

On Not Existing

Michael Sarnoski's *Pig* and an Underworld Myth for the Anthropocene

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Commentaries are brief opinion pieces that are intended to introduce an idea or identify connections between works which beg for deeper investigation and analysis. Explicitly not an account of a research project or a comprehensive investigative endeavor, a Commentary in Confluence is a snapshot, a single moment from the initial encounter with an idea or connection that suggests possibilities for interrogation toward new understanding. The Commentary is an appeal to think about an idea, to consider a question, and to take up in earnest the possible conversation toward which the Commentary points.

“**W**here classical music proves superior to all other forms is in its staying power,” the disembodied voice of a radio DJ intones. He continues: “It was beautiful two hundred years ago and will remain beautiful two hundred years from now,” at which point the bloodied and unkempt hermit Rob shuts off the radio in disgust. His companion, the overly-hair-gelled Amir, turns the radio back on as the announcer praises, “Something so potent and elemental in the appeal...,” and Rob silences him for good. For whereas Amir only hears



Rob shares a mushroom tart with Apple (author's screen capture).

the DJ extoll the permanence of man's artistic creations, Rob understands the announcer's error—for us, there will be no two hundred years from now.

Michael Sarnoski's 2021 revenge tragedy-turned-ecocritical film *Pig* seeks to explore our unacknowledged loss, destruction, and mourning by presenting us with an underworld myth for the Anthropocene. *Pig* stars Nicholas Cage as Robin Feld, a former darling of the Portland culinary scene who, after his wife's death, retreats to an isolated existence in the Oregon backwoods. His sole companion is his prized truffle pig, Apple, with whom he hunts the prized delicacies that he sells to businessman try-hard Amir, played by Alex Wolff. When masked intruders brutally attack Rob and steal Apple, Rob enlists Amir on a journey back in time. Together they sojourn into the city that Rob escaped, searching food truck festivals, an underground fight club for disenfranchised restaurant grunts, and the upper echelons of Portland's burgeoning culinaria, only to learn that the stolen Apple is already dead. As Rob faces the grief of losing the only remaining living creature he truly loves, Sarnoski asks us to contemplate our own mortality and experience a grief so deep we refuse to allow ourselves to feel. For that which is lost in *Pig* is not the titular Apple, or Rob's wife, or even the life that Rob enjoyed in the before-times; rather, *Pig* forces us to mourn the much more profound, apocalyptic, and—most importantly—already irreversible loss of human futurity.

In 2000, atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen and ecologist Eugene F. Stoermer popularized the term “Anthropocene” to emphasize the central role that humankind has played in geological and ecological change.¹ The Anthropocene has become the guiding concept behind much of the science behind climate change and environmental justice. As Elizabeth Kolbert argues in *The Sixth Extinction*, “No creature has ever altered life on the planet in this way before,”² whereas Ugo Bardi plainly states, “we keep

¹ Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, “The ‘Anthropocene,’” *Global Change Newsletter*, The International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (IGBP): A Study of Global Change of the International Council for Science (ICSU), May 2000, 17. *Interdisciplinary Encyclopedia of Religion and Science*. <https://inters.org/files/crutzenstoermer2000.pdf>.

² Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014), 2–3.

destroying everything, including ourselves.”³ The concept has become something of a trendy buzzword in the sciences and the humanities, from the interactive website “Welcome to the Anthropocene” to YA author John Green’s 2021 collection *The Anthropocene Reviewed* to Grimes’s 2020 album *Miss Anthropocene*. Feminist and decolonial critics have amended the original term to stress uneven human responsibility for climate change—the “Chthulucene,”⁴ the “Capitalocene,”⁵ the “Plantationocene,”⁶ or calls to “decolonize the Anthropocene.”⁷ We can conclude, then, that despite Ted Nordhaus’s assumption that “[t]hinking about apocalypse, like thinking about one’s own death, is not something that most of us have much enthusiasm for. And so we don’t”⁸ may not be entirely accurate. It seems like we are, in fact, thinking quite a lot about our imminent demise.

Rob and Amir’s journey to recover the unrecoverable Apple leads them on a trip up the food chain in the form of the contemporary food *supply* chain, from the woods where truffles grow to the farm stand where the truffles are sold to a *haute cuisine* restaurant where they are cooked and consumed. But this ascent is actually a descent, taking Rob further from the land (of the living)

³ Ugo Bardi, “Stewards of the Earth: A Role for Humankind.” *Resilience*, Post Carbon Institute, September 29, 2015. <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2015-09-29/stewards-of-the-earth-a-role-for-humankind/#>.

⁴ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 29.

⁵ Jason W. Moore, ed., *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2016), 5–6.

⁶ Janae Davis, Alex A. Moulton, Levi Van Sant, and Brian Williams, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, or Plantationocene? A Manifesto for Ecological Justice in an Age of Global Crises.” *Geography Compass*, 2019, e12438. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12438>.

⁷ Zoe Todd, “Indigenizing the Anthropocene,” in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environment, and Epistemology*, ed. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 241–254; Kyle Powys Whyte, “Indigenous climate change studies: Indigenizing futures, decolonizing the Anthropocene,” *English Language Notes* 55, no. 1 (2017): 153–162; Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

⁸ Ted Nordhaus, “The Climate Change Apocalypse Problem.” *Anthropocene Magazine*, June 2019. <https://www.anthropocenemagazine.org/2019/06/the-climate-change-apocalypse-problem/>.

and closer to the food's, and his own, ultimate destruction. Early in his quest, Rob seeks out Edgar, a former colleague who runs the underground fight club. Rather than celebrating Rob's return to civilization, Edgar derides the vanished master: "I remember a time when your name meant something to people, Robin. But now? You have no value. You don't even exist anymore. You don't exist." The world has gone on without Rob, and, as Edgar's sentiments reveal, he will not be welcomed back. If we conceive of the Anthropocene not only as an epoch of geological time but also as an affective era defined by unexpressed and unfelt grief, then Rob's search for Apple enacts that grief not for what is lost but for what we refuse to acknowledge as lost.

