

Reframing the cultural catastrophe: the posthuman aesthetics of *Final Fantasy VII* and *Bloodborne*

Abstract: Currently at the core of mass culture, videogames correspond to the kind of media that most demonstrates how much our present merges with the development of technology. The worlds they depict always involve ours, whether these are realistic or fictional. As Braidotti notes, the contemporary imaginary shapes aspirations and anxieties of our posthuman existence through the correlative categories of the cybernetic and the monstrous, manifesting an inherent ambivalence in the relation that we, as humans, maintain with the impersonal domains of technics and nature. Indeed, this is the case of *Final Fantasy VII* (1997) and *Bloodborne* (2015), which both revolve around a human-driven apocalypse: the former describes its imminence and the latter its aftermath. The article will examine the imaginary elements that these videoludic works adopt to portray a modern-day version of the apocalypse—a cultural one—and the role they play in defining two opposite high-concept posthuman aesthetics. Such videogames share a similar post-anthropocentric perspective, although from different sources: *Final Fantasy VII* draws on the ecologism of Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis, while *Bloodborne* on the cosmicism of Lovecraft’s poetics. They also share a communal social commentary: the planetary catastrophe is set off by a despotic technopolitical corporation, whose immoral ethics broke an interdict on several scales—violating the Oedipal law, acquiring forbidden knowledge, and transcending the human condition.

“Everything that throughout the course of history we have called *the world* has left behind superimposed residues that accumulate without the faintest care for contradiction. What culture transports to us in the guise of the world is a stack, a shop crammed full of the flotsam and jetsam of worlds that have followed one after the other, and which, for all their incompatibility, don’t get on any the worse with each other within every single one of us” (Lacan 2014, 34).

Cultural apocalypses.

The last, unfinished work of the Italian anthropologist Ernesto de Martino (1908–1965) revolves around the phenomenon of cultural apocalypse. According to de Martino, the end of the world and, above all, its representations constitute, in every human culture, an invariant element¹: these apocalyptic representations serve to cope with, that is, make sense of, the unpredictable series of historical events, both on an individual and collective scale. Or, in other words, to historicize the shifting relation of the subject with his or her vulnerability and finitude. Indeed, de Martino characterizes as “crisis of presence” (de Martino 2018, 84) the subjective experience of losing the spatial-temporal situatedness of self-consciousness that results in depersonalization. In the Heideggerian framework adopted by de Martino, this occurs when the *Dasein*, or being-there, sustains pure, autonomous being without any world to live in and any other to live with. Thus, he emphasizes the existential value of culture, whose constructions, institutions, and expressions function as the material, empirical support of subjectivity, while unfolding the social dimension. Cultural artifacts, as sense-making instruments, not only grant but also restore human beings’ access to the environment they inhabit; foremost in aesthetic terms, since culture involves how we perceive the worldly and, then, our place in it.

¹ “‘The end of the world’ is a permanent anthropological possibility that torments all human cultures” (de Martino 2018, 319).

However, de Martino further notices that, for the Western societies of late Modernity, the theme of the apocalypse, although maintaining the same function, assumed a nonreligious or secular aspect, which he calls “without eschaton” (de Martino 2018, 11) to indicate the absence of any reference to salvation or fulfillment. In our contemporary apocalyptic representations, there is no room for transcendence, since, as he observes, we cannot imagine what lies beyond the destruction of our civilization except for the vague figure of an inhuman world marked by nonsense. For de Martino, during the second half of the twentieth century, radical changes in our socio-cultural background displaced human existence into an alienating horizon; what appeared homely and familiar was suddenly rendered unrecognizable by the advent of totalizing scientific thinking². Hence, such a new technocratic ethos fails to resolve the crisis of presence, leaving the helpless subject to linger at the threshold of a world impossible to relate to anymore.

Here, de Martino apparently anticipated, by a few decades, the forthcoming impact of the posthuman convergence, as Braidotti (2019) defines it, on the West and its culture. That is, scientific advancements, a substantial component of the latter, decentered the position of humanity with respect to its absolute alterities—the anonymous domains of nature and technics—and this irremediably affected how human subjects situate themselves in the world. In de Martino’s terms, the crisis of presence currently emerges through those same cultural artifacts that were supposed to contain it: from their consistency where *bios*, as human rationality, once recognized itself and its own practice, now *zoe* and *techne*, as natural and artificial vitality, also abruptly arise³. Something integral yet impersonal that persists behind or even entangles with consciousness has been uncovered, preventing the subject from reestablishing its self-centered existential coordinates.

