

# Ghostbusting in the Late Anthropocene

The 1980s, (Un)Conscious Climate Culture,  
and Our Holocene Afterlives

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## Abstract

This paper examines the latent ecocriticism of the horror-comedy *Ghostbusters: Afterlife* (2021) against its original source material in the context of climate catastrophe culture. As a sequel to the *Ghostbusters* films (1984, 1989), *Afterlife* shifts the setting: (geo)physically, from metropolitan New York City to a 'dirt farm' in Summerville, Oklahoma, and generationally, from the original middle-aged, male ghost-catchers to the teenaged grandchildren of the brightest among them. While the original antagonist – the (fictive) Sumerian god Gozer – returns once more to end the world, the Anthro(s)genic landscapes of *Afterlife* establish the film as a geopolitical intervention in the debate on the already-in-progress environmental apocalypse. In its (partial) rejection of the values of its 1980s-era source material, which is critically assessed herein, I argue that *Afterlife* speaks to humanity's emergence as a geological agent defined by geopolitical cultures rooted in human exploitation, hydrocarbon extraction, agro-industrialisation, and nuclearism. Indeed, the decade of Reaganism haunts the film, serving as a ghostly reminder of how

we arrived at our current Anthropocene predicament through white heteropatriarchal triumphalism, neoliberal excess, and ecocide.

**Keywords:** Popular culture, nuclearism, Anthropocene Epoch, landscapes, ecocide

### **The Original *Ghostbusters*: A Paean to Reaganism, Nuclearism, and Environmental Disregard**

*Ghostbusters* (1984) premiered shortly before the actor-turned-politician Ronald Reagan won re-election to the US presidency by a landslide. With its valorisation of neoconservative entrepreneurialism (Sirota 2011), pronuclear triumphalism (Horton and Brashinsky 1992), and anti-environmentalism (O'Brien 2016), the film serves as the paragon of what Paul (1988) has labelled 'Reaganite comedy'. *Ghostbusters* features three recently-fired (white) academics, Peter Venkman, Ray Stantz, and Egon Spengler, who form a 'paranormal investigations and eliminations' agency responding to phantasmal sightings across Manhattan. After several missteps, Spengler develops a nuclear-powered system for capturing spectres and storing them in a facility located below an old firehouse. As their celebrity grows, the trio – now rounded out by Winston Zeddemore, an African American – draw the attention of Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) inspector Walter Peck, who is concerned about the danger the Ghostbusters' catch-and-containment system poses to the city. The Ghostbusters ultimately trace the wave of paranormal activity to an Upper West Side apartment building. Built by the occultist Ivo Shandor, the skyscraper concentrates psychic turbulence to conjure the Sumerian death-god Gozer, a world-ending outcome. Rebuffed by the Ghostbusters, the zealous bureaucrat Peck leads a police raid on their facility and shuts down the containment unit, releasing a plague of ghosts on New York. Personifying the regulatory bogeyman of Reaganite nightmares, Peck presents the small business-owners with a 'cease and desist all commerce order, a seizure of premises and chattels, a ban on the use of public utilities for unauthorised waste handlers, and a federal entry and inspection order to tour the facility'. Despite their subsequent arrest, the Ghostbusters convince the Mayor of New York that 'they're here to save the world' (the tagline of the original movie poster). Freed from police custody, the foursome battle Gozer's avatar – a 34-metre-tall

Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man – and, with its destruction, prevent Armageddon.

