Broken Mirrors: Representations of Apocalypses and Dystopias in Popular Culture

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Who are we *now* in terms of 'our collective anxieties, hopes, values, [and] assumptions' (1)? This is the underlying question in Trotta and Sadri's Introduction to *Broken Mirrors*, suggesting that as much as this collection is about stories, it is about humanity also. In order to answer their question, Trotta and Sadri turn to Speculative Fiction, and in particular, dystopian and apocalyptic literatures, genres selected because they 'problematise social anxieties' and 'reflect on other[…] issues in ways that traditional narratives cannot' (1). Such an explanation aptly justifies the decision to consider two different literary decisions throughout this collection.

Broken Mirrors takes an interdisciplinary approach to its rumination of apocalyptic and dystopian trends in popular culture, analysing prose fiction, graphic novels, films, television programs, and video games through a variety of critical lenses and approaches that renders this collection fascinatingly diverse. Trotta and Sadri see each chapter as 'pieces of a whole' (12), suggesting that although no single chapter will offer authoritative conclusions about 'who we are and where we may be heading' (12), the overall collection may provide scholars of dystopian and apocalyptic literatures fresh insights into two of the twenty-first century's most prominent media genres.

In Chapter One, Zlatan Filipovic draws on Giorgio Agamben's notion of the 'bare life' and Emmanuel Levinas's meta-ethical theories when analysing Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). This leads Filipovic to remark that 'when humanity is backed up against its limit', it is the 'call of goodness' (15) that motivates people, rather than their fear of death, an optimistic observation that he calls 'eminently human' (29). Hope underpins Chapter Two, in which Michael Godhe states that fictional dystopias generate hope because, if successful,

they enable individuals to avoid reaching those dystopias. His analysis focuses on the Brazilian television series *3%* (2016-2020), whose financially polarised story world he sees as the 'extreme finalised result' (35) of Mark Fisher's 'capitalist realism'. *3%* provides hope, argues Godhe, because its characters reject capitalist realism's extreme ends and strive for an ostensibly better alternative. In Chapter Three, Ariel Kahn writes about dystopian and post-apocalyptic comics and the animal-human hybrids found therein. These figures demand a reconsideration of humanity's 'relationships with the natural world and the forms of knowledge and community it embodies' (70) and challenge the egotism of anthropocentrism. Kahn's contribution is particularly valuable in how it questions how 'the hybrid nature and embodied, visual grammar of comics' (46) engage with the tropes of dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction, marking an important intervention to the study of two genres that tend to privilege the analysis of prose texts.

Ideas relating to hope become less prominent in subsequent chapters. In Chapter Four, Emelie Jonsson argues that Edward Bulwer Lytton's oft-overlooked *The Coming Race* (1871) was one of the first novels to engage with Darwinian ideas. Viewed through the lens of Darwinism, Jonsson sees the depiction of the pseudo-human Vril-ya and their underground society as having both utopian and dystopian qualities. In Chapter Five, Iril Hove Ullestad explains how Dmitry Glukhovsky's *Futu.re* (2013) takes ideas central to Russian Cosmism, particularly immortality, to dystopian extremes, and concludes that man is already immortal as 'he will live on as a father and a forefather for generations to come' (102). In Chapter Six, Gabriela Mercado discusses how the uncertainty and fatalism of the apocalyptic setting of Óscar Luviano's short story 'Fuego, camina conmigo' (2013) allows the author to recreate images of 'hypermasculinity and hyperviolence that is characteristic of men working for drug cartels' (116).

Chapters Seven and Eight investigate the figure of the ruin in post-apocalyptic imaginings. For Emma Fraser in Chapter Seven, it is the presence of ruins in post-apocalyptic video games, particularly in Bethesda Softworks' *Fallout 3* (2008), that are most fascinating, with Fraser noting that 'the post-apocalypse shares an affinity with video games because the virtual gameworld is inherently chaotic and fragmented' (132). In Chapter Eight, a vastly ambitious contribution that warrants a full-length study, Jerry Määttä considers the figure of the ruin in post-apocalyptic literature and film. Määttä demonstrates that there is no definitive post-apocalyptic ruin, and that crumbling monuments, destroyed metropolises, and wrecked

residential buildings have different implications, providing a nuanced understanding of this apocalyptic trope that will certainly be of interest to scholars.

In Chapters Nine and Ten, the collection takes a linguistic turn. In Chapter Nine, Linda Flores Ohlson examines how pronouns are used when referring to zombies, which are simultaneously the 'monstrous Other' and 'symbol[s] of humankind' (159). By scrutinising Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan's horror novel trilogy *The Strain* (2009, 2010, 2011), Flores Ohlson determines that human and non-human pronouns are used unsystematically when describing zombies, which reflects their complex position within the human and non-human binary. Joe Trotta conducts a corpus-informed study of apocalyptic and dystopian literature in Chapter Ten. Trotta concedes that his chapter's aim is not to reach any absolute conclusions but is instead to 'explore the usefulness of a corpus-informed, linguistic methodology in investigating apocalyptic and dystopian literature' (179). Indeed, this usefulness is proven throughout the chapter, as the corpus-informed study allows Trotta to highlight subtle, yet important, distinctions between apocalyptic and dystopian fiction that – now highlighted – demand further study.

Theological criticism and Joseph Campbell's conception of the monomyth inform Houman Sadri's reading of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995, 1997, 2000) in Chapter Eleven, the collection's final contribution. Making use of the term's biblical origins, Sadri sees apocalypses as being inherently revelatory, affording a transcendence which 'represents the monomythical boon' (213). In this sense, the apocalypse is not negative, and instead marks a beneficial, if not necessary, next step for mankind.

Each essay in *Broken Mirrors* is fascinating; the interplay between numerous disciplines, forms, and analytical lenses ensures that there is much to learn from this collection. It is somewhat unfortunate that concluding remarks from the editors are not included after Sadri's paper, for the collection's immensely varied contributions can at times feel somewhat disparate, as if requiring further editorial guidance to bind them together. Perhaps this was intentional. As much as the collection's title, *Broken Mirrors*, may allude to the fact that a broken mirror casts poor reflections, the title may similarly acknowledge that a broken mirror, one shattered into smaller pieces, casts not one reflection, but many.