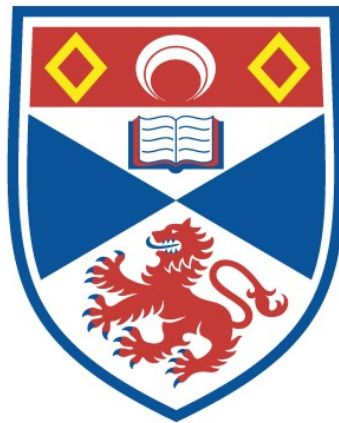# Zeitgeist incarnate: a theological interpretation of postapocalyptic zombie fiction

David Baird

A thesis submitted for the degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews

2019

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Abstract

This thesis attempts to take seriously the claims made by many postapocalyptic zombie narratives to represent the world as it truly is, analyzing and then assessing the theological value of their depictions of the human predicament. The approach is both formal and what Gary Wolfe calls transmedial, examining the recurring narrative structures and themes of texts across several media and eras as part of 'a popular aesthetic movement and not just a body of works of fiction on similar themes', with special attention given to the films and television of the new millennium. The aim is twofold: to extend the relevance of postapocalyptic zombie fictions beyond the relatively narrow vogue of a cultural moment, and to prompt a richer appreciation of the significance of the Christian faith within contemporary society. To this end, Chapter One contextualizes the complexity of these texts' relationship to Christianity by examining first the most prominent obstacles and then the implicit promise of these texts for theological reflection. It places special emphasis on the interior tension in many of these fictions between, on the one hand, aggressively emphasizing the apparent absence of the supernatural, while on the other, frequently claiming to disclose a dimension of human experience in excess of what can be ordinarily perceived by the senses. Chapters Two and Three extend this analysis to the complex content of what these stories depict. Chapter Two considers the multilayered symbolism of decline in their conspicuous spectacles of disaster, disintegration, and death. Chapter Three examines the countervailing symbolic motifs of residual integrity and regeneration that is exhibited most prominently by characters who attempt to live genuinely human lives in spite of these circumstances. The first half of the thesis concludes by proposing a composite postapocalyptic view of the human predicament, which represents the world as ambiguous, dramatic and quite possibly, although not certainly, absurd. Chapter Four begins the theological reflection upon this kind of postapocalyptic perspective, proposing how such depictions might be illuminated by Christian theological descriptions, particularly the absurd existential circumstances brought about by the original sin. Chapter Five, reciprocally, suggests some of the ways the dramatic images of these texts might enrich theological reflection by eliciting fresh insights into the significance of the central mysteries of Christianity, especially the paradoxical already-and-not-yet of eschatological expectation.

The thesis concludes by offering a final evaluation of whether, all told, the world can be truly considered postapocalyptic from a Christian perspective, arguing that although there are significant differences, postapocalyptic fictions and Christianity put forward strikingly similar pictures of the deeply self-conflicted circumstances of the common human predicament.

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

'The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another'.[1]

Christianity and Culture

In principle, all of Christian belief is implicit in the doctrine of the Trinity. As the 'source of all the other mysteries of faith',[2] a thorough knowledge of it and its implications would include all of the content of Christianity,[3] and, indeed, according to its premises, everything that can be known.[4] Yet merely stating that it explains everything does not demonstrate what it means: for this, it must be related to other things.

Accordingly, the history of Christian theology might be understood as the spelling out of these relations. Beginning with Christ's own human embodiment and use of human language, appeal to human observations and reference to works of human culture,[5] the development of Christian doctrine, as the process has come to be called, might be understood as an ongoing process of expositing divine revelation in partnership with human reason, insights, and observations. St. Paul preached with reference to pagan deities and quoted pagan poetry with approval.[6] St. John in the prologue to his Gospel and Justin Marytr in his *Apology* exposited Christian belief in light of Stoic doctrines. Augustine synthesized the insights of Plato and Aquinas the observations of Aristotle. Even the concept of development in Christian theology arose within the same modern European intellectual ferment as Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Darwin's *Origin of Species*. In each of these cases, it might be generalized, the significance of Christian belief is expanded

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[1] Pope St. John XXIII, Opening address to the Second Vatican Council, quoted in Michael A. Hayes and Liam Gearson, eds., *Contemporary Catholic Theology: A Reader* (London: A&C Black, 1999), 336.

[2] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, revised edition (London: Burns and Oates, 1999), §234.

[3] N.B. 'The whole history of salvation is identical with the history of the way and the means by which the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, reveals himself to men "and reconciles and unites with himself those who turn away from sin"'. *Catechism*, §234.

[4] While acknowledging a plurality of not always compatible definitions, for purposes of clarity and consistency in this thesis 'Christianity', 'theology', and cognate terms will refer to those beliefs and reflections consistent with the magisterial teachings of the Catholic Church.

[5] Cf. *Mt* 16:2-4; *Mk* 12:16-17

[6] Cf. *Acts* 17:22-28, *1 Cor* 15:33

in relation to the experiences, stories, and philosophies that are already significant to various subsets of humanity. This thesis seeks to extend this effort up to the present moment with reference to a specific collection of contemporary cultural artefacts, postapocalyptic zombie narratives.

These texts have been selected for several reasons. First, they show signs of theological promise. Consistently featuring Resurrection-like risings from the dead, Eucharistic overtones in the eating of human flesh, and explicit discussions of the nature of the soul and the existence of God, at a minimum these stories offer intriguing variations on traditional Christian themes whose unconventionality may well highlight some unexpected or hitherto underdeveloped implications. Second, postapocalyptic fictions frequently purport to represent the human predicament as it truly is, and in so doing, stake a claim in the same domain as theology when it proposes to define the basic parameters of reality.[7] Whether ultimately converging or diverging from the Christian view, these stories make a claim to represent the real world earnestly enough to be taken seriously by many of their viewers, which might for this reason alone if no other include a few theologians.