Therefore, in this article, we will examine two modern-day representations of the cultural apocalypse, as depicted through high-concept posthuman aesthetics in *Final Fantasy VII* (Squaresoft 1997) and *Bloodborne* (From Software 2015). These videoludic works belonging to the fantasy genre, whether considered together, become significantly relevant: as we will see, their visual-artistic designs on the one hand, put on display a comprehensive outlook on our culture-shaped imaginary—a cyberteratological one—and, on the other hand, reconfigure the eschatological function of the apocalypse beyond transcendence, towards immanence.

As Mussgnug (2022) recognizes, a defining relation actually exists between the posthuman predicament and the most recent instances of apocalyptic imagination. In fact, exploring the cultural inquietude of our age and its typical icons, Braidotti takes into account the widely heterogeneous variety of deviants, mutants, and aberrations that populate media via science-fiction narratives. From this, she sketches out a cyber-teratology (Braidotti 2002): a grotesque but flourishing parade in which the monstrous and the cybernetic constitute the two correlative sides of the same imaginative spectrum. They stand, respectively, for the internal and external—or organic and inorganic—otherness that can dramatically merge with the human body and the incarnated self of the subject (Braidotti 1994). The hybridizations of the very human-form produced by the moving boundaries among *bios*, *zoe*, and *techne* thus gain a distinctive critical value precisely because of the apocalyptic implications they carry for the future of our anthropocentric, human-scaled cultural world. Accordingly, for Herbrechter, such a critical value operates all along the

² “The current cultural climate in the West is familiar with the theme of the end outside of any religious horizon of salvation, that is, as a desperate catastrophe of the worldly, the domestic, the settled, of the signifying and the practicable: a catastrophe that narrates with meticulous, and at times obsessive, accuracy the undoing of what has been formed, the alienation of what is domestic, the unsettling of the settled, the loss of sense of signifiers, the impracticability of the practicable” (de Martino 2018, 191).

³ While referring to its inherent critical stance both in popular culture and scholarship, Nayar describes posthumanism as “the radical decentering of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines” (Nayar 2014, 2).

opening fracture between “the *figure* of the ‘posthuman’ (and its present, past and projected avatars, like cyborgs, monsters, zombies, ghosts, angels, etc.) and ‘posthumanism’ as the contemporary social *discourse* (in the Foucauldian sense), which negotiates the pressing contemporary question of what it means to be human under the conditions of globalization, technoscience, late capitalism” (Herbrechter 2018, 94).

Following Herbrechter’s insight, we will refer as well to the profound enquiry Lyotard (2011) conducted into aesthetic events in order to analyze the imaginary elements represented by the aforementioned videogames⁴. Our aim is to demonstrate how the interplay between the already defined posthuman figures that portray the cultural apocalypses in *Final Fantasy VII* and *Bloodborne*, and the yet undefined posthumanist discourses that underlie them, as a manifold, in-progress project (Braidotti 2013), tends to reframe our conception of the end of the world within an immanent and ahuman eschatology.

Final Fantasy VII and Bloodborne: an overview of themes.

Now focusing on the games, we will investigate why *Final Fantasy VII* and *Bloodborne* (hereafter *FFVII* and *BB*) so effectively reproduce the circumstances under which the crisis of presence is experienced today. The answer lies, foremost, in the fact that their main themes share a common post-anthropocentrism. Indeed, despite being grounded in different source materials, these works describe a human-driven apocalypse from a similar post-anthropocentric perspective through which they consistently challenge the humanistic prejudices of the player in order to dismantle them. On the one hand, *FFVII* builds on an ecologism (Dobson 2007) inspired by Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis, which posits human beings as an incidental part of a living planet⁵; on the other hand, *BB* builds on a cosmicism (Joshi 2016) inspired by Lovecraft’s poetics, which posits human beings as an unessential part of a meaningless and eternal cosmos⁶.

In *FFVII* and *BB*, the constitutive but asymmetrical kinship humanity maintains with the planet and the cosmos is represented by its subjection to the primordial source of Life itself, in the form of a liquid, energetic flux, respectively known as the Lifestream and the Old Blood. The videogames’ storylines, then, follow the catastrophic consequences resulting from the reckless control of this source by a technopolitical corporation, namely the Shinra Electric Power Company and the Healing Church. Over time, the massive exploitation of such fluxes, on which human civilization soon became entirely dependent, allowed these corporations to impose an almost unquestioned despotic rule upon the world. Absolute political domination, however, did not suffice for their leading members, since the fundamental ambition that moved them was to gather as much power and knowledge as Life itself could grant, no matter the cost. Thereby, they reached the point of no return in the attempt to transcend the human condition using the most ad-

⁴ Since in *Discourse, Figure* “Lyotard does not restrict himself to a particular medium but instead shifts from literature, art, theatre, sculpture, poetry and the graphic arts” (Callan, Williams 2011, 42), we will consider what he presents there as an accurate methodology to approach the complex multimediality that distinguishes videogames. On the status of videogames as art, Tavinor 2009; Nguyen 2020.

