

*The Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Twenty-First Century: Modernity Beyond Salvage*

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Reading Heather J. Hicks' *The Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Twenty-First Century: Modernity Beyond Salvage* at the start of 2020 would seem to put one immediately beside Robinson Crusoe taking in his 'wrecked world'. We continue to see everything from the commodification of suffering to heartache and oppression, enclosed for centuries, breaking forth onto ruined streets. The scenes that fill our televisions are eerily and shamefully familiar; such loss might rightfully cause us to question whether the world needs more books, let alone another book about the apocalypse. Hicks' volume not only dispels this doubt like light through fog, it, in an attempt of literary prophecy, reaches to the past (not uncritically) as a way of understanding the present and envisioning the future.

It is Hicks' contention that the works she analyses 'use the conventions of post-apocalyptic genre fiction to interrogate the category of modernity' (2). Stretching back to some of the earliest recorded writings, apocalyptic literature has always refashioned existing texts to its own purposes; this is, perhaps, what Hicks most nearly means by the 'episteme of modernity', revealing not unintentionally the post-colonial focus of Hicks' interpretation. This methodology is particularly suitable to her subject, for all the narratives on which she focuses, and the characters therein, are involved in a particular form of colonialism, be it survival or empire. Having set us afloat on some wide and roiling sea, modernity asks us to 'identify what forms of subjectivity might be salvaged ... in [our] new conditions' (3). While it may be difficult to contend with Hicks' claim that the post-apocalyptic novel is the 'sine qua non of modern fiction'

(4), Hicks goes on to state: ‘these texts remind us, one of the most potent and distinctive aspects of our own contemporary apocalyptic fears is the loss of a global perspective’ (7).

Disconnect and suffering. Ignorance and pain. These are the hallmarks of the six texts Hicks chooses for her study and with which she lays the groundwork for examining the ‘essential nature of the modern [which] looks rather different in each novel’ (14).

Chapter 1 looks at Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003) from a scientific and colonial perspective and develops Hicks’ colonial paradigm with a curious comparison to the biblical book of Revelation (14, 28). Here, Hicks’ critical lens expands and sifts through the various ways bodies – particularly female bodies – have been colonized for the advancement of a society’s narrative. Confronted with Atwood’s union of Defoe’s *Crusoe* with the book of Revelation – or what Catherine Keller calls a pervasive, foundational text in Western culture (29) – we come to understand Atwood’s moral indignation at the perversity which Western civilization praises (43), perhaps even the perversity on which its grandeur rests, and into which it will further sink to its ruin.

Chapter 2 examines David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004). Immediately we are told of the centrality of Eliade’s work on temporality and his study’s focus of ‘human understandings of time as a potential key to our fate’ (61). To *Cloud Atlas*’s divided and interlocking structure Hicks attaches a particular episteme that highlights how linear time and cyclical time are understood. Hicks understands Mitchell’s modernity to be evident in his simultaneous criticism and praise of technology: much like Philip Rieff argues, the episteme of modernity contains the kernels of its own unravelling.

Chapter 3 connects Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006) with *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods* (2007) and focuses our attention through a unique eco-lit/post-colonial critical lens that highlights an area lacking in literary studies (79-82). McCarthy’s work is, Hicks lays out, a novel wrestling with the end of Western civilization, even as the unnamed father tries desperately to teach the “‘old world’ values’ to his son (85). *Robinson Crusoe* continues to play a pivotal role in modern post-apocalyptic texts, a role Hicks concludes is meant ‘to acknowledge the enduring power of a tradition that they also wish to question’ (103).

Chapter 4 takes an interesting turn within the modern episteme concept and relates Colson Whitehead's interrogation of kitsch and the sublime in his *Zone One* (2011). Tracing the critical line Hicks draws from Whitehead's work, following in this volume on McCarthy's and Winterson's novels, she shows most clearly her thesis that 'the cultural meaning of apocalypse shifted from divine retribution and rebirth to the destruction of modernity itself' (108). By focusing on the 'sublime' and drawing in Kant and Burke's monumental studies, Hicks demonstrates how Whitehead widens the perspective by which apocalypse can be comprehended: whether the 'distance ... be geographic, temporal, or aesthetic', we have moved away from the earlier works' more singular foci to a situation in which space, time, and beauty have alike collapsed into a supermassive black hole (110), drawing into it both the sublime and kitsch, the latter now allowing for a commodification of catastrophe (120).

Chapter 5 Paolo Bacigalupi's *Ship Breaker* (2010) concentrates on this prominent phenomenon: 'the convergence of the young adult and post-apocalyptic genres' (138). Much like for Crusoe, 'the craft of seafaring becomes the means for Nailer's growth. The alternative to ship breaking that becomes available to Nailer, which signifies mobility and hope, is a world of global commerce signified by a new type of clipper' (150), yet economic and ecological disaster preclude the very hope the situation provides.

Hicks presents a thoroughly enjoyable and scholarly account of post-apocalyptic fiction in the twenty-first century; while, at times, I feel her critical perspective a bit narrow, it is nevertheless evidenced by solid and wide scholarship. Though clearly a study of six particular novels, this monograph does miss an opportunity to explore more widely Hicks' thesis (2 and 108), even as the authors on which she focuses are explored in-depth. Hicks' work is neither erudite nor straightforward. Her scholarship demands much attention from her readers, but she demonstrates how the twenty-first century has fully and artistically thrown away the ages-old understanding of the apocalypse, and have come to a sort of quiet grief, a lament for the loss of something we could never own anyway.