Third, and perhaps most important for present purposes, the postapocalyptic visions are extraordinarily popular. The HBO comedy series *Silicon Valley* refers to this when the CEO of a Microsoft-like tech giant attempts to rally a boardroom full of employees by prophesying an imminent 'data-geddon', and someone questions the coinage, suggesting that 'There's just been a lot of '"geddons" lately'.[8] As a diagnosis of the current cultural moment this would seem to hold up. Since the new millennium, postapocalyptic themes and zombies have multiplied not only across media platforms but also in terms of output and viewership. From Jane Austen to reality TV,[9] they are to be found on cable and network television,[10] the big screen,[11] on the shelves of high street booksellers as both literary and

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[7] The oddity of this claim, to represent the real world by way of imaginary monsters and a largely demolished fictional world, will be addressed in Chapter One.

[8] *Silicon Valley*, season 2, episode 1, 'Sand Hill Shuffle', directed by Mike Judge, written by Clay Tarver, aired 12 April 2015, on HBO, https://www.amazon.com/Sand-Hill-Shuffle/dp/B00ZOSPVAW/.

[9] Cf. Seth Grahame-Smith's surprise hit mash-up novel *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, and BBC Three reality TV series *I Survived the Zombie Apocalypse* (2015).

[10] Numerous televised examples include series such as *Jericho* (2006-08), *Survivors* (2008-10), and *Into the Badlands* (2015-).

[11] Recent postapocalyptic films include *I Am Legend* (2007), *Oblivion* (2013), the reboot of the *Mad Max* franchise (2015), *A Quiet Place* (2018), and feature animations like *Wall-E* (2008) and *9* (2009).

genre fictions,[12] as a pervasive theme across new media[13] and across the mastheads of news columns.[14] Among the 450-odd zombie films released since *White Zombie* in 1932, nearly sixty percent appear since the turn of the millennium.[15] Additionally, when the second season premiere of the AMC television series *The Walking Dead* (2010-) aired on 16 October 2011 it was 'the highest-rated drama telecast in the history of basic cable',[16] and in each year since it has been the number one show on television among viewers age 18 to 49.[17] If as Kingsley Amis observes, 'the ability of a literary mode to expand into others is often taken as a sign of vitality',[18] then this can certainly be said of postapocalyptic tropes, which, if even two decades ago might have been dismissed as a niche fascination amongst eccentrics, have today become fully mainstream.

Combining this proliferation with these texts' frequently sober avowals to show us reality as it really is, it seems reasonable to suppose—as a hypothesis to be tested—that these texts might be popular because in some sense or other they do. Manifestly extending beyond the sheer quality of any specific programming, these fictions might appeal at a generic level, that is, because they represent something fascinating, relevant or commensurate to the way many people feel, validate an intuition or a set of them, or

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[12] There are standalone novels like *The Road* (2006) and *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* (2009), plus bestselling series like *The Hunger Games* (2008-10) and *Wool* (2013-14).

[13] The postapocalypse can be also be found among video games such as *Half-Life 2* (2004), the *Fallout* franchise (1997-)*, and *The Division* (2016), and in a wide range of anime, comics and web originals like *Black Bullet* (2014)*, Wasteland* (2006-15)*, and *Afterworld* (2007-08)*.

[14] Headlines steeped in postapocalyptic associations frequently appeared during the most recent United States presidential election, for example, Charles Lane, 'The Problem with John Kasich? He's Not Apocalyptic', *Washington Post*, 20 Apr 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-problem-with-john-kasich-hes-not-apocalyptic/2016/04/20/d5ca5348-0716-11e6-bdcb-0133da18418d_story.html?noredirect=on; 'Are You Prepared for Election Armageddon?', U.S. Gold Bureau, *PRNewswire* (website), 19 October 2016, https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/are-you-prepared-for-election-armageddon-300347397.html; 'Half of young Americans prefer meteor apocalypse to Donald Trump presidency', Reuters, *The Guardian*, 19 October 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/oct/19/half-of-young-americans-prefer-meteor-apocalypse-to-donald-trump-presidency.

[15] 'List of Zombie Films', *Wikipedia*, last modified 8 August 2018, 13:32, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_zombie_films.

[16] Krista Tippett, 'Transcript for Diane Winston—Monsters We Love: TV's Pop Culture Theodicy', *On Being* (website), accessed 15 August 2018, https://onbeing.org/programs/diane-winston-monsters-we-love-tvs-pop-culture-theodicy/.

[17] This can be stated up to the year of 2016. Frank Pallotta, '"The Walking Dead" Creator on Crafting a "Zombie Movie That Never Ends"', *CNN Media* (website), 21 October 2016, https://money.cnn.com/2016/10/21/media/robert-kirkman-the-walking-dead-amc/index.html.

[18] Kingsley Amis, *New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction* (North Stratford, NH: Ayer, [1960] 2000), 143.

present a view of the world that is somehow adequate to a vital aspect of contemporary experience. If 'people want to see the basic dramas of their lives enacted',[19] in other words, these stories which are largely unbeautiful and replete with human behavior that is far from commendable might appeal as somehow true. Like the *logos spermatikos* or the categories of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, therefore, this thesis presupposes that postapocalyptic zombie stories might be generative for theological reflection because for so many people they already make so much sense.