⁵ Lovelock gives credit to the biologist Lynn Margulis for illustrating the relational context where humans, as a species among others, inhabit the Earth: “Each species to a greater or lesser degree modifies its environment to optimize its reproduction rate. Gaia follows from this by being the sum total of all of these individual modifications and by the fact that all species are connected, [...] however circuitously, to all others” (Lovelock 1979, 120).

⁶ Lovecraft explains to the editor Farnsworth Wright his conception about the position and the purpose of humanity in the universe: “All my tales are based on the fundamental premise that common human laws and interests and emotions have no validity or significance in the vast cosmos-at-large. To me there is nothing but puerility in a tale in which the human form—and the local human passions and conditions and standards—are depicted as native to other worlds or other universes. To achieve the essence of real externality, whether of time or space or dimension, one must forget that such things as organic life, good and evil, love and hate, and all such local attributes of a negligible and temporary race called mankind, have any existence at all” (Lovecraft 1968, 150).

vanced scientific means at their disposal: once this trespass violated the laws that order the world, the coming of the apocalypse was already set in motion. *FFVII* and *BB* thus invite the player to explore the apocalyptic events this unethical venture brought about, during their imminence in the former, and during their aftermath in the latter.

We will delve into the plots in detail later on. As for now, we will examine how such works, albeit fictionally, refer to our contemporary reality. Evidently, on the surface, the universal message they convey corresponds to a rather traditional warning against human hubris: a tremendous catastrophe awaits those cultures that neglect and exacerbate their pending contradictions to solely pursue profit and progress, as a sort of morally twisted pay-off for their culmination. Nonetheless, more in-depth, these videogames seem to propose, subtextually, a particular commentary on the characteristic culture developed by, and hence identified with, Western capitalistic societies. The social commentaries presented by *FFVII* and *BB*, while they proceed on diverging plots, turn out to be converging on not less than three interconnected issues typical of our cultural background: the unjustified belief in the outcomes of science; the arbitrary and illegitimate use of political power; and the unilateral appropriation of natural resources. Addressing these issues through their storytelling astutely delineates, in terms of exercising knowledge, authority, and possession, the historical posture that the West under late capitalism (Mussnug 2022) still embraces when engaging with nonhuman otherness to subjugate it. That is, humans exclusively claim for themselves the prerogative to regulate scientific research, state intervention, and environmental plunder because of their supposed exceptionalism, which apparently sets them apart from the rest of nonhuman entities (Braidotti 2013). Therefore, the two fantasy titles not only explicitly challenge the humanistic assumptions behind conventionally accepted discourses and practices, but also implicitly suggest that our culture, as a whole system relying on such assumptions, will be directly responsible for an eventual, or worse, unavoidable apocalypse. Specifically, they criticize those self-referential cultural processes in which the autonomous logic of the world—the planet and the cosmos—and of the alterities populating it is reduced to our rational, often economical or teleological at most, understanding, without intentionally acknowledging that we, as human beings, are just a narrow portion of a much broader *continuum* that surpasses us.

In order to portray the disruptive emergence of this more-than-human *continuum* from within late Western culture, *FFVII* and *BB* employ the category of hybridization, narratively and aesthetically. Thus, hybridization coincides with the cause and the effect of the catastrophe at once, or, adopting a psychoanalytic jargon, functions as both the trauma and the symptom. In a very posthuman fashion, it all begins indeed with forbidden experiments on xenotransplantation that quite predictably, considering the trope (Nayar 2014), go wrong: the result of hybridizing humanity with nonhuman life forms is not transcendence or evolution but, conversely, a brand-new, chaotic, and dreadful state of the world where the human condition itself, rather than everything else, will no longer be the same. Here, the aesthetic features of these works make visible what the narrative ones alone would not⁷. Cyborgs and monsters, machines and beasts, hybrids and crossbreeds, which occupy and haunt the settings of the videogames in question, as well as holding a relevant place in our cultural imaginary, let us visualize, on a perceptive level, the unsettling discovery hybridization leads to ontologically, on a conceptual level (Fig. 1): human life, and for extension any of its cultures, is always merged with the components located below and beyond it, as nature and technics are, since all of them originate from and depend on the same inhuman source. The authentic revelation, to mention the etymological meaning of the word apocalypse as unveiling (Mussnug 2022), announced by the cyberteratological creatures of *FFVII* and *BB*, is that the unspeakable nonhuman otherness they incarnate is not an externality

