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## EXTINCTION FEVER

**ABSTRACT:** For the first time in human history, extinction has expanded into the common parlance of everyday life. Not only is it no longer special, but it has also entered into the vast machinations of the culture industry. The certainty of our extinction is, however, grounded in the paradox of the uncertainty of how it will all play out. And so, despite the seeming inevitability of extinction, its presumed factualities sound fictional and, indeed, science fiction has had a field day. The opening up of awareness of the vast time scales at play has also created a new temporal condition based on a basic truth: we, the human species, will not have time to “evolve” into something else. In other words, despite the long-drawn-out processes of our evolution, we are now stuck in the awkward fixity of our supposed “humanity” as something that is now both permanently endangered and permanently fragile.

**KEYWORDS:** extinction, evolution, *Schadenfreude*, deep history

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As in a dream, the pursuer never succeeds in catching up with the fugitive whom he is after, and the fugitive likewise cannot ever clearly escape his pursuer. (Homer, *The Iliad*, book 22, lines 199–200)<sup>1</sup>

In past centuries, the project of our modernity found its grounding in the vexing socio-political encounter between human and machine. Today, that encounter is no longer as comprehensible or even critiquable since the two—largely because of data capitalism—have become co-dependent. AI will seal the deal for better or worse. What then marks the project of our modernity *now*? It is the encounter—or perhaps better, the re-encounter—between the human and its future, a future that might well end in its extinction. Up until now, philosophy has had more or less two imaginaries of the future, a theological one that focused on the afterlife, and a more recent secular one that emphasized a gradualist version of progress and development. The first is embodied in the notions of heaven, Judgment Day, and reincarnation, which are, of course, for many people still foundational to their worldviews. *Star Trek* is the perfect example of the second, with Starfleet, maintained by the United Federation of Planets, the model of a society organized around the needs for deep space exploration, research, defense, peacekeeping, and diplomacy within a multi-species universe. Despite all the dramas, things always seem to work out. There are of course any number of agencies and organizations that try to get to that magical place in real time, one of them being, for example, the Future of Life Institute, created in 2014.<sup>2</sup> Its goal is to steer transformative technologies towards benefiting life and away from large-scale risks.

There is now, however, a new “future” suited to the late Anthropocene that gives the human a more diminished place in the eco-fauna-physical world. We are now, or at least now partially willing to admit, that we are part of a vast natural continuum and not just its most superior manifestation. This more inclusive view was held by our distant ancestors and is now slowly making a sort of comeback. Increasingly, a wide range of animals are gaining legal status, and so too are trees, rivers and

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<sup>1</sup> Referenced in S. Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1991, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> FLI was founded by MIT cosmologist Max Tegmark, Skype co-founder Jaan Tallinn, DeepMind research scientist Viktoriya Krakovna, Tufts University postdoctoral scholar Meia Chita-Tegmark, and UCSC physicist Anthony Aguirre.

mountains.<sup>3</sup> In New Zealand, the Te Urewera National Park was recently declared a legal entity. The Ganges and Yamuna Rivers are now also considered legal persons. If we add to that Paul MacLean's thesis from the 1960s that we all still have in our heads a "reptile brain," then suddenly our old security in the integrity of our being—critical to the very idea of our modernity—seems quite uncertain.

And to make things worse from the point of view of our normative exceptionalism, we now know that ninety-nine percent of the genes in your body are bacterial. Only about one percent is human. We are indeed mostly microbes. In fact, our planet is populated by at least a trillion species of microorganisms, with 99.999% of them remaining undiscovered. Every life form is sustained by these microorganisms, and they make the planet habitable. Some scientists have even postulated that "microorganisms demonstrate conscious-like intelligent behavior."<sup>4</sup> Why am I not surprised?

This new sense of self—one that "rides along" with nature—seems to see that same nature, in its outward manifestation at least, increasingly through the lens of cataclysm, turning nature into a planetary geo-political force all unto its own. Our diminished Self and our vulnerable Self are two sides of the same coin. The Weather Channel on Facebook captures the latest videos of hurricanes, tornadoes, landslides, and volcanoes. In the 1990s, we already saw the first popularization of weather disaster narratives. *The Coming Global Superstorm*, a 1999 book by Art Bell and Whitley Strieber, which became the backdrop for the film *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), predicts the failure of the Gulf Stream, the melting of the polar ice caps, and the emergence of huge rainstorms. Art Bell, in case one is unfamiliar with him, was the founder and the original host of the paranormal-themed radio program *Coast to Coast AM*. Whitley Strieber is the author of vampire novels like *The Hunger* and *The Last Vampire*. On December 26, 1985, he was abducted from his cabin in upstate New York by non-human beings. The book he wrote about this, *Communion* (1987), reached the number one position on *The New York Times* Best Seller list for non-fiction. This is not to diminish the value of *The Coming Global Superstorm*, but to simply point out the symmetry

<sup>3</sup> See: D. Takacs, "We Are the River," *University of Illinois Law Review*, 2, 2021, pp. 545–606.