Expressing the Zeitgeist

It is also important to note that, arguably, the deeply felt significance of these stories is in no way mitigated by the fact that it remains less than clear what exactly they mean. For instance, several critics have discussed the elusive, ubiquitous appeal of these stories in terms of the spirit of the age. Berger describes how in the late twentieth century, a sense of crisis 'exists together with another sense, that the conclusive catastrophe has already occurred',[20] observing that in recent times forebodings about an impending end of history have 'increasingly given way to visions of after the end', and that 'the apocalyptic sensibilities both of religion and of modernism have shifted toward a sense of post-apocalypse'.[21] Majid Yar speaks of 'today's dystopian sensibility', a widespread 'imaginary of disaster' and 'mood of pessimistic foreboding'.[22] Evan Calder Williams describes 'a deep-seated conviction that things are teetering on a precipice, that disaster is not just around the corner but that the corner has already been turned', and that 'we stand on the nervous razor edge of bad years bound to go worse'.[23] Gwendolyn Foster suggests that the apocalypse 'is a current event, taking place as we speak',[24] and according to Rosalind Williams, 'the end of history dwells in the present as a rolling apocalypse […] It is here and

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[19] Krista Tippett, 'Transcript for Diane Winston'.

[20] James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xiii.

[21] Berger, xiii.

[22] Majid Yar, *Crime and the Imaginary of Disaster: Post-Apocalyptic Fictions and the Crisis of Social Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 18, 91, 19.

[23] Evan Calder Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011), 4.

[24] Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Hoarders, Doomsday Preppers, and the Culture of Apocalypse* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 47.

now and all around'.[25] Berger usefully summarizes this shift in cultural atmosphere—what others have called a general 'perspectival stance' or 'mode of thought'[26]—by labelling it 'a pervasive post-apocalyptic sensibility in recent American culture',[27] and several of the theories for the present day popularity of these texts will be discussed in Chapter Four. The point at present is that the stories that express this sensibility might appeal for reasons that are definite, deeply felt, and widely appreciated, even though the reason for their appeal remains in dispute or below the general threshold of conscious recognition.

At the same time, it is also critical to point out that identifying postapocalyptic stories as expressions of this sensibility does more than merely restate that they are popular. It also implies that as narrative forms of art they bestow a perceptible shape and structure upon it, granting to the otherwise airy nothing of a mood or atmosphere so many local habitations and a name.[28] Postapocalyptic zombie narratives therefore not only take the temperature of the times, as it were, but by expressing an inchoate conglomeration of widely held assumptions and intuitions, expectations and beliefs in concrete form also render them analyzable. In broad terms then, the procedure of this thesis will be to analyze and then evaluate these stories from and for a Christian perspective, describing and then critically engaging with them as representations of what many people believe, in the hope that light shone on them might also illuminate some as yet underappreciated aspects not only of the human predicament but also of the Christian deposit of faith.

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[25] Rosalind Williams, *The Triumph of Human Empire: Verne, Morris and Stevenson at The End of The World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 346. Similarly, Oliver Lindner observes that 'in the early 21st century, scenarios of apocalypse and the downfall of civilization have become essential features of the zeitgeist in literature, film and popular culture', Oliver Lindner, 'Postmodernism and Dystopia: David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (2004)', in Voigts and Boller, *Dystopia*, 363, and Scholes and Rabkin write that 'in our time the utopian impulse has been largely replaced by dystopian projections of disastrous current trends'. Robert Scholes and Erik Rabkin, *SF Science Fiction: History - Science - Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 174.

[26] Williams, *Combined and Uneven*, 157-58, 238.

[27] Berger, *After the End*, xiii.

[28] In more philosophical terms, it might be said that postapocalyptic zombie narratives render a postapocalyptic sensibility susceptible to observation by the senses, employing an artistic medium whereby sub-rational experience or might be engaged by the intellect. In a similar vein, Don DeLillo describes his books as 'about movements or feelings in the air and in the culture around us, without necessarily being part of the particular movement', quoted in Anthony DeCurtis, 'An Outsider in This Society: An Interview with Don DeLillo', in Frank Lentricchia (ed.), *Introducing Don DeLillo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 66.

Literature Review

Before describing in detail how the thesis will approach this task, it is helpful to note how this effort does not stand alone in contemporary scholarship. From myriad enthusiast projects to a few select fruits of rigorous research, many books, articles, and essay collections have appeared since the new millennium analyzing the contemporary cultural significances of postapocalyptic and zombie fictions. However, the scholarly usefulness of these sources varies considerably, and with reference to the unique contribution of this thesis, only a few have attempted to analyze the recurring structures and themes of postapocalyptic zombie narratives at a generic level, and even fewer have devoted any sustained attention to theology. Nevertheless, several studies have important overlaps with the present work. James Berger's *After the End* remains the best point of entry for the theoretical implications and current cultural relevance of postapocalyptic narratives, and his suggestive analysis of the multi-layered relevance of the theoretical discourse on trauma provides a powerful hermeneutic for postapocalyptic stories in general and the interests of this thesis in particular. Evan Calder Williams' lyrical if unconventional *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* gives voice to many aspects of the postapocalypse as a cultural mood, and Majid Yar's *Crime and the Imaginary of Disaster* provides an illuminating starting point for reflecting upon the implicit religious significances of the genre. Sibylle Machat's doctoral thesis published as *In the Ruins of Civilizations* offers an exemplary formal analysis of postapocalyptic fictions, whose primary focus is deliberately limited to the structural implications of various types of world-altering disaster, i.e. the diverging possibilities for human life in the wake of a flood, comet strike, et al. Roger Luckhurst's study offers a readably rigorous overview of the cultural history and interpretations of zombies, and Kyle Bishop's *American Zombie Gothic* situates some of the major texts at the intersection of trending schools of critical theory. Essay collections like *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*, *Generation Zombie: Essays on the Living Dead in Modern Culture*, and *Zombies Are Us: Essays on the Humanity of the Living Dead* examine the many historical influences upon the zombie and its inroads into several domains of popular culture. The latter volume dedicates a section to religious themes, but the wide scope of the essays offers only limited engagement with specifically Christian theology. In this regard, the essays in *The Undead and Theology* are more focused but are unevenly applicable to the