⁷ “It is there, in the spontaneous formation of the new plastic order, that we can properly see, and therefore fully signify, what we glimpsed in the theory, namely, the separation of the signifier from the signified and its anchoring in the designated—in short, the constitution of representation” (Lyotard 2011, 184).

but an internality to us and, as such, ultimately defines our existence as living beings, contrary to the assertions of humanism. These types of representations, in which corrupted and repulsive hybridized traits take over or replace the harmonic and ideal proportions of human figures⁸, serve to dismantle, primarily from a visual standpoint, the outdated anthropocentric discourses we inherited from modernity and yet continue to adhere to.

Hence, the properly apocalyptic register of these hybrid imaginaries consists in immediately exposing the inconsistencies of the humanist self-enclosed normativity that shapes our social customs and behaviors⁹; *FFVII* and *BB* precisely evoke this register when they depict the dramatic collapse of scientific, juridical, and economic institutions taking place in their cultural worlds because of hybridization. Likewise, such events affect the player insofar as their depictions reflect the manifestations of the posthuman turn we witness nowadays, all across our culture, which is being transformed into something inherently odd by a multilayer cluster of phenomena: prosthetization, genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, climate change counter-measures, space colonization, and so forth, gradually dispossess human beings of their control over the world and simultaneously attribute it to impersonal ones, as these natural and artificial entities. Sparked by the incongruous contours, landscapes, and overall aesthetics of the two works, the overwhelming feeling of living at the end of times involves our perception of the worldly as a contemporary occurrence of the crisis of presence described by de Martino would do. In these respects, their cultural apocalypses provide the player with simulated contexts to experience the ungrounding of consciousness and its subsequent reintegration¹⁰. Since *FFVII* and *BB* purposefully represent and communicate what in Western culture used to rest irrepresentable and incommunicable, the two videogames foster not only the historicization processes of these anomalous and uncanny imaginary elements concerning our daily lives, but also the attribution of positive values to their negative appearances. In addition to destabilizing our cultural system, the posthuman aesthetics they arrange contribute to partially displace the latter towards a further non-anthropocentric normativity that participates in restoring both of the functions emphasized by de Martino: offering a tangible mediation with historical change and a meaningful account of our role in it. This counter-normativity appears to be, on the one hand, adequate to the ambivalent, nonhuman, and biotechnological social sphere of the XXI century, and, on the other hand, capable of establishing “the properties of a set of rules in which various possible ‘(hi)stories’ can be told” (Lyotard 2011, 176) about the current state of the world.

Complementary posthuman aesthetics.

In the following section, we will inspect the peculiar aesthetic qualities of these videogames through the posthumanist figures and discourses put on display along their narratives. Thus, we will fully appreciate the double-sided expressive dimension of their fictional worlds according to

⁸ Figurative abstractions whose literal reality we believe in too ingenuously, forgetting they actually are cultural artifacts marked by a historically determined function, as in the case of the Vitruvian Man (Braidotti 2013).

⁹ “This is precisely a very important function of culture, to allow the members of the group to decipher the event, to recognize the unknown, to signify disorder. This function may well be operative and adaptive, but it does not apply directly at the level of the individual’s relation with ‘reality.’ It concerns instead a collective order that functions as mediator for the individual, and this order partakes of language. One could say that this order’s purpose is to transcribe difference (the event, irreversible atemporality, dissymmetrical spatiality) into opposition, by incorporating disequilibrium into a structural system” (Lyotard 2011, 161–162).

¹⁰ As Žižek puts it, from a Lacanian standpoint: “an extraordinary social and psychological change is taking place right in front of our eyes—the impossible is becoming possible. An event first experienced as real but impossible (the prospect of a forthcoming catastrophe which, however probable it may be, is effectively dismissed as impossible) becomes real and no longer impossible (once the catastrophe occurs, it is ‘renormalized,’ perceived as part of the normal run of things, as always already having been possible)” (Žižek 2010, 328).

Lyotard's method, which makes a distinction between figure and discourse in order to separate, for each aesthetic component considered, what it designates from what it signifies¹¹.