<sup>4</sup> J. S. K. Reddy, C. Pereira, "Understanding the emergence of microbial consciousness: From a perspective of the Subject-Object Model (SOM)," *Journal of Integrative Neuroscience*, 16, 2017, pp. 27–36.

between end-of-the-world predictionalism and the populist aesthetics of alienation.

This is still only a small part of the story. Ever since the days of Charles Darwin, we have more or less bought into the principle that humans emerged as the end result of a long, painfully slow process that relied on species developing precise fits to their particular ecology. But in recent decades, we have come to realize that evolutionary theory, as important as it is in the short history of our interspecies realities, fails to account for the drama of planetary history. As it turns out, there were—depending on whom one asks—five major extinction events. They were, simplified here, Late Ordovician mass extinction (444 mya) 86%; Late Devonian Extinction (360 mya) 75%; Permian–Triassic extinction event (250 mya) 96%; Triassic–Jurassic extinction event (200 mya) 90%; The Cretaceous–Paleogene extinction event (65 mya) 76%. The causes vary: too much ice, too many volcanoes, rising sea levels, not enough oxygen, too much oxygen, and, of course, asteroids. In total, more than 99% of all species that ever lived on Earth—amounting to over five billion species (not counting microbes)—are estimated to have died out at one time or another *before* the arrival of humans some mere 250,000 years ago.

All of this took place in a span of 4.6 billion years, meaning that it took 4.59999999 billion years to produce humans out of the five extinction events. And it was really only the last such event, the Triassic–Jurassic extinction event (200 mya), that knocked off the dinosaurs and allowed mammals—and ultimately humans—to take over the planet. We are all children of the Chicxulub impactor, as the asteroid is called. In other words, we are the precarious end result of a set of violent planetary events that could have gone wrong anywhere along the way and not produced humans at all. From that perspective, we are lucky to be here. We could have remained diatoms, lock-jawed fish, bees, or even long tail monkeys.

One of the reasons scientists are studying these events is because they can give us a sense of the future. For example, the factors that led to a mass extinction at the end of the Permian Period, when some 96 percent of marine species were wiped out, remind Prof. Wolfgang Kiessling (University of Erlangen, Germany) very much of today. What separates us from the events of the past is the extent of these phenomena.<sup>5</sup> And yet the title of his article is: “Mass extinction with prior warning.” And

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<sup>5</sup> W. Kiessling “Mass extinction with prior warning,” <https://www.fau.eu/2018/03/14/news/research/mass-extinction-with-prior-warning/>, (accessed 3 November 2024).

indeed, using supercomputer, scientists now calmly predict “a new mass extinction that will wipe out humans and all mammals.”<sup>6</sup>

If we look to the deep future, we know that in about three billion years the sun will expand into a red giant and swallow Mercury, Venus, and Earth. The survivability of our species for that long is statistically impossible. Most scientists agree that human life might not make it past the emergence of something called the “Pangea Ultima,” a hypothetical supercontinent—first postulated in the early 1980s—that will form about 250 million years from now when the Earth’s various continents collide.<sup>7</sup> The east coast of the United States would be squished up against the west coast of Africa. New York would be a stone’s throw away from Namibia. But of course, we will not experience it. The volcanoes, earthquakes, sea-level changes and global warming will all mean that humans, regardless of their technology, will perish along the way. What will survive are the microbes, and it will all start all over again.

Should we not curse the “consciousness” that makes us seemingly special, especially since our so-called consciousness is incredibly short-lived and destructive? For three hundred thousand years or so, we lived in small, dispersed communities scattered across Africa, moving into Europe, Asia and then—much later—the Americas. We did not farm, but gathered resources from the sea and land, augmented by hunting. We talked to rocks, water, trees, the air, and of course, our ancestors. It was all just a part of the “nature of things.” Living and dying with the plants and animals around us.