present work and at times, it can be said, eccentric. The promisingly titled *How to Survive the Apocalypse: Zombies, Cylons, Faith, and Politics* would seem to derive the majority of its theological reflection from a few closely-read passages from the writings of Charles Taylor, and while the one full length study dedicated to the theology of zombies, Kim Paffenroth's *Gospel of the Living Dead: George Romero's Visions of Hell on Earth*, offers numerous worthwhile observations, the bulk of its content consists in summarizing the plots of five films by a single director.

By contrast, this thesis aims to evaluate the theological significance of postapocalyptic and zombie narratives at the level of genre and therefore necessarily engages with a wide and varied range of texts. Deliberately poised between the distinguishable sets of postapocalyptic and zombie fictions, it places special emphasis upon analyzing the symbolic significance of zombies as structural elements in a postapocalyptic fictional framework, how theology might inform this and how this might inform theology. The efforts of the thesis are divided overall into two parts, therefore, analysis and reflection. Given the relative dearth of critical engagement with these stories at a generic level, it has seemed advisable before evaluating them with specific reference to Christianity to first establish a relatively neutral close reading of their recurring themes and structural devices. However, given the forbidding quantity of existing texts and rapid proliferation of new ones, examples have been chosen to be representative rather than exhaustive. At the same time, out of the desire to do justice to the depth and diversity of these stories as a total cultural phenomenon, the selection of texts is what Gary Wolfe calls *transmedial*, texts chosen from several media and eras to represent 'a popular aesthetic movement and not just a body of works of fiction on similar themes',[29] with particular attention given to the films and television of the new millennium.

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[29] It is instructive that Wolfe's use of 'fiction' here specifically includes films, as texts 'structured by the same concerns that structure much of the literature, and sometimes even succeed in reaching deeper centers of consciousness in a wider audience than literature does' (xiii). Gary K. Wolfe, *The Known and the Unknown: The Iconography of Science Fiction* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1979), xii.

Thesis Structure

The analysis of these texts in the first part of the thesis is divided between two tasks, first to establish the peculiar character of these stories' claims to disclose what the world is really like, and subsequently to examine the complex content of such depictions. In more detail, Chapter One begins by examining the most prominent obstacles to a constructive theological engagement with these texts, in particular their often overt repudiations of basic Christian beliefs, and subtler divergence in what each signifies by the terms apocalypse and post-apocalyptic. Perhaps even more fundamentally, their flamboyant floutings of the ordinary appearances of the world call into question their value as serious representations of the human predicament, let alone depictions compatible with a Christian point of view. However, after analyzing some of the variety and nuances of these claims, the chapter suggests that these otherwise odd assertions might be best understood as referring to a real yet ordinarily imperceptible dimension of reality. The chapter goes on to compare and contrast this kind of claim with similar descriptions of divine revelation in Christian theology, and concludes by noting what might be a fundamental structural contradiction between how these stories repudiate and echo basic Christian claims.

Having examined some of the complexities involved in these texts' assertions to represent the human predicament as it is, Chapters Two and Three lay the foundation for additional theological reflection by taking a closer look at these stories' content. Whereas Chapter Two focuses upon what is most conspicuous about the postapocalypse, namely, an interlocking symbolism of disaster, disintegration, and death at every level of human experience, Chapter Three rounds out these observations by underscoring what is arguably just as characteristic of postapocalyptic fictions if sometimes less obvious, that is, characters struggling against this disaster. In other words, if the typical postapocalypse represents a world that is thoroughly traumatized, it nevertheless retains enough residual integrity, forces of regeneration, and grounds for hope that characters typically are not merely reduced to the attempt to survive but also work to cultivate meaningful human lives. At the same time, the chapter acknowledges that a deep ambiguity runs through most of these stories, whereby both disaster and resistance to it remain ineradicable aspects of the human predicament. In the attempt to redress a shortcoming in the secondary literature, Chapter Three stresses those elements of these fictions that run counter to the appearance

of a world in which everything comes to nothing, emphasizing the numerous ways in which the structurally-enforced confrontations with decomposition in these stories—most vivid, perhaps, in the symbol of decomposing humanity, the zombie—also reinforce the discovery of those things that remain beautiful, vital, and intact. This analytical section of the thesis concludes by summarizing what might be called a composite postapocalyptic view of the human predicament, arguing that these texts are seldom simply pessimistic, but more commonly exhibit complex attitudes towards a universe depicted as thoroughly ambiguous, dramatic, and quite possibly, although not certainly, absurd.

