

The Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel: Critical Temporalities and the End Times

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As is so often the case in the critical monograph, the spirit of Diletta De Cristofaro's book lies in its subtitle. Coining the term 'critical temporality', De Cristofaro argues that twenty-first century post-apocalyptic fiction turns the conventional 'sense-making' teleology of the literary apocalypse on its head, destabilising time and memory to question the apparent certainty and finality of the End Times (1-3). Beginning from the Greek root of the word as 'an uncovering', De Cristofaro argues that the traditional – Biblical – model of the apocalypse uses its ostentatious trauma to draw an end to history and thus define its meaning. The Bible's eschatology is of course a prophecy (a revelation) about judgment and the settling of accounts, leading to a utopian New Jerusalem without suffering or death. In De Cristofaro's view, the contemporary apocalypse is less definite: the end 'is no longer the privileged site of meaning' (3), a great unmaking without the hope of renewal or salvation. The author acknowledges that the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel builds on a strong tradition of twentieth-century dystopian fiction, but argues that the works under consideration are distinctive in their engagement 'with the concerns that give origins to today's dystopian apocalyptic visions in such a way that the roots of these concerns in traditional apocalyptic logic are exposed' (5). De Cristofaro demonstrates, through her concept of critical temporality, a series of major works that challenge both linear and teleological conventions of time in their portrayal of civilisational collapse and human extinction.

The monograph is structured into four chapters, each focused on a major theme in recent post-apocalyptic literature. Explicit Biblical parody is tackled first:

[Will Self's] *The Book of Dave* and [Sam Taylor's] *The Island at the End of the World* deconstruct the apocalyptic paradigm from within, by parodically appropriating

biblical apocalyptic tropes – from Revelation and the Genesis story of the Flood – and articulating critical temporalities that expose the apocalyptic construction of history as just a narrative, which is always self-referential and is particularly congenial for deranged minds. (36)

De Cristofaro sees this use of parody as an (implicitly deliberate) subversion of the literalism seen in works such as LaHaye and Jenkins' *Left Behind* series (1995-2007) and undermining any attempt to frame the End Times as a conflict between good and evil.

In Chapter Two, De Cristofaro explores the idea of a distinctively American apocalypse, noting the reliance on US icons in even British post-apocalyptic fiction, most notably in Jim Crace's *The Pesthouse* (2007). There is some discussion here of the impact of 9/11 on American Exceptionalism: Crace's reversal of Manifest Destiny, and Colson Whitehead's satirical, nihilistic, take on the War on Terror in *Zone One* (2011). The text that best supports De Cristofaro's argument, however, is Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006): a novel where fragmented time, moral compromise, and the slow march to death create a true American dystopia – a no-where where nothing matters, albeit one clad in the signs of US culture.

Chapter Three discusses climate change, the Anthropocene, and the 'negative teleology' of human-made environmental catastrophe (130). De Cristofaro's key texts here are David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) and Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007), exploring the use of 'concertina time' in the structure of both novels (119). Along with Lidia Yuknavitch's *The Book of Joan* (2017), these works comprise arguably the most hopeful of the texts under consideration. De Cristofaro argues here that the use of narrative to move back and forth in time creates the potential for narrative to inform the future, again challenging the notion of *telos* and offering the possibility of humanity's survival (120).

Chapter Four is concerned with Fukuyama's End of History and neoliberalism's usurpation of prophecy as the sense-making apparatus of the apocalypse. De Cristofaro uses Mark Fisher's concept of 'capitalist realism', tying together faith in the free market, disaster capitalism, and Margaret Thatcher's assertion that 'there is no alternative' into a modern apocalyptic teleology, determining meaning in such a way that 'justifies' oppression and inequality (just as scripture does to legitimise suffering as necessary for salvation). The elegiac tone of Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) seems to demonstrate Fredric Jameson's idea of the fragmented present (135) and the inability to imagine life beyond

capitalism, as melancholy survivors gather iPhones and laptops as artefacts of the civilisation they wish to commemorate. Most interesting, however, is De Cristofaro's reading of the interplay between Douglas Coupland's *Girlfriend in a Coma* (1998) and *Player One* (2010), the first novel commenting on neoliberalism's rise and the second on its erosion of a generation's sense of self (as 'denarration', the sense that one's life is merely existence rather than a narrative).

The monograph concludes with a discussion of the relationships between narrative, history, power, and agency that shape our understanding of the future. Here the author returns to Yuknavitch's *Book of Joan* through the lens of Derrida's 'archive fever', discussing how power aspires to 'landscape' virtual pasts – stories about who we are and have been – in order to shape the future (168).

The book's central motif is imbrication – each of the major themes overlaps the others and texts such as *The Book of Joan*, *The Book of Dave*, and *Player One* reappear throughout the De Cristofaro's monograph to offer a new angle on the theme of the chapter (though disappointingly there is little in the conclusion on Self's novel, though it seems highly relevant). The book's high points are its compelling readings of both *The Road* and *Cloud Atlas* and together these comprise a significant proportion of the book. The concept of Critical Temporality is both interesting and useful, but its initial definition appears vague. This is a book that grows on re-reading, as the author's new critical model needs to be demonstrated before it can be understood. Re-reading the monograph is, ultimately, an act of apocalyptic sense-making – the irony of which I imagine the author would enjoy.