Reflecting on its resonance, Bryan and Clark declare: ‘Ghostbusters never disappeared as a cultural touchstone of a generation’ (2019, 151); yet, they highlight the film’s troubling anti-environmental inclinations and how such fare reinforced Reaganite ideals, referencing the sitting president’s often-quoted maxim: ‘The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: “I’m from the government, and I’m here to help”’ (152). Here, I would like to focus on the ideology of nuclearism as presented both in the film, and more generally in the context of the Reagan’s ‘cold war’, a conflict that took place as much within pop-culture as it did on the surrogate battlegrounds of Nicaragua, Angola, and Afghanistan. Despite holding advanced degrees, the founding Ghostbusters are presented as ‘everymen’ of Middle America, replete with ‘receding hairlines’ and ‘beer bellies’ (Bryan and Clark 2019, 152). Yet, when prompted by fate, they (led by Spengler, who ‘haunts’ the film *Ghostbusters: Afterlife*, hereafter *Afterlife*) master the atom in short order, weaponizing positron colliders and building a nuclear-powered containment unit. In doing so, these ‘entrepreneurs’ effortlessly replicate the Big Science of government-funded physicists who unleashed the power of first nuclear bomb at Los Alamos on 16 July 1945 – an event which many Earth Systems Scientists use to mark the beginning of the Anthropocene.

While Reagan railed against government as the enemy of progress and profit at home, he positioned the US into an ever-more aggressive footing against the USSR in a nuclear stand-off by spending billions on weapons that could end all life on Earth. By placing ‘unlicensed nuclear accelerators’ in the hands of its anti-authority protagonists, *Ghostbusters* provides a popular-cultural cipher for the paradox of Reaganite nuclearism: a belief that the acquisition of more nuclear weapons functions as the *only* guarantee against nuclear annihilation, ultimately endowing the master of such an arsenal with god-like powers (Ungar 2010). In its vilification of the ‘dickless’ EPA inspector, who takes (appropriate) action against a group of unlicensed entrepreneurs running a nuclear reactor and wielding hand-held positron colliders in midtown Manhattan – but who ultimately save the ‘world’ after their (wrongful) disarmament is reversed (Grant 2009) – the film paradoxically validates Ameri-

can gumption in opposition to an ineffectual state. Likewise, the narrative affirms the US as the true master of the atom in its global contest with the Soviets via the Ghostbusters' development of the 'indispensable defence science of the next decade'. In its climax, these paunchy middle-aged men (and their Black employee) cross the streams of their electromagnetic-radiation weapons, eradicating the threat to Manhattan and metaphorically saving 'America' from Soviet aggression (Grant 2009). *Ghostbusters* trades in unapologetic boosterism of nuclear fission as the solution to the existential threat of nuclear winter, rather than a dangerous geological intervention that accelerated the cumulative effects of the (as-yet-unnamed) Anthropocene Epoch. Moreover, by shifting the possession of such god-like powers to 'up-by-the-bootstraps' businessmen, *Ghostbusters* signals a cultural shift wherein the (white, male, and American) individual – freed from governmental oversight – comes to command 'fundamental forces' that can disrupt 'planetary existence' (Kosmina 2021, 974), while also personifying the 'geological praxis' of resource extraction – 'natural and psychic' – that maintains 'white heteropatriarchy' (Yusoff 2021, 665).

### **The Anthro(s)genic Cartographies of *Afterlife*'s 'Oklahoma'**

*Afterlife* (2021) provides an unironic, though problematic apologia to the excesses of its source material, *Ghostbusters*. Decades after the Manhattan Interdimensional Crossrip, *Afterlife* opens on Spengler's 'dirt farm' outside of Summerville, Oklahoma. The prologue features Spengler luring a ghost through rows of corn into a giant trap-field sewn into soil of his front yard; however, his ploy fails when the technology malfunctions, triggering his death. Following Spengler's passing, his estranged daughter, Callie, and her two children are evicted from their apartment and travel to Oklahoma to take up residence in the ramshackle house bequeathed by their bankrupt forebear. The siblings – Phoebe and Trevor – soon discover that their grandfather was an original Ghostbuster, and relocated to the town due to its defunct mine, once owned by Ivo Shandor and which houses a Gozerian temple within its depths. Under the guidance of Phoebe's teacher, Gary Grooberson, an amateur seismologist, the teens unravel the mystery of Spengler's death, being drawn into conflict with Gozer, who has been trapped beneath the mine

since 1984. Aided by the surviving members of the original team and the physical manifestation of Spengler's ghost, the next generation of Ghostbusters dispatch the world-ending threat once more, trading the backdrop of Manhattan for the Oklahoma prairie.