Today, we realize that we are indeed different from our ancestors, whom not too long ago we labeled as primitive and savage. The question might not be how we got this way, but how we—ever since the proverbial and much-ballyhooed “birth of agriculture”—so rapidly lost touch cognitively with our ancestral capacity to live within the world and not in opposition to it. Slavoj Žižek argued that the very fact that we are speaking creatures not only sets us apart but also means that “all attempts to regain a new balance between man and nature” can only yield a fetishistic disavowal.<sup>8</sup> Man is not the product of evolution, but an acciden-

<sup>6</sup> E. Ralls, “Scientists predict a new mass extinction that will wipe out humans and all mammals,” <https://www.earth.com/news/scientists-predict-a-new-mass-extinction-that-will-wipe-out-humans-and-all-mammals/>, (accessed 3 November 2024).

<sup>7</sup> A. Farnsworth *et al.*, “Climate extremes likely to drive land mammal extinction during next supercontinent assembly,” *Nature Geoscience*, 16, 10, 2023, pp. 901–908.

<sup>8</sup> S. Žižek, *Looking Awry*, pp. 36–37.

tal byproduct “evolving” from speech-makers to extinction-makers. It is not just creatures in nature that suffer from this. Our capacity to make something extinct applies to ourselves as well, especially when empowered through the auspices of civilization, colonialism, and modernization. How many languages and cultures have been lost over the years, centuries, millennia? In a sense, we are children of extinction perpetrators living in a multitude of after-extinctions. But not too long ago, we had little care for this since we thought that our civilizational perspective was the mark of our superiority, and in the 18<sup>th</sup> century we began to call ourselves *Homo sapiens*. Today, of course, no one is sure if this *sapien*-ness is the right word. If our so-called natural intelligence will not continue the processes toward self-annihilation, then AI will certainly do it. *The Terminator* (1984–1991) may indeed be our destiny. And we all know that science will possibly lead us to our doom. In a recent, nearly three-hundred-page technical report, scientists describe the horrifyingly existential risks posed by what is known as “mirror life”: synthetic organisms developed in the name of medicine, whose DNA structures are a mirror image to that of all known natural organisms. “Scientists Horrified by ‘Mirror Life’ that could wipe out biology as we know it.”<sup>9</sup>

The possible factualities of all of this are, of course, intimately intertwined with fictions. In fact, Walter Benjamin—should he be around today—would hardly have to change his adage from 1936 that “humanity’s self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.”<sup>10</sup> But Benjamin was talking about life in the wake of a world war. Today, our aesthetic pleasure is made (mostly, at least) during peace. We no longer need war or nuclear bombs to imagine the worst. Benjamin, talking about the threat posed to democracy by fascism, pointed out that “[t]he tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight.”<sup>11</sup> But as likely as it might seem that this “state of emergency” has now expanded to include the possibility of our extinction, it might not necessarily follow that extinction requires

<sup>9</sup> F. Landymore, “Scientists Horrified by ‘Mirror Life’ that Could Wipe Out Biology as We Know It,” <https://futurism.com/neoscope/scientists-horrified-mirror-life>, (accessed 29 November 2024).

<sup>10</sup> From the Epilogue to “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in: *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Schocken Books, New York, 1969, p. 242.

<sup>11</sup> W. Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, p. 257.

its own conception of history, largely because—very simply—there is no salvation, no repair, much less any utopian “out.” Extinction possibility has become extinction porn as we experience it in cinema, in our sci-fi novels and on Fox Weather channel, live streaming from the inside of a hurricane, the planet being destroyed in one way or another.

Who can forget *The Blob* (1958) where an amoeba-like organism crashes to Earth and consumes everything in its path? Today, of course, it is all not enough. *Daybreak Zero* (2011) by John Barnes follows the destruction of Western civilization by plastic/hydrocarbon-eating bacteria. Industrial civilization rapidly breaks down, and tens of millions die in the U.S., with the global death toll measured in the billions. A current list of “Extinction Movies” is now up to forty-four, almost all from after 1990.<sup>12</sup> The cleverest deployment of our extinction fetish in the era of climate change was the film *Elevation* (2024). It is the story of bulletproof creatures that emerge from hibernation to whip out humans. They hunt them down by sensing their carbon dioxide emissions. Recent films have the advantage of software like Esri CityEngine. It is not just “an essential tool for urban designers, planners, architects,” as it advertises itself, but also allows for “highly detailed fire and explosion simulations [...] to enhance the destruction, including smoke, heat waves, and realistic fire spread.”<sup>13</sup> It was used in *Independence Day* (1996) to depict buildings and entire cities getting blown into smithereens by extraterrestrial aliens.<sup>14</sup> And for every film, there are dozens of page-turners. Put an invasion by aliens who have weaponized fungi to destroy the planet together with the American “dark state” that refuses to face new realities and that uses violence against its own citizens, billionaires who fund secret scientific projects and one gets the perfect storm of aliens, fungus, cataclysm, violence and paranoia. Read no further than *The Meteor* (2024) by Joshua T. Calvert.

