droughts. As Ribault (2021) remarks, these tensions are underscored by high-impact technological accidents, with Fukushima standing as another symbolic inflection point. At the same time, they are but one manifestation of a series of socio-political and economic tensions that traverse contemporary capitalism and shape its exploiting, colonial, and extractivist logic.

Within this context, comics emerge as a litmus test for contemporary

cultural sensibilities. Less constrained by the symbolic prestige of high culture, the medium has proven particularly effective in detecting and displaying signs of collapse, in a manner that is immediate, visual, and accessible. Carla Benedetti suggested in a recent essay that literature still offers the potential of “saving ourselves from extinction” (2021) by presenting us with models to face the global crises of our contemporaneity. Similarly and notably, over the past fifty years comics – through their hybrid, layered, yet popular language – have staged the risk of the upcoming collapse of the Anthropocene, and are now telling that the end is not nigh anymore, but has already (symbolically) happened.

6. *This is the end: the Anthropocene and the epicalyptic mode*

Indeed, we argue that, when intersecting with the post-apocalyptic theme, contemporary cultural production – as in the case of the comics examined here – neither anticipates the end of the world nor depicts a slow, diluted erosion. Instead and more radically, it is permeated by a new awareness of *already inhabiting* the post-apocalypse. Rather than dwelling on the shock of the apocalyptic passage – whether conceived as a singular event or as a protracted existential condition – these texts stage a post-apocalyptic state that overlays the present, haunting and veiling it.

We want to advance the hypothesis that this is best understood not through Frezza’s notion of *endo-apocalypse* (literally, ‘inner revelation’), but instead as a form of ‘*epicalypse*’ – a narrative and cultural condition where repressed, concealed post-apocalyptic scenarios *veil* the present, infiltrating the contemporary imaginary and folding into its temporality. The emergence of this paradigm is tied to the impact of recent real-world events – most notably, the unprecedented global «state of exception» (Agamben 2008) triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the growing frequency of severe natural disasters in areas once untouched. The epicalyptic imaginary thus reflects what Grossi calls the *grande rimozione* (great repression, Grossi 2024): the recognition that the apocalyptic threshold has already been trespassed, and we are living in a time after the time. In this scenario, nothing can be done to avert the end, for the end *has already taken place*.

We are thus facing a paradigm shift: whereas the apocalyptic tradition – religious, philosophical, or narrative – has historically framed revelation as an eschatological and ontological threshold, contemporary post-apocalyptic tropes merge the everyday and the aftermath without needing any

unveiling to take place. The (post-)apocalyptic imaginary – developed atop an already heavily stratified cultural and narrative substrate – has evolved into the ‘epicalyptic’ mode as a veritable *epic* of contemporaneity: a constellation of narratives that give form, voice, and iconography to the fundamental anxieties of the present.

This bears some affinity with Malvestio’s idea of “eco-dystopias” as a sub-genre of science fiction that addresses environmental concerns and blends dystopian with post-apocalyptic elements¹⁶. Yet a crucial distinction lies in the more intricate relation that the *epicalyptic* mode establishes with the present, which exceeds the dichotomy between rupture and continuity as it did with the dynamics of anticipation or deferral respectively described by Grusin and Frezza. On the one hand, like post-apocalyptic fiction, the *epicalyptic* mode begins in the aftermath of a (diegetic) speculative catastrophe; on the other, like eco-dystopias, it unfolds in continuity with (real-life) crises already underway, symbolically centering not on warning or mobilization, but on a pervasive sense of belatedness. Indeed, epicalyptic narratives do not aim to caution against impending disaster (as eco-dystopias do), for there is nothing (left) to prevent.

The epicalypse stems instead from the awareness of the unprecedented anthropogenic impact on the environment that has led the Humanities to conceptualize the Anthropocene as the techno-capitalist acceleration of a series of practices that are radically transforming and destabilizing the planet.¹⁷ It rests on the perception that ecological collapse is no longer impending, but unfolding, resonating with what Bevitori and Russo (2025) have described as the «polycrisis» or «permacrisis» of the Anthropocene. We have elsewhere discussed the link between present crisis and hauntology in relation to the multiversal imaginary (Busi Rizzi & Di Paola 2025), identifying it as a key narrative strategy for rendering the present *narratable* by staging alternative historical articulations that preserve a horizon of “futurability” (Berardi 2017).

Epicalyptic narratives reflect the interconnectedness of Anthropocene dynamics and stage the overlap between economic, ecological, and social

¹⁶ See Malvestio 2021a, 2021b, 2022, 2025.