Figure 1. Spengler's Dirt Farm in Oklahoma

In the choice of location for the inter-generational continuation of the Ghostbusters story, Jason Reitman (son of *Ghostbusters* producer Ivan Reitman) situates the narrative in a 'haunted landscape' of the (American) Anthropocene – a space where ghosts serve as 'the vestiges of past ways of life still charged in the present' (Gan et al. 2017, 1). As Anthropocene scholars have argued, supported by Indigenous Studies colleagues, the world has already been irrevocably transformed for the worse for many human populations around the globe; however, it is only now that the (Geo)Humanities is coming to grips with this fact through the explicit 'conjoining of genocide and ecocide' as central to the colonial project (Yusoff 2021, 667). As the terminus of the notorious Trail of Tears for the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, Seminole, and Cherokee, Oklahoma – formerly Indian Territory – served as a sort of *off-world* settlement zone following the end of these Native American nations' *worlds* at the hands of the US federal government. These peoples were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands in the south-eastern United States, resulting in massive casualties before, during, and post-transit. This physical violence was compounded by the loss of connection to that territory which had long served as a space of creation and maintenance

for their myths, lifeways, and interactions with the more-than-human (animals, plants, bodies of water). Compounding the tragedy, Oklahoma was shortly ‘opened up’ to settler colonialism in the Land Rush of 1889, negating Native American sovereignty, and amplifying the deportees’ physical, economic, and spiritual precarity, effectively visiting a second apocalypse upon the first Oklahomans.

A generation after Oklahoma gained admission to the union (1907), it became ground-zero for the environmental catastrophe known as the Dust Bowl. Due to over-farming and unsustainable land-use practices, combined with changing weather patterns (extended drought, hotter temperatures, increasing winds), the Southern Plains States suffered massive erosion and frequent dust storms in the 1930s. Environmental degradation triggered widespread crop failures and livestock die-offs, as well as respiratory illnesses amongst the human population. Treating the phenomenon as a ‘climatic event, a geomorphic event, and a socioeconomic event’, Cordova and Porter (2015) posit that future geoarchaeologists will link sedimentary evidence and the ruination of settlements in the 1930s, when so-called ‘black blizzards’ carried Great Plains topsoil as far as Greenland and California. Descendants of those Euro-American settlers who had quite recently displaced the five Indian nations thus watched their own *world* become subsumed in dust, with some 2.5 million ‘Okies’ quitting the region to move west. Yet, these *Homo sapiens* were luckier than those other-than-human beings who could not flee the ecological catastrophe. The wheat farmer Lawrence Svobida recalls:

As [the dust storm] sweeps onward, the landscape is progressively blotted out. Birds fly in terror before the storm, and only those that are strong of wing may escape. The smaller birds fly until they are exhausted, then fall to the ground, to share the fate of the thousands of jack rabbits which perish from suffocation. (qtd. in Richardson 2015, 59-60)

Within American popular culture, such imagery of environmental cataclysm remains vibrant, with the continued circulation of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), the motion picture *The Wizard of Oz* (Fleming, 1939), and Dorothea Lang’s iconic photograph

of an 'Okie' mother, Florence Owens Thompson and her two toddlers (1936). Born in Indian Country in 1903, Thompson claimed Cherokee heritage on both sides of her family, thus linking the loss of two worlds in one lifetime.