Though all of these end scenarios are ambiguous, uncertain, and certainly hallucinatory, we are culturally in a position where the fictional imaginaries are no less powerful than the ostensibly factual ones. In fact, there is a strange and unmistakable, paradoxical attraction between fact

<sup>12</sup> S. Sayeed, “List of Movies on Extinction,” <https://www.imdb.com>, (accessed 3 November 2024). Leaving out the films about the *Planet of the Apes*, there are only 3 older than 1990.

<sup>13</sup> Anon., “How Hollywood Builds and Destroys Cities with 3D GIS,” <https://www.esri.com/about/newsroom/arcnews/how-hollywood-builds-and-destroys-cities-with-3d-gis/>, (accessed 3 November 2024).

<sup>14</sup> Anon., “ArcGIS CityEngine” <https://www.esri.com>, (accessed 3 November 2024).

and fiction. The BBC, in an interview with Jane Goodall, considered the world's foremost expert on chimpanzees, just announced in no uncertain terms: "The sixth great extinction is happening."<sup>15</sup> And if we do not believe Goodall, then we can take the word of David Attenborough in his BBC "documentary" called simply *Extinction: The Facts* (2020), which walks us through the grim details of the ongoing, sixth extinction or, as some call it, the Anthropocene extinction.<sup>16</sup> And if that is not enough then we can take our cue from a headline in the *New York Times*: "She went for a Walk on the Beach and found a Rare 'Doomsday Fish'."<sup>17</sup> It was an oarfish that in Japanese mythology is the harbinger of earthquakes and other disasters. In another recent news item we read "Supervolcano [referring to the Phlegraean Fields near Naples Italy] shows signs of waking up, which would plunge the world into chaos."<sup>18</sup> If that is too ho-hum, a recent prepper expo in Minnesota billed itself as "a family-friendly event" that covers an enormous range of topics, "including zombie survival" as their logo hints at.<sup>19</sup>

The young at heart can, of course, play computer games like *The Last of Us*, a 2013 action-adventure game where players defend against hostile humans infected by a mutated fungus. In the more recent *Planetary Annihilation* (2024), you can engage in intergalactic mayhem as you take control of the forces of nature and unleash cataclysmic events upon various planets, moons, and celestial bodies. According to the advertisers: "Indulge your curiosity, and let your destructive instincts run wild in this visually stunning and immersive game."<sup>20</sup> Of course, not everyone seems to be attracted to the lures of *Schadenfreude* (a German word

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<sup>15</sup> V. Gill, "The sixth great extinction is happening', conservation expert warns," <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c93qvqx5y01o>, (accessed 3 November 2024). See also: A. Barnosky *et al.*, "Has the Earth's sixth mass extinction already arrived?," *Nature*, 471, 7336, 2011, 51–57.

<sup>16</sup> For a good discussion of governmental and scientific uses of the word extinction, see: F. S. Tanswell, "The Concept of Extinction: Epistemology, Responsibility, and Precaution," *Ethics, Policy & Environment* 27, 2, 2024, pp. 205–226.

<sup>17</sup> I. Kwai, "She Went for a Walk on the Beach and Found a Rare 'Doomsday Fish'," <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/21/us/doomsday-fish-california-oarfish.html>, (accessed 3 November 2024).

<sup>18</sup> E. Ralls, "Supervolcano shows signs of waking up, which would plunge the world into chaos," <https://www.earth.com/news/supervolcano-italy-solfatarata-crater-phlegraean-fields-shows-signs-of-waking-up/>, (accessed November 3, 2024).

<sup>19</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Minnesota Prepper Expo, <https://www.mnprepperexpo.com>, (accessed 3 November 2024).