To start with, we will briefly assess why a parallel aesthetic reading of *FFVII* and *BB* is legitimate even though they are almost twenty years (and three generations of hardware) apart. Since, for the videoludic media, the computational capabilities of the game engine necessarily inform the constraints of the game mechanics (Tavinor 2009), it is clear that, from a mimetic perspective, there are representative disproportions of the technology-based kind between one another. However, in staging the stories they show and tell, the specific stylistic choices the two fantasy titles opted for justify such a reading. These choices concern not only the development of an original gameplay design on an existing technical infrastructure, but also the innovative refinement of the conventional rules defining role-playing games—the videoludic genre both fall into—, or RPGs: respectively, *FFVII* and *BB* implement different but equally expressive immersive strategies in order to generate interaction with the player. Their rhythms dictate the way to encounter tridimensional, highly rendered models of the characters, during combat sequences; the former, as a turn-based RPG, present a slow-paced rhythm that sets up static and thoughtful fights, and the latter, as a real-time action RPG, present a fast-paced rhythm that sets up dynamic and hectic fights.

Moreover, the prevailing tones and moods of these videogames appear strikingly contrasting, to the point that when juxtaposed, they become complementary. Indeed, the world of *FFVII* is joyful, bright, and vividly multicolored, whereas the world of *BB* is bleak, obscure, and ghostly faded. Above all, this stark contrast depends on the fact that in the first, the apocalypse is about to happen, and in the second, it has already happened. Nevertheless, as noted, the two works convey aesthetically more than an emotional engagement with what is ultimately at stake at the end of the world, because their tonal and atmospheric facets subtly contain an opposite, and hence complementary, critical attitude towards the civilization that causes the apocalyptic catastrophe, namely Western modernity. In *FFVII* and *BB*, besides the scripted cutscenes and the characters' dialogues, the storytelling involves in-game items, architectures, and environments. Since the settings themselves visually play a key role in worldbuilding processes, the aesthetic properties of their design participate in defining the meanings these settings assume in the narrative as well¹².

Thus, the cities of Midgar and Yarnham (Figs. 2–3), where pivotal plot-related events occur, immediately exhibit how a certain evaluation of capitalist culture permeates each depiction of the videoludic scenery. Their architectonic profiles emblematically refer to the metropolitan landscapes that derive from late and early industrial stages of capitalism: as *FFVII* is set in a proximate, ultra-modern, and promising future, and *BB* in a remote, proto-modern, and decadent past, these works reflect on the constitutive ambivalences of the posthuman predicament, materializing the forthcoming and previous outlooks of our contemporary society. Midgar and Yarnham, however, turn out to possess an analogous structure because, alluding to global metropolises, they replicate spatially, in their intricate urban dispositions, the complex systems of power that intrinsically organize them. At first sight, the two cities do not give a realistic impression; the se-

¹¹ Conveniently, thanks to the subtle versatility of *Discourse, Figure's* analyses, we can include the digital context of videogames in the factual context whereby the artwork enacts the “world-function” that Lyotard ascribes to it in general: “objects and symbols offer themselves in an expanse where showing is possible. This expanse bordering discourse is not itself the linguistic space where the work of signification is carried out, but a worldly type of space, plastic and atmospheric, in which one has to move, circle around things, make their silhouettes vary, in order to utter such and such signification heretofore concealed. Words or linguistic units are not signs through signification, nor are they signs through designation, rather they produce signs with the objects they designate (make visible) and signify (make intelligible), and from which they are separated; presence and absence together become world on their margins” (Lyotard 2011, 83).

¹² “The language of art, speaking as it does with things, making a figure with words, embodies an indissoluble link between discourse and the tangible” (Lyotard 2011, 256 n. 54).

ries of figural transgressions¹³ embedded in their contours, in fact, transmit an unorthodox feeling. Such distortions are not solely due to graphic or gameplay purposes but aim to consistently expose the power relations on which these cities are built. In both cases, the headquarters of the Shinra Electric Power Company and the Healing Church tower above the other buildings, and highlight the hegemony of the two corporations over the surroundings. Hence, as soon as he or she digitally walks the streets, the player experiences in what measure their influence spreads out from the center to the peripheries: labyrinthine pathways manifest the pervasiveness of the stringent monitoring they exert; stratified districts conceal the extensive inequalities they produce; and deceptive appearances prove the cynical attitude they maintain toward the citizens.