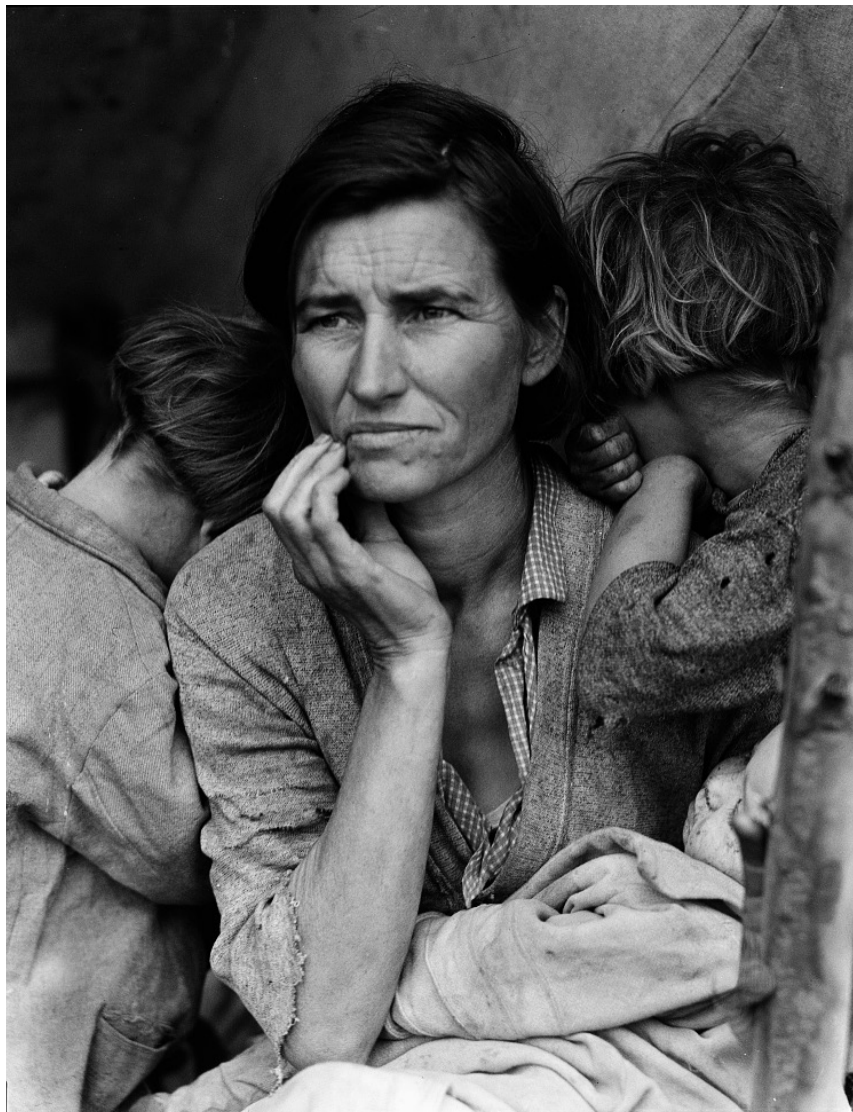


Figure 2. Migrant Mother by Dorothea Lang. 1936. Courtesy of the US Library of Congress

Even before becoming a state, Oklahoma ranked as the largest oil-producing territory in America, only losing that title to California in 1927 when its output peaked. However, since 2014, crude oil production has increased dramatically, with Oklahoma ranking fifth in

the country. Despite its small size, the state is the US's third-largest producer of fossil gas, with 70 percent of output being sold outside the state. While agriculture has greatly diminished in its importance to Oklahoma's economy, it retains its position as the country's fifth-largest producer of both cattle and wheat. Regarding these monocultures, it is incumbent for any discussion of the Anthropocene and the American 'frontier' to highlight the necropolitical 'geosocial relations' (Yusoff 2021, 670) that bind westward colonisation and the near-extinction of the American bison (from a peak population of 30 million to just over 1,000 around 1900), a government-abetted ecocide that bound genocidal Indian Wars *and* the 'targeted' destruction of the 'entire prairie ecosystem' to make way for cattle grazing (Grove 2019, 2-3).

Linking these products (hydrocarbons, cattle, and grain), all being major inputs to anthropogenic climate change, it is feasible to describe the landscape of Oklahoma as a paragon of what Ellis and Ramankutty (2008) have deemed an 'anthrome' (anthropogenic biome). As a species capable of remaking ecosystems through technology, most notably the 'human control of combustion' (Dalby 2018, 718), vast portions of the world have been altered into spaces that are nigh unrecognisable due to the presence of humans. Beyond human habitation and its attendant transformation of the landform into built-environments of concrete, steel, glass, and lumber, we must also consider the conversion of wildlands into croplands and rangelands. As an anthrome, Oklahoma demonstrates how dramatically the landscape can be altered, a process that began in earnest in 1830 with Congress' passage of the Indian Removal Act (de Beurs 2016).