On the basis of this analysis, the second part of the thesis assesses the theological value of postapocalyptic narratives, proposing, first, what Christian theology might confirm, contribute to, and qualify about these depictions of the human predicament, and second, reciprocally, what these fictions might confirm, contribute to, and qualify about Christian theological descriptions of it. Beginning with a review of several other interpretations of the contemporary appeal of postapocalyptic stories, Chapter Four supplements these with a Christian theological interpretation that focuses upon the doctrine of original sin. Drawing upon traditional Christian theological descriptions of the essential nature and existential condition of fallen humanity, the chapter examines how an imperceptible wound to the integrity of the created order might provide an explanation for the unevenly postapocalyptic character of the phenomenal world as well as the uneven human perception of it. As one possible hermeneutic amongst many, the chapter queries the extent to which numerous post-millennial postapocalyptic texts might be understood as evoking something more fundamental than any particular psychological, social, or ecological catastrophe, that is, a perennial ontological predicament underlying each of these, yet do so in such a way that does not rule out the viability of many of these other interpretations. At the same time, the chapter also stresses what Christian theology contributes towards the understanding of these stories that is unique, and articulates the implicit critique its religious narrative presents to other explanations in its claim not only to diagnose the same problem but to offer a solution believed to be inaccessible to unaided human reason or observations.

If Chapter Four proposes how Christian theology might help to make better sense of the symbols employed by postapocalyptic stories, then Chapter Five suggests how these symbols might help provoke constructive theological reflection. Specifically, the chapter

proposes how a postapocalyptic vocabulary of dramatic images might help to illuminate, enrich, and stand alongside some of the tensions involved in Christian eschatological expectation. Whereas theology might describe how humanity is implicated in an invisible drama of redemption, for instance, these stories can show us something of what it is like and offer what may be necessarily imperfect anticipations of the eternal human predicament. They might do so, additionally, in a way that does not merely illustrate the meanings of Christian metaphysical claims but also enlarges upon them, importing fresh nuance, connotation, and hints at perhaps unanticipated significances. The chapter finishes with a few general reflections upon the question of whether there are aspects of the human predicament that might evade adequate representation in any medium but drama, and, if so, what this might imply about the intrinsic limits of theology and the unique contribution of these stories to the Christian understanding of reality.

The thesis concludes by offering a final evaluation of whether, all told, the world can be truly considered postapocalyptic from a Christian perspective, arguing that although they do so through different symbolic vocabularies, both postapocalyptic fictions and Christianity claim to reveal an important hidden dimension of the human predicament and put forward strikingly similar albeit significantly different pictures. If successful, the theological interpretation of this thesis will extend the relevance of postapocalyptic zombie fictions beyond the relatively narrow vogue of a cultural moment by relating them to more perennial human concerns, and its extended analysis and reflection will prompt a richer appreciation of the scope and significance not only of these narratives and the human predicament they represent, but also of the significance of the Christian faith within contemporary society. If Christianity is the religion of the Triune God most succinctly expressed in the Incarnation, the hope is that probing more deeply into these texts' representations of the human predicament will yield a more profound appreciation of the meaning of God made man—even if it turns out that, from their perspective, the most coherent way to depict him, paradoxically, is a walking contradiction.

Chapter One

'[The healthy person] has always cared more for truth than for consistency […] he sees two different pictures at once and yet sees all the better for that'. [30]

If as suggested in the Introduction, postapocalyptic zombie fictions offer an initially promising set of symbols for the development of Christian doctrine, there are also some immediate obstacles. The most obvious of these is how often aspects of these texts would seem overtly to repudiate or at least implicitly undermine basic tenets of Christian belief. Another perhaps even more serious challenge is the oddity of the recurring postapocalyptic fictional claim to represent the world as it truly is despite defying how it actually appears: for if these texts do not even plausibly represent the real world, what good are they to Christianity? The primary aim of this chapter is to address these challenges, and, secondarily, to analyze what might be called the deep structure of how these texts depict the human predicament. Whereas subsequent chapters will be concerned to analyze the content of these stories in comparison with Christian theology, this chapter seeks to compare and contrast how each of these disclose what they take to be the full scope of the human condition. Through the close examination of a variety of examples, the chapter argues that while the conventions and atmosphere of many of these texts may at first seem fundamentally antipathetic to Christianity, the relationship is actually more complex, ambivalent, and involves deep structural similarities.

Antagonisms At First Glance

The apparent absence, irrelevance, or malignity of the Christian deity is a more or less explicit theme in many postapocalyptic zombie fictions. In the premiere episode of the second season of the AMC television series *The Walking Dead* (2011-), for example, a group of human survivors who have just escaped from zombie-overrun Atlanta find themselves searching for a lost little girl and come across a small country church. The pews are filled

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[30] G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane, 1909), 47.

with 'walkers' and after dispatching them, the group's leader, Rick, takes a moment to pray in front of an imposing crucifix. He is not much of believer, he admits, but pleads for 'some kinda acknowledgment, some indication I'm doing the right thing … Any sign'll do'.[31] Shortly thereafter his son is shot in a freak hunting accident, and, as the apparent answer to Rick's prayer, would seem to signify either the non-existence of the deity in a universe of raw chaos or some cruel diabolic inversion of a miracle. In a later episode, after the group survives a bloody shootout and Rick performs a cold-blooded execution inside a different church, the episcopal preacher Gabriel comes out from hiding and protests against the slaughter on the grounds that they are in the Lord's house. Maggie, one of the members of Rick's group, flatly replies, 'It's just four walls and a roof'.[32]

Another way that these fictions undermine the credibility of Christianity in their fictional worlds is through the use of traditional religious symbols apparently evacuated of their traditional religious significance. Within the first few minutes of Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2001), for example, the film often credited with sparking the millennial 'zombie renaissance',[33] protagonist Jim wakes up in an empty hospital room, roams the desolate streets of London and then wanders into a church. There he has his first post-disaster encounter with humanity in the figure of a priest who stands up from a pile of corpses, convulses as he approaches him, and then chases him out under graffiti reading, 'Repent, The End is Extremely Fucking Nigh'.[34] In a similar episode in the novel *The Girl with all the Gifts* (2014), a small group of scientists, teachers, and military personnel attempt to uncover an explanation for the precocious intelligence of a group of undead school children. When their fortified compound gets overthrown by a band of feral tar-covered human 'junkers', the group gets thrown out into the wider world overrun by 'hungries' and find their first resting place near a church. Inside, 'near the rood screen', are bones left by an animal 'or

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[31] *The Walking Dead*, season 2, episode 1, 'What Lies Ahead', directed by Ernest Dickerson and Gwyneth Horder-Payton, written by Ardeth Bey and Robert Kirkman, aired 16 October 2011, on AMC, https://www.netflix.com/watch/70248461.