Then, *FFVII* and *BB* continue to subvert how we commonly perceive Western culture, pointing further to who holds power and the social institutions through which they operate. The Company and the Church act as technocracies that firmly established a despotic governance on the monopoly of the fluxes we mentioned before: what guarantees their unlimited political power is the knowledge of life itself and the scientific means to manipulate it. The corporations publicly account for their repressive authority and mischievous conduct to the population, presenting themselves as the ones who brought an unprecedented economic wealth and who announced the conclusive theological truth. Thus, they promise prosperity in the form of progress and atonement, at the cost, though, of a reckless extractivism of nonhuman life that not only devastates the world to the degree of provoking the apocalypse but also results in the harmful instrumentalization of humans through unscrupulous scientific procedures. In this respect, the two video games figuratively address such discourses and practices, which, unsurprisingly, resonate throughout the history of our modernity in the controversial deeds of several political regimes and parties¹⁴, additionally representing them via the attire and the aspect of the Company and the Church's respective members, as part of their distinctive character design. Since *FFVII* describes a future age led by finance and economy, the Company's associates assume the figures of businessmen, managers, and technicians; since *BB* describes a past age led by religion and theology, the Church's affiliates assume the figures of clergymen, scholars, and physicians (Fig. 4).

While antagonistic figures cleverly imply recognizable Western historical institutions and humanist values, the protagonist figures, by contrast, embody a variety of posthuman exceptions. The groups of main characters, to which the player relates diegetically and affectively for the entire course of the games, share a corresponding backstory based on vulnerability: they got involved, willingly or not, in the plans of the corporations, and this irremediably changed their existence, making them live through an intense amount of physical or psychological suffering. As outsiders in their own worlds, each one of these characters has a personal reason to rise against the Company or the Church and put an end to their absolute power. Thus, in *FFVII*, we meet Cid, a veteran pilot; Yuffie, a teenage ninja; Red XIII, a warrior beast; Barrett, a renegade cyborg; Cloud, a genetically enhanced mercenary; Tifa, an eco-terrorist; Aerith, the last descendant of an extinct people; Cait Sith, a remotely-controlled synthetic cat; and Vincent, an undead immortal man. Instead, in *BB*, we meet Gherman, a physically impaired, haunted-by-the-past former member of the Healing Church; a foreign, anonymous hunter called to eradicate a scourge; the Doll, a living *automaton* without any memories; and the messengers, kind ethereal beings from another plane of existence (Fig. 5). Their figures portray the heterogeneous and disparate traits of those excluded or segregated by Western societies: in the binary logic of identity and otherness, which humanism and its discourses, in an implicit manner, comply with (Braidotti 2013), these characters do not correspond to the theoretically universal images and concepts of

¹³ "Transgression of the object, transgression of form, and transgression of space" (Lyotard 2011, 276).

¹⁴ For example, we can refer to the expropriation of natural resources and the exploitation of human labor in post-colonial contexts, which are legally conducted in the name of neoliberal ideology by multinational enterprises. Braidotti (2013), among others, speaks of "bio-piracy".

the human in our habits of thought, but rather they get branded – in the pejorative sense of ‘different than’ – as others.

An immanent, ahuman eschaton.

Finally, we will determine how *FFVII* and *BB* reframe part of our apocalyptic imaginary towards an eschaton that, as de Martino observes, has long been absent. The two videogames reintegrate in the cultural apocalypses they narrate and display their original anthropological function reformulating the representations of the end of the world within a novel horizon of meaning: in order to historicize our present and resolve the crisis of presence in its current instances they provide an imaginative framework based not on transcendence but on immanence, which is more adequate to the secular or post-metaphysical sensibilities and worldviews of our epoch. Such a reframing originates from the figural violation of the aesthetic canons that visually represent the fundamental discourses of Western humanistic culture¹⁵; through equivalent storytelling choices, as we saw, it is introduced by displacements on the traditional form of the human body and is expanded by transgressions on the established value of the organization of urban living spaces, the political and ideological institutions of capitalist society, and the oppositional dialectic paradigm of identity and alterity. This reframing then becomes complete and retrospectively operational when the narratives reach their climactic resolutions, with the conclusive overcoming of the apocalyptic crises conceived in fully posthuman terms. The critical force of figurality, by now so detached from discursivity to escape it, serves as the autonomous basis for its reconfiguration around an eschaton impossible to articulate and sustain before¹⁶.