### **The Climate Catastrophe Culture of *Afterlife***

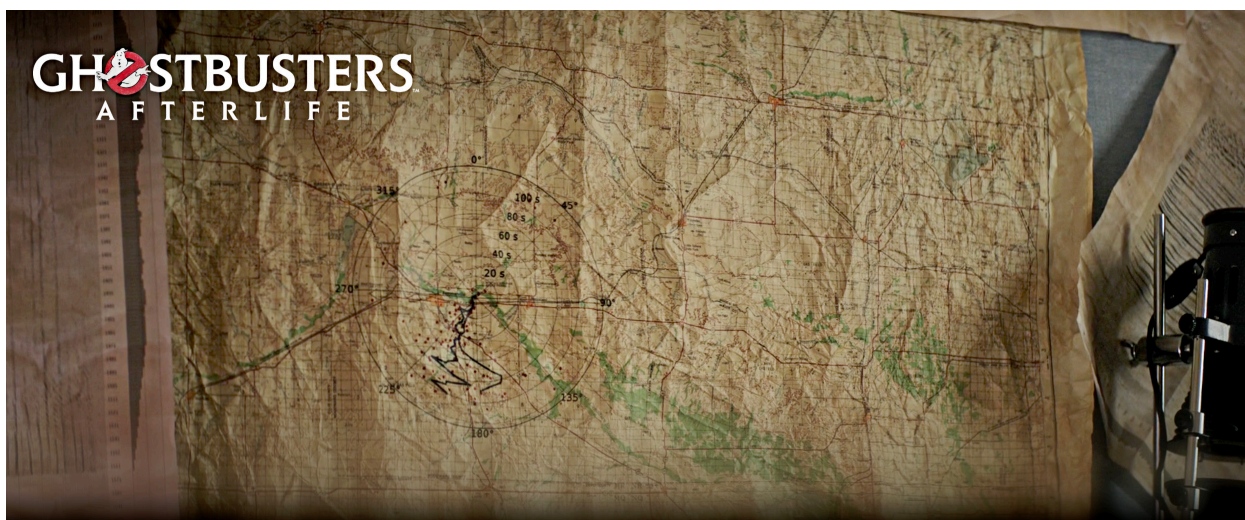
Within *Afterlife*, anthropogenic impacts on the planet are obliquely addressed through symbolic representation. However, there is no reason why we should not unpack such interventions, since even small depictions – such as that of *Afterlife*'s 'Oklahoma' imaginary – can help us to *see* the 'always invisible' hyperobject that is planetary catastrophe: a thing which defies our framing of the world and which 'presses chaos, complexity, and non-linearity upon us' (Bould 2021, 14). In *Afterlife*, this is done via its meaning-laden Anthropocenic landscapes, which haunt the present, serving as ghostly re-



minders of past misdeeds done to the land and the people on it. While a red herring, fracking (and its connection to frequent earthquakes) is raised by Mr. Grooberson in his discussions with the Spengler family. He declares that the earthquakes – the first of which occurs as the Spenglers arrive – cannot be attributed to hydraulic fracturing, thus begging the question why does Grooberson mention fracking? Perhaps we can find the answer by diagnosing what Bould (2021) refers to as the Anthropocene unconscious of the text, i.e. the latent ecocriticism of *Homo sapiens*' millennia-long despoiling of the planet and our unseen violations of those other 'lives' that call it home (fauna, flora, and various forms of nonlife).