[32] *The Walking Dead*, season 5, episode 3, 'Four Walls and a Roof', directed by Jeffry F. January, written by Angela Kang and Corey Reed, aired 26 October 2016, on AMC, https://www.netflix.com/watch/80010529.

[33] Cf. Dave Paul Strohecker, 'The Zombie in Film (Part 3: The Zombie Renaissance)', *Cyborgology* (blog)*,* 16 February 2012, https://thesocietypages.org/cyborgology/2012/02/16/the-zombie-in-film-part-3-the-zombie-renaissance/.

[34] 'Scene 3', *28 Days Later,* directed by Danny Boyle (2002; Century City, CA: Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2003), DVD.

else by some passing Satanist',[35] and when a lingering zombie tackles a member of the group only to be stopped by a last minute bullet to the head, it is wearing 'the mouldering remains of a priest's surplice'.[36] Scrawled above the altar are the words, 'He's not listening, morons', and Sergeant Parks, whose perspective provides the focal lens for the chapter, 'takes that as a given'.[37] The implication in each of these examples appears to be that the postapocalyptic zombie-infested world offers no sanctuary, and that if anything sacred exists, it is inaccessible through established religious channels: these are at best indistinguishable from the surrounding profane space, and at worst deceptively lull the disaster survivors into a perilous vulnerability out of step with the hideous nature of the real.

However, whilst the beliefs and practices of Christian religion are often denigrated in these stories, at the same time, it should be acknowledged that there are some positive presentations as well. The character Herschel in *The Walking Dead* often reads the Christian scriptures and retains his faith throughout the repeated horrors he encounters. In *The Book of Eli* (2010), the film's eponymous protagonist traverses a drear post-disaster landscape to deliver the final copy of the Bible to a printing press on Alcatraz Island. P.D. James' novel *The Children of Men* (1992)—from which the 2006 film takes its title and major premise if only intermittently thereafter—presents a subtler example. Thematically threaded throughout with political and social 'life issues' often associated with contemporary Christianity, the narrative almost reads like a speculative treatise on the consequences of a civilization that abandons its commitment to the sanctity of life. Set in a dystopian near future several decades since the birth of the last child, the story follows Dr. Theodore Faron, fellow of Merton College, Oxford, 'divorced, childless, solitary',[38] through his escalating entanglement with an underground political group, 'The Five Fishes'. The group openly opposes the utilitarian policies of the dictatorial Warden of England, demanding that he grant immigrant 'Sojourners' full civil rights, stop deporting criminals to the unregulated

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[35] M.R. Carey, *The Girl with All the Gifts* (Orbit, 2014), 176.

[36] Carey, 178.

[37] Carey, 178. A milder version of this kind of scene appears in *Los Ultimos Dias*: when protagonist Marc and his companion emerge from the sewers of Barcelona into an abandoned church and find little of significance beyond a filled whisky flask—perhaps suggestive of the 'real' consolation of the resident clergy—and unceremoniously drink from the chalice during an impromptu meal before being attacked by a bear.

[38] P.D. James, *Children of Men* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1993), 1-2.

penal colony on the Isle of Man, abolish 'the Quietus'[39] and shut down both the compulsory tests for sexual potency and the public pornography shops. Biblical themes become transparent during the climactic scene of the birth of a seemingly impossible child, born in a shed, where a fire leaps 'like a celebration' and Theo, looking down upon the mother's 'transfigured face', has to turn away because 'the joy was almost too much for him to bear'.[40] With the child between them, these two partake of a eucharist of sorts together from the cup a midwife sacrificially dies to procure,[41] and as the three surviving rulers of the realm kneel beside them, a fourth fatally-wounded character looks 'down at the child with his dying eyes and spoke his Nunc Dimittis'.[42] Such overtly positive religious symbolism, even if a minority example amongst postapocalyptic fictions, at least dispels the notion of any basic incompatibility between the genre and positive Christian concerns.

A more complex and perhaps more typical example of a postapocalyptic religious tonality can be seen in the AMC spinoff series *Fear the Walking Dead* (2015 -), whose first season opens in a derelict church turned heroin 'shooting gallery' where addict Nick wakes up to discover his girlfriend eating a corpse. The second season begins in a different church focused upon a Mexican priest who stands up and delivers an impassioned homily:

> The times we're living in […] They are testing our faith. Where is our God? Has he abandoned us? […] The God I believe in, the God I know, wouldn't do such a thing. This is not God! This thing, this evil that's befallen us, wants us to turn away from Him, to turn us away from our faith. It feeds on our doubt. Do not give into it. Do not feed it![43]

The words 'do not feed' are ironically voiced over images of the parishioners receiving consecrated hosts that turn out to have been poisoned, the preemptive strike of a local matriarch who deems the congregation a threat to her zombified family members that she considers still alive. The image of perversely eucharist-like flesh eating that opens the first

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[39] Ceremonies of ritual suicide organized by local councils for the elderly who are deemed a drain on diminishing public resources.

