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Book Review

De Cristofaro, D. (2019). *The Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel: Critical Temporalities and the End Times*. Bloomsbury Academic Press. 195. ISBN 978-1-35-008577-0

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Writing about Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* in the last chapter of her book, Diletta De Cristofaro defines the central motifs of the novel "a catastrophe of global capital" (145): global interconnectedness, rapidity in communications and travel, global economy – all supposed strengths of the modern world – are the same factors that ultimately cause or contribute to the collapse of society in the novel. Written in 2014, the novel revolves around the outbreak and aftermath of a flu pandemic and the inequalities and injustices that even before the spreading of the virus affected humanity and the world. *The Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel: Critical Temporalities and the End Times* is a succinct and yet complex exploration of novels, such as *Station Eleven*, able to critically investigate some of the most pressing crises and challenges of the contemporary world in what has come to be known as the Anthropocene. The author focuses on British and North-American post-apocalyptic novels outside the domain of sci-fi and plain speculative fiction and analyzes them through the crucial notion of critical temporality defined as "a construction of time that debunks the entrenched understandings of time and history contributing to the novels' catastrophes" (1).

The book, in fact, discusses the critical appropriation of conventional apocalyptic logic and the critique of utopian teleology in contemporary post-apocalyptic literature. The conventional apocalyptic discourse, notes De Cristofaro, has been shaped by a pre-modern imaginary, as epitomized by the Book of Revelation in the New Testament. Traditional apocalyptic narratives, in fact, "are written during periods of crisis for they are aimed at making sense of troubled times through the projection of utopia in the future" (8). The same cannot be said of novels such as *The Road* or *Station Eleven*, among the others analysed by De Cristofaro: while they were written in times of crisis and risks, they at the same time purposely focus not on a "utopian renewal" or a "pastoral utopia" (9): in fact, they realize a "shift in the apocalyptic imagination from apocalypse as utopian revelation to apocalypse as dystopian catastrophe" (9). The contemporary post-apocalypticism in fiction, as De Cristofaro suggests, "deploys the deceptive promise of a future utopia to legitimize oppressions and the status quo as part of a necessary teleological pattern tending towards betterment" (19). Hence,

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contemporary post-apocalyptic novels offer a critique of Western cultural structure of significance generally attached to the notion of ‘Apocalypse’.

To grasp this shift from a utopian to a dystopian teleology in the evolution of contemporary novel, De Cristofaro elaborates a theory of ‘critical temporalities’. The author highlights how apocalypticism, as a way of teleologically and linearly thinking about historical time, has come to constitute the ideological foundation of Western modernity. Focusing on the “imbrication of apocalyptic discourse with time” (1) therefore, allows one to understand how the distortion of this link in contemporary post-apocalyptic novels has become a way to articulate a “critique of the apocalyptic roots of modernity’s dangerous legacies in today’s world” (7).

Besides the aforementioned *Station Eleven*, De Cristofaro analyses both very famous and niche novels, including Will Self’s *The Book of Dave*, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas*, Sam Taylor’s *The Island at the End of the World*, Jim Crace’s *The Pesthouse*, and Jeanette Winterson’s *The Stone Gods*. After an extensive Introduction that lays down the critical framework of the volume, four chapters examine how post-apocalypticism is read, in the selected novels, through the concept of time and how the aforementioned critical temporality deconstructs specific domains of the conventional apocalyptic imaginary.

Starting with familiar themes, chapter one, titled *Biblical Parodies*, explores “the relationship between the contemporary apocalyptic imagination and the biblical source (21). De Cristofaro highlights how the parodization of the apocalyptic discourse in contemporary literature – as it can be seen, for example, in Perrotta’s *The Leftovers* – not only subverts it from within, but also brings to the surface the oppressive and violent nature imbricated in conventional, biblical narratives and in the power structures behind them.

Chapter two, “Apocalypse America”, deals with American ideologies in order to highlight how many contemporary post-apocalyptic novels set in the US – such as McCarthy’s *The Road* or Crace’s *The Pesthouse* – are less linked to the post 9/11 context as one might immediately imagine than rooted in a critique of “the apocalyptic ideological foundations of the nation” (23). Arguing that the US historical consciousness has an intrinsically apocalyptic narrative structure, De Cristofaro notes how “apocalyptic time is central to the American project from modernity” (57) and contemporary literary responses to these attitudes “foreground and question the apocalyptic foundations of nationalist and imperialistic ideologies that construct America as the culmination of history” (58).