As anticipated, we will now return to the plot in more detail. We already know that the exploitation of the fluxes by the Company and the Church did not directly cause the apocalyptic catastrophe, despite resulting in terrible consequences: on the one hand, the systematic extraction of the Lifestream ruined ecosystems and brought the planet on the verge of the collapse and, on the other hand, the massive use of the Old Blood unleashed an epidemic on the population, transforming part of it into literal beasts and driving the rest into madness. What actually triggered the end of the world were experiments aimed to transcend the human condition—experiments conducted on superior alien entities. Initially, the discovery of the vital fluxes coincided, for the corporations, with another, far more significant: the uncovering of an alien goddess, fallen from the cosmos and dwelling beneath the surface of the planet. In *FFVII*, it is called Jenova, and in *BB*, Ebrietas (Figs. 6–7); such extraterrestrial entities symbolize the ancestral nonhuman life that animates the universe as the very source of the Lifestream and the Old Blood. Hence, these experiments involved hybridizing selected human beings with the alien entities believed to be divinities. Instead of fostering human evolution, however, the uncontrollable nature of nonhuman life took over. The Company procreated Sephiroth, a demigod and legendary war hero who, once realizing his true heritage, brutally claims the planet for himself and his mother Jenova, a cosmic parasite, and, after repeatedly failing to rise to the godlike status of Ebrietas, the Church instigated the sudden arrival of the eldritch Great Ones, which torment and corrupt the existence of unaware humanity. In both videogames, the plotline culminates with an invading nonhuman life form that, in addition to manifesting through the relentless hybridizations of humans, inadvertently seizes control of the planet from an advanced human culture while threatening its extinction. To this culture, which deliberately resembles the capitalist Western one, the apocalypse

¹⁵ “It is to deconstruction, the interval, and critique that the figure owes its poetic dimension” (Lyotard 2011, 325).

¹⁶ According to Lyotard, figurality hinders understanding but makes us see. “The position of the image changes completely: no longer discourse’s lining, it becomes a theater or mirror, carving out behind its glass pane a deep stage where the phantasmatic becomes hallucinatory. *For one stages what one cannot signify, and one makes visible what is unsayable*. Representation depends on the disjuncture of the discourse-figure couple” (Lyotard 2011, 192).

plays out as the moral reckoning for having considered the human species the top of the hierarchy of beings and the center of the universe.

Furthermore, human ascension to godhood, rather than the original sin, recalls the breaking of the Oedipal interdict. Addressing not only the themes of science and biotechnology but also those of motherhood and reproduction, *FFVII* and *BB* represent these attempts to ascend in a postmodern interpretation of the Oedipus myth. Interestingly, what they evoke is an inherent linkage between forbidden knowledge and incestuous union: at first, for the sake of understanding, the corporations experimentally interfered with the impenetrable principle of nonhuman life, and then, for the sake of appropriation, blasphemously merged—xenotransplanted—it with humanness itself. Such a hazardous coupling results in hybrid beings that should never have been generated, as twisted incarnations of the Freudian death drive striving to carry humanity into nothingness. Sephiroth aspires to reunite, or become one again, with his mother in order to usurp the Lifestream and conquer the cosmos; the Great Ones, incapable of breeding their own offsprings, employ humans as living vessels in order to ensure a surrogate progeny.

Yet these desperate apocalyptic circumstances leave the possibility of an eschatological resolution in de Martino's cultural sense. The videogames allow the player to defeat the alien divinities, staging their most visually outstanding fight (Figs. 8–9), but to display, right after, an anti-cathartic ending. *FFVII* shows the city of Midgar five hundred years in the future, reclaimed by plants and animals, with no humans in sight; *BB* shows the hunter reborn and nursed by the Doll in the godly form of a squid-like Great One. Both imply that, eventually, humanity will not survive, neither on a collective nor on an individual level—nonhuman life, though, will. Their conclusive message is as straightforward as impactful: decenter the human in your worldly existence and embrace the nonhuman life within and around yours. As for the ecologism and the cosmism that inspired them, the two works ultimately reject the anthropocentrism on which our culture is historically founded and deny the spiritual transcendence according to which the rational soul, mind, or consciousness lies at the basis of human exception. Therefore, the eschatological perspectives of *FFVII* and *BB* redefine the Western apocalyptic imaginary towards immanence because they affirm, conversely, that what will remain of us is the organic or even inorganic nonhuman life and matter by which our corporeality is composed, and our species is determined¹⁷. Consequently, if the posthuman aesthetics of such eschatologies alter our perception of cultural apocalypses, recentring them around an immanent meaning, they also change our conception of ontological contingency, carrying it beyond the ethical tenets of humanism. In particular, the post-anthropocentric *eschatons* of *FFVII* and *BB* convey a similar ground for an ahuman ethics, notably akin to the one outlined by MacCormack (2012), that, on the assumption of the transitory presence of the human phenomenon on Earth, suggests an alternative set of values than the current ones to adopt; in the face of the risk of extinction, the moral ransom for Western humanism shall begin with its demise.