[40] James, *Children of Men*, 228.

[41] The mother, Julian, acknowledges the sacrifice, in response to which Theo bids her drink and be thankful. James, 234.

[42] James, 234. Theo, adopting a ring signaling civilizational rule christens the child with his own tears, calling him at his mother's wish, Luke Theodore, 'the light giving gift of God'.

[43] *Fear the Walking Dead*, season 2, episode 6, 'Sicut Cervus', directed by Kate Dennis, written by Brian Buckner, aired 15 May 2016, on AMC, https://www.amazon.com/Sicut-Cervus/dp/B01CYTO6RC/.

season, and the literally poisoned elements of the second, might be understood to supply concise images of how deeply in these fictions a positive preoccupation with religious symbols and the auras they evoke can intermix with the subversion of their traditional significances: the ambiguity, as might be said of the latter case, literally baked in.

In response to the objection that these texts are intrinsically antithetical to a Christian view of the human predicament, therefore, it can be acknowledged that there are indeed many examples that overtly repudiate—albeit in some cases less pointedly than others—traditional Christian understandings of God. At the same time, though, this is not the case in every postapocalyptic story. In fact, there are numerous examples in the genre of positive representations of Christian religion, as well as other texts in which the significance of the religious symbolism is mixed, inconclusive, or deeply ambiguous. So, while there are instances of conspicuous antagonism to fundamental tenets of Christianity in postapocalyptic zombie fictions, these do not exhaust the treatments of religion in these texts and therefore also do not foreclose the possibility of useful partnerships in the exposition of Christian belief.

Deeper Incompatibilities

A subtler way in which the texts of this genre might be understood to fundamentally oppose a Christian theological view of the human predicament is the potentially radical discrepancy between what is signified by each with the term 'apocalypse', and by extension, what it means to be 'post-'. 'Apocalypse' is a transliteration of a Greek word that is often translated as 'disclosure' or 'unveiling', and in Christian tradition it is commonly translated 'revelation' and supplies the name for the final book of the New Testament. In general Christian usage, the title of this text often elides with its content, so that Apocalypse comes to refer not merely to the fact of a vision experienced by St. John on Patmos, but to the culmination of human history it envisions. Notably, this vision of the future, although fraught with upheavals and difficulties for the people of God, is ultimately characterized by hope. By its light, even those who suffer now can look forward to Christ's triumphal return, when evil and oppression will be definitively judged and overthrown, the righteous separated from the wicked, and the reign of God established in the midst of a community of the blessed and a renewed creation that will carry on forever. The Apocalypse in the biblical tradition—in

the sense of the future indicated by the text of the same name—is in the eyes of the people of God a good thing that can be looked forward to. By extension, 'post-apocalypse', although not a traditional Christian theological category, might be understood to bear a certain relation to one or both of those everlasting 'Last Things', which, according to Christian eschatology, carry on forever after death and the Final Judgement. The biblical postapocalypse, in this sense, might signify one of two diverging post-history human destinies, Heaven or Hell.

At the same time, even when the referent of 'apocalypse' shifts away from the revelatory event experienced by St. John to the future events it reveals, the meaning of the term as divine disclosure is not altogether lost from view. The future history foreseen by the vision, in other words, not only discloses the eternal destiny of history, but also its aboriginal supernatural ground. Revelation of the end of time simultaneously reveals the forces always already at work in the midst of time, and even during the turmoil, torments and instabilities of the end of history underscores the basic fact of a benign divinity. Thus the apocalypse in the traditional Christian sense not only signifies the uncovering of the future but also of the object of Christian faith and hope, which although hidden in the present age, will be made manifest in the fullness of time, 'For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face'.[44]

The meaning of 'apocalypse' in current popular culture is often different, and James Berger helpfully distinguishes between three often intermixed meanings: revelation, end, and cataclysm.[45] Here the elision between the unveiling of history's end and the events surrounding it tend to take on a tonality that is distinct from the biblical tradition, not conceived in relation to a supernatural intervention that puts an end to fallen history and the suffering of humanity and inaugurates a happy eternity, but rather as a culminating cataclysm that brings an end to history and humanity full stop. In other words, the apocalypse in this sense ushers in neither paradise nor perdition but annihilation, the conclusive demolition, not necessarily divine, of the world. To the extent the modern day

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[44] *1 Cor* 13:12. Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotation are taken from the Revised Standard Version.

[45] Cf. James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 38. Williams makes a similar although less precise distinction between what he calls crisis, calamity and apocalypse, that is, a temporary disruption, an end without revelation and a 'lifting of the veil'. Evan Calder Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011), 4-5.

apocalypse retains any association with the Final Judgement, it might be said that the mood views it from the wrong side, as it were, of divine justice, anticipating a *Dies Irae* Doomsday rather than an etymologically purer Day of Decision or Implemented Law. The Apocalypse as popularly conceived, therefore, commonly looks forward to a future of mere overwhelming destruction, disorder, and death, and represents a vision of the End that markedly departs from traditional Christian expectation.