This search, furthermore, mirrors the trajectory of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, in which Orpheus, son of Apollo and Calliope, descends to the Stygian realm to recapture his wife Eurydice, who died of a snakebite on their wedding day.⁹ After pleading his case with Hades and Persephone, Orpheus retrieves Eurydice from the underworld, although Hades warns him that Eurydice must walk behind Orpheus and Orpheus must not turn around to look at her while they walk. However, fearing that the gods have replaced Eurydice with a shade, Orpheus loses faith a few feet from the exit and turns to look at Eurydice, sending her back to be trapped with Hades forever. The myth, retold repeatedly since Virgil's *Georgics*—a poem about agriculture, coincidentally enough—has become synonymous with the risks and futility of *looking*, for what we love is not lost in the losing but rather in looking for it.

And yet looking is exactly what Rob insists on doing. Granted access to the most privileged spaces of Portland's culinary scene by virtue of his former fame, Rob embodies the god-protected Orpheus. And like Orpheus, Rob ultimately finds Eurydice, this time in the guise of an upscale eatery that shares the heroine's name, run by Derek Fenway, a chef whom Rob once fired. But the Derek that Rob knew aspired to open an authentic British pub; instead, Rob's meal at Eurydice begins with an empty soliloquy:

We all have a set of beliefs about the world
around us. To challenge them is to acknowledge
our foundation is sand, but it opens us up to

⁹ Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 313.



Deconstructed scallops at Eurydice (author's screen capture).

something greater, to pure connection, to true life. Today's journey begins by uniting the depths of the sea with the riches of our forests. We've emulsified locally sourced scallops encased in a flash-frozen seawater roe blend, on a bed of foraged huckleberry foam, all bathed in the smoke from Douglass fir cones.

An Orpheus disillusioned, Rob discovers that Eurydice is already lost, irrevocably lost, and has always been lost. His underworld journey, however, collides with the Anthropocene through its connection to the local food movement. Yes, the scallops are local and the huckleberries were foraged, but they have been destroyed to the point of being unrecognizable. We've been primed to view food in the revenge tragedy as a metaphor for consumption and destruction, thanks largely to *Titus Andronicus* and *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover*, but in *Pig* food becomes a neutral agent that takes on a moral position only in the hands of humans. The food's locality, that touchstone of eco-friendly cooking, signifies nothing in light of what Derek has done to it—intentionally metamorphosized into something foreign. The food in *Pig* does not remind the eater that he is alive; it reminds him that, for him to be alive, something else had to be destroyed. Derek has convinced himself that Eurydice fulfills him, but it is merely a shade of his dream, a loss Rob forces him to confront: "Every day you wake up and there'll be less of you. You live your life for them, and they don't even see you." Derek's face contorts into a manic grimace, for what other response is there? He is trapped in a reminder of his own failure, a failure that cares little about him.

Likewise, we created the Anthropocene, but the Anthropocene doesn't care about us. The earth merely *is*, and it

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will do what it's going to do without any regard to us at all. On a larger scale, we are what needs to be destroyed. Sarnoski, and Rob by extension, takes an ambiguous moral position on the inevitability of humanity's nonexistence, merely presenting us with the bald-faced fact that every moment we are alive, we and the world around us are less. The Eurydice server's speech about uniting the sea with the forests foolishly promises connection and authenticity by focusing on the local, but Rob gives his own monologue about what the sea and the forests have in store for humanity:

We don't have to care. People first came out here ten thousand years ago, we would have been under four hundred feet of water. Every two hundred years, we get an earthquake right along the coast. One's coming up. When the shockwave hits, most of the city will flatten. Every bridge will fall into the Willamette, so...there's nowhere to go, even if we could. Anyone who survives that, just waiting, five minutes later they'll look up and they'll see a wave ten stories high and then this, everyone, it's all gonna be at the bottom of the ocean. Again.

Pig's Eurydice, like Orpheus's lost bride, falsely promises life of the "Earth Mother will provide" variety. Rob prophesies that the inevitable union of sea and forest will not be for our benefit; it is not something for us to consume. It is precisely our efforts to recapture the lost, however, that forces us to acknowledge the permanence of that loss. Rob confronts Derek with the



Derek Fenway faces his failure and his loss (author's screen capture).

authenticity he lost by acknowledging his foundation of sand, and the film concludes with Rob confronting the loss of Apple, who has been dead since before Rob even started looking for her. After learning of Apple's death, Rob and Amir share a wake of diner coffee and prepackaged brownies, where Rob laments, "I was thinking...if I never came looking for her, in my head she'd still be alive." Amir softly replies, "But she wouldn't be," to which Rob, after a long pause, acknowledges, "No, she wouldn't be." For this is the moral of the Anthropocene—that, as Megan Garber notes, "The end is nigh, and also the end is...*sigh*."¹⁰ We may be able to preserve what is lost within our minds if we refuse to look, but in the Anthropocene such willful ignorance is a luxury we are no longer afforded. *Pig* may be a movie about a pig—a symbol of lost innocence named Apple, no less—but it also a movie about us, in that it shows us that nothing is really about us anymore. We are our own illusion, our own unacknowledged loss, and we all exist only in our own minds.

¹⁰ Megan Garber, "Apocalypse is Now a Chronic Condition," *The Atlantic*, February 1, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2019/02/frank-kermode-revisited-apocalypse-pop-culture/581803/>.

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