For de Martino, it is indeed from the incapacity to consistently or adequately make sense of the extinction of our culture using modern representations that the crisis of presence arises. Nonetheless, the posthuman figures and discourses of *FFVII* and *BB* seem to provide us with new and effective representative means to comprehend our historical condition, in terms of both transformative opening and eschatological closure (Mussnug 2022), whereas the humanist ones do not. The critical edge of these aesthetics and imaginaries draws on the non-reducibility of figurality to discursivity, also emphasized by Lyotard. As the figure always exceeds discourse in the construction of meaning¹⁸, the aesthetic qualities of their fictional worlds significantly affect

¹⁷ “A deeper kind of inhumanity, which is specific to *anthropos* him/her-self. That inner core of structural strangeness or productive estrangement is [...] the non-rational and non-volitional core of the inhuman which makes us quintessentially human” (Braidotti 2013, 109–110).

¹⁸ “Even when meaning (conveyed by words) becomes impossible, representation by things (designation) remains” (Lyotard 2011, 345).

how we understand and relate to ours. Thus, as we observed, in *FFVII* and *BB*, the posthuman figures, while reversing the already arranged humanist discourses, consent to fill the blank spaces¹⁹ of the still-developing posthumanist ones.



Figure 1. Hybrids, concept art.

¹⁹ “The secret of the figural, which transgresses the intervals that constitute discourse and the distances that constitute representation” (Lyotard 2011, 339).



Figure 2. Midgar, cinematic trailer.



Figure 3. Yarnham, cinematic trailer.



Figure 4. Corporations' members, concept art.



Figure 5. Main characters, concept art.

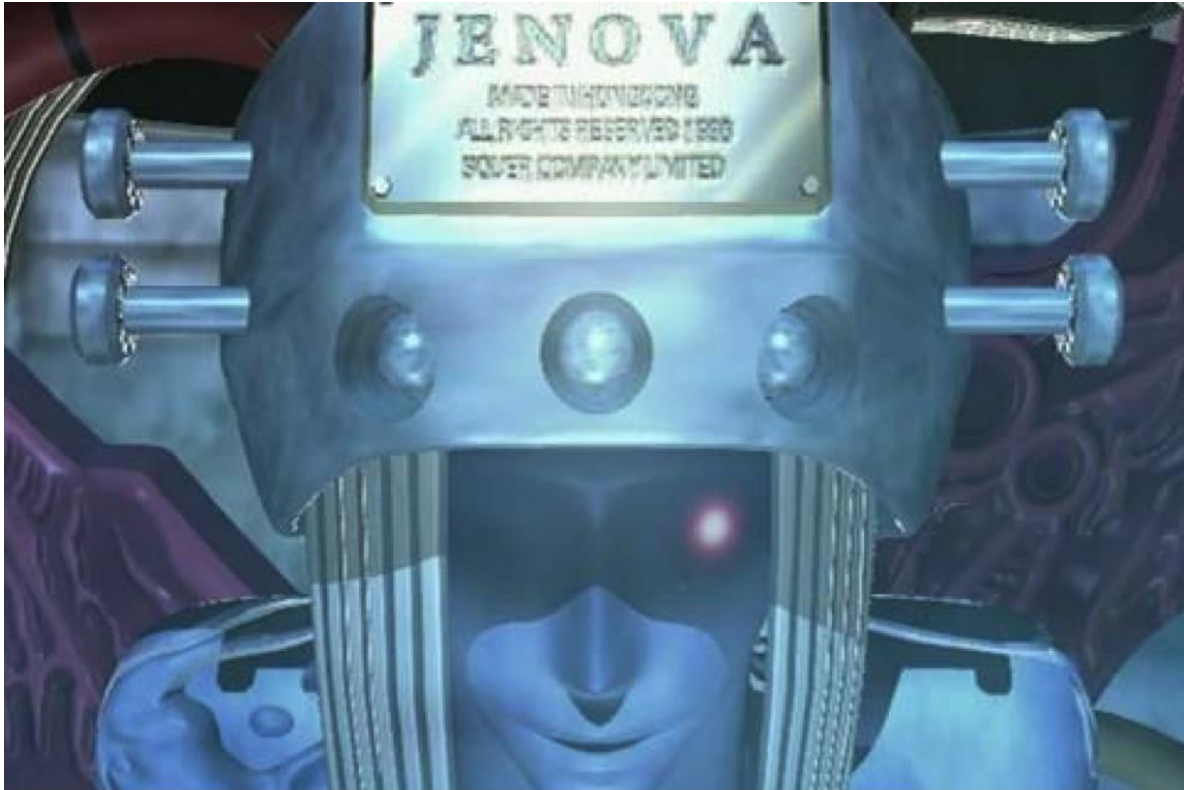


Figure 6. Jenova, gameplay.



Figure 7. Ebrietas, gameplay.



Figure 8. Sephiroth, gameplay.



Figure 9. The Great One, gameplay.

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