In order to access fossil gas deposits, a mixture of water, hazardous chemicals, and sand is injected at high velocity into underground rock formations creating fissures that enable access to 'trapped' pockets of fossil fuel. The highly polluting and literally earth-shaking technoscience of fracking thus serves as a paragon of extractivism combining 'verticality, subterranean spaces, and volumetrics' (Yusoff 2021, 666-667). Since 2000, there has been a precipitous increase in fracking across North America, quickly making the US the world's largest producer of fossil gas and oil. The environmental impact of the practice is notorious, from air pollution and flammable well-water, to water supply depletion and 'human-induced earthquakes' in places where they were almost non-existent – with Oklahoma serving as the most dramatic example of this phe-

Figure 3. Grooberson's map of seismic activity near Summerville



nomenon (Denchak 2019). Perhaps there is no better metaphor of the geological agency of humans than the causation of seismic events as a by-product of our pursuit of ever-more energy at ever-cheaper prices. But the viewer must remember that the earthquakes in *Afterlife* are *not* related to such fracking, which resulted in Oklahoma going from between 0-3 earthquakes per year before 2008 to a peak of 887 in 2015 (Lewis 2019).

While the diegetic setting of *Afterlife* is Oklahoma, primary filming took place in the Canadian province of Alberta. Such visual leg-erdemain invites scholars of the (Geo)Humanities to bring the *real* and *imagined* landscape into the frame of analysis. Apropos of our discussion of Oklahoma as a focal point of US hydrocarbon production, Alberta's Athabasca oil sands rank as the fourth-largest reserve in the world, behind Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. An extremely 'dirty' practice, tar sands production produces triple the global-warming pollution when compared to conventional crude. Its impact on the surrounding landscape and local ecosystems are also acute, as a 'hugely expensive energy- and water-intensive endeavour that involves strip mining giant swaths of land and creating loads of toxic waste and air and water pollution' (Denchak 2015). *Afterlife's* evocative use of landscape speaks to these issues. The elder Spengler grandchild Trevor lands a summer job at the local drive-in, itself a visual manifestation of the American car culture/petroculture, which has dramatically contributed to global

Figure 4. Defunct mine owned by the occultist Ivo Shandor



climate change. After proving himself, he is invited by his work-mates to visit the old mine, which serves as the locus of evil for the remainder of the film. Their mode of transportation is a Ford Ranchero, an iconic vehicle of the 1970s when leaded gasoline peaked in North America – another potential marker of the Anthropocene. While the ‘mine’ is digitally fabricated, the vistas of Horsethief Canyon are not, and the area is indeed defined by the robotic stolidity of pumpjacks churning out oil from the region’s geological composition, which has long produced dinosaur fossils (Ebner 2010) – a material reminder of the fragility of our own relationship with a planetary ecosystem that hinges on ‘extractive afterlives’ (Yusoff 2021, 663).

*Afterlife*’s climax occurs at the edge of a corn field, pointing us to the last element of the film’s Anthro(s)genic engagement. Although wheat is king in Oklahoma, placing the fictive Summerville within America’s corn belt is meaningful (interestingly, cinematic trickery represents both wheat and corn fields; from a distance, the ‘dirt farm’ is dominated by the former, but in action shots, we see the characters framed by rows of maize). Interestingly, Alberta is part of Canada’s ‘new corn belt’, where maize has supplanted wheat due to longer growing seasons and warmer temperatures, both of which are expected to increase by 2050 (Bjerga 2012). Corn – like petroleum – has been diversified for its by-products as part of the Great Acceleration: the result is that corn has entered the food system in other ways, being responsible for a dramatic increase in American waistlines since 1980, especially as a less-healthy substitute for cane sugar. ‘King Corn’ is at the root of not only the far-ranging transformation of the North American landscape, but has also contributed to the breaching of planetary boundaries by disrupting biogeochemical cycles. Via millions of tonnes of artificial fertilizers to increase harvests, both nitrogen and phosphorus levels are skyrocketing, threatening local plant and animal life and causing run-off into distant water sources portending ‘epidemics of toxic tides, lifeless rivers, and dead oceans’ (Pearce 2018). Moreover, twenty-first-century corn is perhaps the most reflective of (neoliberal) humanity’s god-like powers when it comes to nature, with patented genetic modifications that increase yields and make the crop resistant to herbicides (thus encouraging the widespread use of patented weedkillers,

which disrupt traditional forms of soil renewal, simultaneously endangering pollen-distributing bee colonies and human health).