<sup>20</sup> Planet Annihilation 3D Smash, <https://play.google.com/store/apps>, (accessed 3 November 2024).



that means something like “destruction-giddiness”). The abandonment in the last decades of large swaths of the Romanian countryside, as villages have moved to the cities, has led some to envision “a rewilded Eden in the ruins of humanity.”<sup>21</sup>

Basically, the responses are: 1) do nothing except perhaps for watching another season of *Naked and Afraid*; 2) lead a more “sustainable” life and cross your fingers; 3) get funding from a university to study the problem; 4) assume that the future is in god’s hands; 5) move in with some alternative communitarians; 6) build an underground shelter, play computer games, and listen to dark, electro-industrial mayhem of *Lust For Extinction* by Yiannis Chatzakis, whose alias is *The Degenerated Sequences*;<sup>22</sup> 7) join a “prepper community,” visit the annual *Be Prepared Expos* and stock up on gold coins, bullets, whiskey and rice, or at least that is what one website recommends; 8) Wait for Musk to build a Mars colony for billionaires.

The paradoxes multiply: humans as cause, humans as salvation; science as cause, science as salvation; microbes as cause, microbes as salvation; computers as cause, computers as salvation; aliens as cause, aliens as salvation. Regardless of which scenario proves to be correct, there is no doubt about one thing: the ultimate void around which all this navigates. As we play out the agonies of our diminished and vulnerable selves, there is not enough time for humans to slowly “evolve” into something better. This means that the Anthropocene is not just the story about human impact on the environment. It is also the epoch where the *longue durée* of our evolution is over. Another *longue durée* is coming into focus, but one without us. The transition will not be smooth and will be drawn out possibly over centuries of agonizing wait, with ever more potent opportunities for scenario building. By the time we face extinction for real, we will be suffering from extinction desire syndrome. “Many Bay Area residents raced away from the ocean after a jolting cellphone alert warned, ‘You are in danger.’ Others raced toward it.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> T. McC lure, “The great abandonment: what happens to the natural world when people disappear?,” <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2024/nov/28/great-abandonment-what-happens-natural-world-people-disappear-bulgaria>, (accessed 29 November 2024).

<sup>22</sup> <https://degeneratedsequences.bandcamp.com/track/lust-for-extinction>, (accessed 29 November 2024).

<sup>23</sup> H. Knight, “Tsunami Warning in San Francisco ‘Felt Like a Science Fiction Movie’,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/05/us/tsunami-warning-san-francisco.html>, (accessed 29 November 2024).

Back in less stressful times, Carl Sagan had an optimistic tone to his forecast. His famous 1977 film, *Powers of Ten*, gave us views of the world that went ever further out into the cosmos and then into the atom. Sagan hoped that seeing these perspectives would somehow make us more tolerant as a species. “Everyone one of us is, in the cosmic perspective, precious. If a human disagrees with you, let him live. In a hundred billion galaxies, you will not find another.” To which he added: “Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the universe, are challenged by this point of pale light [our planet].”

Unfortunately, the shock of our precariousness has never had the desired effect; the salvation of the human species simply cannot transcend our evolutionary-induced—and much bemoaned—shortsightedness. Sagan’s wonderful plea for tolerance sounds these days like liberalism’s last hurrah. And so, in *Judgment Day* (1998), the cultist who tries to thwart the government from demolishing a threatening asteroid makes a claim that many might well adhere too much to. “He is a loving god, He is a forgiving god, but he has said enough.” That, as it might be, no one really wants a story about us listening to our better side.

Extinction, even if it were today to involve something we call “nature,” can no longer be natural for the simple reason that the classic ambition to lead a life worth living is irradiated by an extinction-philic culture where fact and fiction are no longer separable, where horror and normalcy seem to be found in equal measure, and where guilt and longing are one and the same. There is no way out. Perhaps Hegel was right when he claimed with wonderful ambiguity that “[t]he human being is this night, this empty nothing that contains everything in its simplicity—an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him—or which are not present.”<sup>24</sup> For despite the ever-growing repertoire of endings, there is something about extinction that is and remains inaccessible to the imagination, the *post-evolutionary* Self where time basically stands still.