¹⁷ While the scope and magnitude of these practices, and their ideological substrate, make the term extremely useful for Humanities scholars, the fact that humans have had an impact since their appearance on Earth and the capacity of the planet as a system to eventually regain homeostasis are the reason why the concept is more contended amongst scientists.

collapse, reflecting the deep tensions of our contemporary world. In these works, the post-apocalyptic is a pervasive condition, devoid of clear beginning or resolution. The once inhabited, now flooded spaces exemplified by our case studies are one of its central tropes: sites which bear the mark of the catastrophe, whose main tension is nonetheless (an estranged, allegorical version of) the present we already inhabit, rather than the future we might prepare to. The ubiquitous, ambivalent presence of water reflects the functioning of the mode, which appears as a lingering affect within diverse strands of contemporary artistic practice¹⁸.

7. Coda

Thirty years ago, Alberto Abruzzese discussed the emergence of a new «illiterate» subjectivity (1996) – one that differs radically from the notion of illiteracy as depicted in *La terra dei figli* (both the graphic novel and its cinematic adaptation). According to Abruzzese (2003), the new illiterate subject is «anti-modern», «anti-historical», and «anti-social», insofar as it rejects the ordered narratives that once provided coherence to the world. Hence, this novel form of subjectivity does not seek apocalyptic revelation or redemptive closure; rather, it rejects the very paradigm of catastrophe, opening to a radical reconfiguration of its premises and implications.

Indeed, the characters inhabiting the contemporary post-apocalyptic comics hereby discussed do not aspire to reconstructing the past or restoring a lost order. They navigate worlds devoid of fixed coordinates, where prior structures – cultural, economic, political – have become obsolete. This entails a fundamental disruption of the most entrenched modern institutions: capitalism, the nation-state, social hierarchies, gender roles, humanism and even humanity as a universal horizon of meaning. Epicalyptic narratives interrogate the intrinsic inadequacy of these symbolic structures in addressing the pervasiveness and impact of contemporary crises, and their complicity in generating them.

While “crisis” is an ancient conceptual category, it is only from the mid-twentieth century – and with increasing intensity over the last two

¹⁸ This resonates with Bould’s idea that the Anthropocene Unconscious (2021) can be found in *every* contemporary work: that is, that many literary, visual, and media works which do not explicitly thematize the Anthropocene, nonetheless express it latently and structurally through atmospheres, landscapes, symbols, temporal distortions, and topographies.

decades – that it has acquired, in our everyday life, a global, simultaneous, and systemic dimension, one potentially capable of extinguishing the human both as a cultural construct and a biological species. This realization underpins the epistemological caesura that this study has sought to discuss: a shift away from the narratives of the end and the archetype of the fall, and towards facing what lies beyond it, exploring the possibility of new forms of subjectivity that no longer recognize themselves in the philosophical-spiritual and economic-social models that have guided the world towards disaster.

Within this framework, submerged worlds emerge as powerful narrative and medial metaphors for such a transition. They mark the collapse of the world as we know it, but simultaneously suggest the potential for a rebirth, albeit one stripped of certainties. Submerged cities – once icons of the order, stability, and permanence of humanism – are now unusable relics, empty shells of a disintegrating symbolic system. Unable to confront new global challenges, late-capitalist structures are wiped out. Flooded landscapes, deprived of stable reference points, thus mirror the condition of new subjectivities: uprooted, yet flowing, free to reinvent themselves.

Water, as an agent that engulfs, dissolves, and absorbs, not only destroys what humanity has constructed, but reconfigures space according to alternative logics. It inscribes the image of nature reclaiming what was taken from it, but also points towards the possibility of a new, posthuman spatiality – where traditional oppositions between human and non-human, subject and environment, identity and alterity, begin to dissolve. Submerged worlds thus function not merely as representations of the end, but as a generative matrix for new forms: symbolic spaces capable of accommodating fluid, porous, relational identities, navigating indeterminacy through novel strategies.

This way, the fluidity of water becomes a medial metaphor for an emergent subjectivity: one that, despite its vulnerability, articulates a mode of active adaptation to collapse. Even within the extreme pessimism of some of these stories, it becomes a metaphor – still embryonic and ambiguous – for how new identities can detach themselves from existing conventions and navigate a world without certainties.

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The Article

Date sent: 30/04/2025

Date accepted: 31/08/2025

Date published: 30/11/2025

How to cite this article

Busi Rizzi, Giorgio – Di Paola, Lorenzo, “Calypsis. Submerged Worlds and the Post-Apocalyptic Imaginary in Contemporary Comics”, *Dopo la Catastrofe. Narrazioni postapocalittiche contemporanee. After the Catastrophe. Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Narratives*, Eds. E. Abignente – C. Cao – C. Cerulo, *Between*, XV.30 (2025): 63-83, <http://betweenjournal.it/>