### **Nuclearist/Neoliberal Afterlives, or the 1980s as a Cultural ‘Golden Spike’ of the Anthropocene**

Considering the vibrancy of the Ghostbusters franchise, I will conclude with a brief discussion of how *Afterlife* serves as a mediation of the Accelerationist sins of the (grand)father, without explicitly repudiating the past. In their shared existential adversary, both films focus on defeating a being revered by the first civilisation, Sumer. Via its advances in technology, agriculture, commerce, and record-keeping, the Sumerians set the species on its Anthropocene path towards self-annihilation. Near the end of *Afterlife*, the young protagonists poignantly discover evidence of several near-misses of Armageddon carved into the subterranean temple walls: 1883 (Krakatoa Eruption), 1908 (Tunguska Event), 1945 (Los Alamos), and 1984 (Manhattan Interdimensional Crossrip). As Kosmina (2021) points out in her analysis of *Twin Peaks: The Return*, the first nuclear bomb test in 1945 is marked not only as an Anthropocenic event, but also a supernatural one, opening up the world to evil. Linking 1945 to 1984, Relidzyńska (2021) argues that the sf-horror series *Stranger Things* – set between November 1983 and July 1985 – locates the peak of Anthropocenic culture via its ironic treatment of mid-1980s Reaganism: nuclearist, neoliberal, consumerist, and extractivist.

While both of these artefacts filter their plots through ‘today’s political and environmental consciousness and anxieties’ to express our ‘current, collective angst’ (Relidzyńska 2021, 238), *Afterlife* takes another approach, *resurrecting* its decades-old source material to accomplish an analogous outcome. From my reading of the film, I see three particularly representative examples. First, when placed in the hands of a 12-year-old girl attended by her even younger companion, Podcast, the awesome power of the positron collider – which emits a rope-like beam of highly-concentrated gamma rays – is on full display, creating a frisson of dread markedly different from the affect produced in previous films where misfires of the weaponry were employed for comic relief. Second, rather than the tony Manhattan high-rise where the most successful Americans of the 1980s would have aspired to live, the climactic locus of *Afterlife* is a derelict farm in ‘Oklahoma’. A socio-geographic shifting of the

existential battlespace from the (urban) apex of consumerism to a (rural) synecdoche of the collapse of America's smallholders subtly critiques what ghostbusting means in a world haunted by past ecocidal actions. Third, the absent presence in *Ghostbusters* was inarguably the USSR (and its superior nuclear arsenal), whereas the transcendent signified of *Afterlife* is the Anthropocene (and its multivalent threats to *Homo sapiens'* dominance of the planet). While both films metaphorically counterpoise the same supernatural threat (Gozer) against a genuine existential one (nuclear winter versus an unliveable planetary ecosystem), the former revels in its disregard for the environment, while the latter curates a landscape assemblage that reminds the viewer of humanity's injustice to the planet and its (other-than-)human denizens.

Like the oft-referenced cli-fi film *Interstellar* (2014), *Afterlife's* mission to save humanity from Armageddon is launched from a corn field: a telling manifestation of the Anthropocene-inflected ecoanxiety that is increasingly haunting our screens. While it playfully and profitably commoditises catastrophe, *Afterlife* nonetheless invests in a generational revision of the original values of the *Ghostbusters* franchise. In doing so, it steers the viewer towards a subtextual understanding of the Anthropocene and its attendant calamities, which find fertile soil in the prairies of *both* Oklahoma *and* Alberta. Consequently, the most recent iteration of the *Ghostbusters* franchise makes a contribution – however tentative – to 'limit the destruction we call the Anthropocene and protect the Holocene entanglements we need to survive' (Gan et al. 2017, 2), specifically by placing the hero's mantle on the shoulders of the next generation who will need to 'save the world' from the damage previous ones have done to it.

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