In the 1961 episode of *The Twilight Zone* called *The Midnight Sun*, the Earth is moving away from the sun. Mrs. Bronson, however, has a feverish dream of just the opposite, namely of the Earth moving toward the sun and burning up. “The place is New York City and this is the eve of the

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<sup>24</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, “Jenaer Realphilosophie,” in *Frühe politische Systeme*, Ullstein Verlag, Frankfurt, Berlin, Wien, 1974, p. 204; translation from D. P. Verene, *Hegel’s Recollection: A Study of Images in the Phenomenology of Spirit*, Suny Press, Albany, 1985, pp. 7–8.

end, because even at midnight it's high noon, the hottest day in history, and you're about to spend it—in the Twilight Zone.” Only at the end of the story does the truth come out that the world's inhabitants are freezing to death. In the closing scene, the narrator in his famous monotone voice says: “The poles of fear, the extremes of how the Earth might conceivably be doomed. Minor exercise in the care and feeding of a nightmare, respectfully submitted by all the thermometer-watchers—in the Twilight Zone.”

At the time, it was clear that all of this was a reference not to climate change—which was not yet a thing—but to nuclear annihilation. On October 30, 1961, just two weeks before the release of *The Midnight Sun*, the Soviet Union detonated the Tsar Bomba, the world's largest thermonuclear weapon, in a test over the Novaya Zemlya archipelago in the Arctic Circle. In that same year, the U.S. saw a new generation of “push button” nuclear missiles, the Minuteman.<sup>25</sup> *The Twilight Zone* builds on the resultant anxieties, but also on the already rampant annihilation fantasies of the time. Annihilation was so immanent that the 1957 novel *On the Beach* by Nevil Shute was set in 1961. It contends with the last days of humanity after a cataclysmic nuclear war. In *The Midnight Sun*, however, the impending cataclysm is not represented in high definition, nor spelled out as some sort of protracted extinction-philic adventure, but written only in translation, so to speak, in the face of Mrs. Bronson. There is no moralizing here; no hidden message about our presumed “humanity,” and no erotics of destruction.

A new paradox emerges, for we are well aware that the increasingly colorful epics of extinction are a story that is beyond comprehension in the same way that death itself is beyond comprehension. Just as the subject (in this case the proverbial human) can get close to the object (in this case, its extinction) but can never attain it, so too the object (our extinction) seems to enforce its distance, making it too as if it were a subject in its own right. No matter how graphic, horrible, or sublime, extinction simply cannot be told, since we have experienced it at best only through other species outside of our own time horizon. Following the thoughts of Žižek, this leaves us hanging in a dream world where teleology has been replaced by “the paradoxical element” that serves as a “place-holder of the lack,” the point of the signifier's non-sense.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> D. McChristian, “Whiteman Air Force Base, Oscar-01 Minuteman Missile Alert Facility (MAF),” *Historic American Engineering Record*, No. M0-87, 1996, p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> S. Žižek, *Looking Awry*, p. 53.

The film *Räumliche Massnahme* [*Spatial Intervention*, 2002] (Figure 1) by the Viennese artists Nicole Six and Paul Petritsch embodies this. It is a 28-minute video of a darkly clad person on a frozen lake, walking in a small circle and stopping every now and then to strike the ice with a pickaxe. The audience hears the constant, jarring cracks of the hits as the person obsessively and fruitlessly whacks away. The person seems to be on a mission, looking, so it seems, for a way out of this nothingness, looking for a depth under the shallowness of the ice. The title of the film is meant to be a clue. *Räumliche* means “spatial” and refers obviously to the circle, but it also suggests the spatiality of the planet in a forbidding cosmological nowhere. The figure has all the space in the world and yet seems to be stuck in a particular spot. *Massnahme*, a word difficult to translate into English, means literally “measure” but implies something like “actionable steps” and a purposefulness used to solve a problem. Here the “actionable steps” are those of a person who is literally stepping even if in circles that go nowhere, though perhaps we as viewers recognize that it is the downward spiral of frustration. When the video ends, the screen turns black, and we hear a cracking sound and a scream. There can be no doubt that the figure has finally plunged into the freezing water. The paradox of the “human all too human”—trapped between wanting an “out” and simultaneously an “in”—is broken. But there is no witness to it either. Extinction is, after all, without witness.

This asymmetry between the human as subject and human as (soon-to-be) object—though devoid of object-hood—is the collapse of the distinction between fate and destiny. We are doomed and even a fever dream—one in which there is no clear ending, or perhaps it is an end that has already ended—will only spell out the end in a different register. In the meantime, what was once thought to be a minor exercise in the care and feeding of a nightmare is now a major one.



Figure 1. Nicole Six and Paul Petrisch, "Spatial Intervention (1)," 2022 © Bildrecht, Vienna 2024.

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