Neo-colonialism and the Anthropocene are explored in chapter three, “The New Worlds of the Anthropocene”. Focusing not only on *Cloud Atlas* and *The Stone Gods*, but also on Matthew Sharpe’s *Jamestown* (2007), Marcel Theroux’s *Far North* (2009), and Yuknavitch’s *The Book of Joan*, the chapter analyses how these novels denounce “the nexus between the apocalyptic justifications of colonialism, the modern capitalist economy (...) and a damaging instrumentalist approach to nature” (23). Critical temporalities emerge in these novels through cyclical patterns of repetition in order to highlight these transhistorical trends.

Chapter four, “After the Neoliberal Future”, revolves around “the hegemonic temporality” of the “apocalyptically-inflected neoliberal end of history and its supposedly utopian completion of modernity” (132). In different ways, De Cristofaro argues, *Station Eleven*, Coupland’s *Player One*, and Whitehead’s *Zone One* all subvert the neoliberal ideal of a utopian ‘end of history’ and deploy a dystopian teleology in order to “deconstruct the pervasive legacies of apocalyptic logic on our present and denounce their catastrophic risks” (132).



In the concluding pages of the volume, De Cristofaro highlights the role of literature and its agency in not only commenting, but also critically intervening in contemporary pressing social issues “through the fostering of narratives that do not consume the planet and others in their self-righteous teleology and hunger for power” (25).

As it may already appear, De Cristofaro’s argument is particularly relevant from an ecocritical and ecohumanist perspective. It has recently been noted how “apocalyptic thinking is structurally anthropocentric” and while the apocalyptic imaginary with its “sense of existential urgency” has the potential to direct the attention to environmental threats and structural injustices, teleological and linear conceptions of time are “particularly problematic in the context of the unfolding climate and environmental catastrophe” (Mussgnug, 2022). In this context, De Cristofaro positions her work in the framework elaborated by theorists of risk, such as Beck and Giddens, who have highlighted how modernity is inherently linked with crisis and risk as crucial elements in everyday life of people and societies. From environmental dangers to human-machine ambiguous interactions, from the geological changes impressed by humanity on the Earth to the increasing inequalities produced by uncontrolled growth: hyper-modernity goes hand in hand with an almost endless array of dangers and fears. For De Cristofaro contemporary literature – and increasingly not only sci-fi or speculative fiction – seems to naturally turn to issues of anthropogenic environmental crises and global structural inequalities in order to denounce, through a dystopian depiction of possible futures, what is wrong with a very real present.

The catastrophes around which the analyzed novels revolve thus are the real focus of what we can term the New Post-Apocalyptic Novel and on which these texts want to direct their readers’ critical attention. By organizing the book in four thematic sections, De Cristofaro depicts a catalogue of contemporary threats and possible near end-of-the-world scenarios. And yet ‘The End’, apocalypticism per se is not the point of these narratives. The examined novels often undercut the power of end-of-time narratives (in trying to make sense of history) in order to highlight the potential for change implicit in these moments of ‘crisis’(19). Where the teleology of conventional apocalyptic narratives defines the determinism of their ideological imaginary, contemporary post-apocalyptic novels open to the possibility of still unwritten futures available to those open to a radical rethinking of History itself.

De Cristofaro’s work belongs to a well-established field of study, that often analyzes a by now well-established ‘canon’ of texts. This field counts, most recently, Heather Hicks’ *The Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Twenty-First Century*, that focuses on how the conventions of post-apocalyptic genre are used in 21st century novels to interrogate the category of modernity; Tate’s *Apocalyptic Fiction* – exploring the cultural and political contexts of post-apocalyptic novels of the new century as well as their bond with speculative fiction’s canon; and 2021 *Remainders of the American Century Post-Apocalyptic Novels in the Age of US Decline*, by Bellamy that sees the “post-apocalyptic mode” framework as a tool to read US contemporary culture through literature.

At the same time, *The Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel* boldly advances an innovative critical FRAMEWORK that is rooted in previous studies while also opening up new avenues of inquiry in the area. It is also well-grounded in a more general social and cultural critique of contemporary society – of the Anthropocene. Speculative fiction has often, if not always, been the privileged ground on which radical critique and “faith in the transformative power of

narrative” (163) have met. As recently noted by Rosi Braidotti, speculative fiction has the ability to offer “broader visions for humanity and new ways of interacting [...] by conjuring up alternative worlds” (Braidotti, 2021). In her study, De Cristofaro highlights once more the power of these narratives by realizing a work of deconstruction and dissection of the processes of world and story building and their strict relationship with our contemporary world as well as by emphasizing the power of literature and fiction in exposing oppressive power structures. The book is thus an interesting addition to the landscape of scholarship not only specifically on speculative fiction and post/apocalyptic literature, but more generally on contemporary literature, literary theory, and cultural studies and for sure one fascinating read.

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