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**Review: *The Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel: Critical Temporalities and the End Times* by Diletta de Cristofaro, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019**

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Discussions of time and temporality – and by extension, locating a suitable language that is universally understood by those having these discussions – is, at best, complicated, and at worst, impossible. Diletta de Cristofaro, however, focuses on a very specific instance of temporality: that which we find within the contemporary post-apocalyptic novel. Even within such a narrow view, though, the questions of what is meant by ‘temporality,’ the nature of temporality, and our perceptions of it are still diaphanous. The critical temporalities in question are most often inverted temporalities; rather than having a tidy past/present/future arrangement, the catastrophes in De Cristofaro’s chosen novels lack one or more. *The Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Narrative* is a concise, yet thorough, exploration of the evolution of post-apocalyptic themes from the Bible to twenty-first-century novels.

The end of the world – or the end of the world as we know it – is not a new fascination. Reasons for this are manifold, and while we can speculate on the contemporary fears around the Anthropocene, environmental crises, and political and societal strife as catalysts for the modern fixation on apocalyptic scenarios, we cannot offer the same insight into past iterations of this obsession – nor what innate human characteristic leads us to a prolonged introspection of mass devastation and destruction. Despite its continuous relevance in terms of the human psyche, however, post-apocalyptic narratives – at least in contemporary delineations – are often relegated to – as the author quoting Ursula LeGuin states – the ‘literary ghetto’ (4). De Cristofaro maintains that post-apocalyptic narratives contain vital insight into the human condition and our own fluctuating humanity (both in the sense of being human, and demonstrating compassion).

*The Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel* is segmented into four distinct sections that, in their own way, follow a logical chronology. The first chapter, ‘Biblical Parodies,’ highlights the historical origins and etymology of *apocalypse* and thus, *apocalyptic*, with contemporary imaginings of zombies, irradiated mutations, and the monstrous human. The second chapter, ‘Apocalypse America,’ focuses heavily on the impact of 9/11 on twenty-first-century fiction, with the emerging trend of post-apocalyptic narratives centring on vague or unspecified apocalypses (i.e. an unwritten history) being the result. Here, De Cristofaro conducts a thorough dissection of national exceptionalism, imperialism, and colonialism – the three primary shades of science fiction – and how post-apocalyptic fiction works to undermine these ingrained concepts.

The idea of a form of colonialism is carried over into ‘New Worlds of the Anthropocene,’ the third chapter in De Cristofaro’s monograph. In this chapter, De Cristofaro’s concept of temporal inversion is most clearly explored in future scenarios where human civilisation has completely regressed to an ‘original state’, whereby

society is not simply contemporary humans rebuilding a better, brighter civilization *sans* electricity and hot showers; this is an *entirely new* civilization coming into being, with little or no memory of the society we know, while also leaving clues for the modern reader that it is not them who *we* come from, but *they* who come from us. While ‘New Worlds’ concentrates on the temporal inversion of the past becoming the future, the following chapter, ‘After the Neoliberal Future’, refers to a continuously cycling present. De Cristofaro states that these neoliberal futures are hopeless in that they are actually futureless; the future is there, but it is simply a continuation of the ‘hopeless present’ (24). The machine of accumulation will continue to spin, regardless of what humanity does or does not do. In this scenario, there is no end, and that is the most hopeless part of all. Through novels such as Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2014), Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* (2011), and Douglas Coupland’s *Player One* (2010), De Cristofaro explores the idea – and reality – of a society acutely aware that it is hurtling towards the edge with no brake system. Dwindling resources, environmental calamities, political corruption, and terminal accumulation all combine with a *laissez-faire* resignation that this is ‘just the way things are.’

In her conclusion, De Cristofaro turns to the importance of the post-apocalyptic archive, an essential trope to most post-apocalyptic novels. The protagonist(s) here finds comfort in telling and/or documenting their story – for posterity, for an absent loved one, or simply for a possible future someone. We make sense of our world by telling stories, and apocalypses, by their nature, promise that sense will be made. Post-apocalyptic narratives, however, seldom deliver that promise. It is no wonder, then, that the protagonists take the initiative to create sense by telling the stories of themselves. Coupled with this is the twinned anxiety and anticipation of which texts will survive the apocalypse, and how their interpretations will shape future societies. Will Self’s *The Book of Dave* (2006) is a prime example of this: the delusional writings of a London cabbie are read as prophecy by post-apocalyptic survivors lacking the context of the book’s origin. These survivors are so desperate to apply some sort of apocalyptic logic to their circumstances that they cling to Dave’s journals zealously, and build their lives, culture, and society around his words. However, in Dave’s present – the survivors’ past – he creates a subsequent journal, disavowing his previous beliefs. This temporal location is inaccessible to the survivors, just like their present/Dave’s future is inaccessible to him. Only the reader is able to traverse freely between the two, providing yet another (undocumented) temporality influencing the text.

De Cristofaro has introduced a perspective and logic not previously considered in terms of post-apocalyptic fiction. However, I feel that in some respects she has failed to take in certain considerations – namely that stories *about* apocalyptic endings are

not necessarily about the apocalyptic *endings* at all. Even in seemingly despairing novels such as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), there remains that glimmer of utopian renewal – hope. That said, her readings challenge established ideas about the genre, and pose questions I had not yet asked of my conclusions on those same texts. I found her inclusion of the post-apocalyptic origin story particularly relevant; while a contemporary reader may not think of John the Elder as they read Lionel Shriver's *The Mandibles* (2016), there has always been an element of the Biblical imbued in the collective unconscious of Western society – and most definitely for British and North American authors. As De Cristofaro points out, in post-apocalyptic narratives, there is often featured a Messiah of sorts. This can be overt, as in the case of Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), and Sam Taylor's *The Island at the End of the World* (2009). It can also be more subtle, such as Rick Grimes in *The Walking Dead* (Robert Kirkman, 2003–2019), Amy in *The Passage* (Justin Cronin, 2010), and Katniss Everdeen of *The Hunger Games* (Suzanne Collins, 2008). In each of these instances, the fate and survival of a community is reliant on a single Chosen One – whether that One is Chosen through deliberation, circumstance, or simply being in the wrong place at the right time. This does indeed echo the Hero's Journey, and many could argue it is mere coincidence, but the post-apocalyptic Hero is frequently featured as 'saving' (redeeming) those they come across, and, ultimately, leading that community to a 'new' civilization that – to use De Cristofaro's term – represents a temporal inversion by placing the past in the future. Additionally, there is certainly merit in De Cristofaro's claim that the unspecified apocalypses in contemporary fiction are a response to, in Lydia Cooper's words, an 'immediate and visceral fear of cataclysmic doom' (Cooper, 2011). This is where the post-apocalyptic is not always about apocalypses, but often acts as a study of the human condition in a vacuum of sorts stripped of culture, nation, tradition, and identity. Who are we when those things are gone? The citizens of the post-apocalypse are, when all is said and done, true citizens of no-where, and potentially even no-when.

*The Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel* is both interesting and thought-provoking. De Cristofaro's study creates an impetus to reframe not only critical thinking around post-apocalyptic narratives, but also the practical aspect of creating them. Few are examining the critical temporalities of contemporary post-apocalyptic narratives in this way, and I certainly have never viewed them through this specific lens. De Cristofaro's analysis, in the context of temporal inversion, provides compelling ground for scholars and students to return to the novels she discusses in order to reconsider their dimensions in terms of a reimagined temporality.

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### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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### References

Cooper, Lydia. 2011. 'Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as Apocalyptic Grail Narrative.' *Studies in the Novel* 43 (2): 218-36. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2011.0032>