*Post*apocalyptic fiction picks up this tone of dread from popular apocalyptic literature and modifies it yet further. Majid Yar persuasively argues that postapocalyptic fictions carry their particular symbolic resonance precisely by borrowing the motifs and tonalities of traditional apocalypse,[46] and yet it is also the case, as Elizabeth Rosen observes, that in this genre the term shifts away from notions of absolute endings or divine disclosures to mere catastrophe.[47] While postapocalyptic fictions might be said to partake of the mood the apocalyptic End of the World, what they depict can be more accurately described as the future *almost* End—because some remnant of humanity survives. They operate upon what Maria Manuel Lisboa calls a 'logic of the near-miss',[48] offering visions of what remains of human life and society 'after disaster has been visited upon us',[49] whether following the last living individual, or more commonly, 'at least one human being of each sex, sufficient land, water and resources […] to guarantee a reasonable likelihood of a new beginning'.[50] Unlike a popular apocalypse, in other words, contemporary postapocalyptic fictions dramatize not the end of the world *in toto*[51] but the end of the world '*as we know*

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[46] Majid Yar, *Crime and the Imaginary of Disaster: Post-Apocalyptic Fictions and the Crisis of Social Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[47] Elizabeth K. Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and the Postmodern Imagination* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), xiv.

[48] Maria Manuel Lisboa, *The End of the World: Apocalypse and Its Aftermath in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2011), xxv.

[49] Yar, *Crime and the Imaginary of Disaster*, 2; also cf. Karen J. Renner, 'The Appeal of the Apocalypse', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 23:3 (2012), 204.

[50] Lisboa, *End of the World*, xxv.

[51] As Alexandra Warwick clearly states, 'any account of the end of the world is a paradox; if the world has ended who is writing and who is reading?' Alex Warwick, 'Lost Cities: London's Apocalypse', *Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography*, eds. Glennis Byron and David Punter (London: Macmillan, 1999), 75. The borderline inability to imagine or represent such a 'view from no one' is addressed and exemplified by Baudrillard in 'The Anorexic Ruins' and *America*, and is the particular preoccupation of so-called 'nuclear criticism' which examines 'the fantasy of such an unprecedented, all-encompassing, and remainderless end, and the problems it raises for thinking the last and unsurvivable event'. Lecia Rosenthal, *Mourning Modernism: Literature, Catastrophe, and the Politics of Consolation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 1. For a

it'.[52] And yet it might also be said that postapocalyptic stories build upon the popular apocalyptic mood of terror and dread by adding tonalities of survival, anti-climax, and a truncated, uncertain future, so that the feeling of a consummate ending is retained, albeit not actualized as a comprehensive conclusion but as a superlative loss.

While tonally operating at least two removes from the biblical sense of Apocalypse, therefore, it might still be argued that the genre retains a vestigial sense of divine judgement. Yar maintains, for instance, that despite their pronounced dystopian atmosphere, postapocalyptic worlds are also implicitly characterized by a 'utopian expectation of redemption' wherein 'the substantive religious or theological content of apocalyptic eschatology may be rejected, yet its formal structure (the notion of a logic or direction at work in the unfolding of history) is nevertheless retained'.[53] On this view, the world-altering cataclysm and its aftermath operate as a kind of religion-stripped Last Judgement, 'a kind of secular cleansing'[54] that wipes out all or many of societies' undesirable elements. The fictional destruction of vast segments of the human population and social structures thus operates as a near-total social and cultural critique, effectively condemning the established patterns of the contemporary world and envisioning a root-and-branch reboot. By way of such wholesale, uncompromising critique, Yar maintains, at the level of deep structure the motif of worldwide cataclysm in these stories echoes an apocalyptic 'moment of redemption wherein the problem of evil will finally be answered, and justice delivered'.[55]

A major irony of such apocalypse-as-disaster, however, is that the New Jerusalem, what Elizabeth Rosen calls 'the raison d'etre of the traditional apocalyptic narrative',[56] is usually replaced by mayhem and squalor. Whereas the 'postapocalyptic human survivors' considered in the traditional terms of the Christian Final Judgement might be correlated to

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rare example of a postapocalyptic narrative conceived after the total end of humanity, see the History Channel 'documentary' *Life After People* (2008 - 10), which offers a series of digitally enhanced pictures of crumbling cityscapes variously reclaimed by the natural world, and yet their depictions are necessarily selected, organized and narrated by human persons, with the presumed ability to video record, communicate to an audience, etc.

[52] Yar, *Crime and the Imaginary of Disaster*, 2.

[53] Yar 84, 78.

[54] Claire P. Curtis, *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract: 'We'll Not Go Home Again'* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), 7.

[55] Yar, *Crime and the Imaginary of Disaster*, 83.

[56] Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation*, xiv.

the saints in paradise or the damned in hell,[57] the survivors who manage to endure the disaster in these fictions tend to be the dirty and haggard 'remnants of humanity fighting to survive in a crapsacked scavenger world of scenery gorn and ghost cities' where people 'inevitably degrade down to disaster scavengers and crazy survivalists'.[58] As a consequence, considered in the broadest terms, the angle taken by these fictions upon the human predicament differs considerably from those of traditional religious apocalyptic literature, whose function has been:

> to comfort people whose lives are, or who perceive their lives to be, overwhelmed by historical or social disruption. Its purpose is to exhort its readers to maintain faith in the midst of trying times and to assure them that they will ultimately be rewarded for their faithfulness and that their enemies will be vanquished. Such narratives endeavor at least in part to make sense of events which cannot otherwise be reconciled with a community's vision of itself and its history […] Thus is suffering made meaningful and hope restored to those who are traumatized or bewildered by historical events.[59]

In postapocalyptic literature, by contrast, civilizational disaster is not followed by any kind of paradisal fulfillment and its characters are consigned to a universe of apparently endless, unresolving struggle and its apparently purposeless history.[60] Whereas 'the promise of apocalypse is unequivocal: God has a plan, the disruption is part of it, and in the end all will be made right',[61] that is, in postapocalyptic literature, as Teresa Heffernan argues:

> the present world is portrayed as exhausted, but there is no better world that replaces it […] the end is instead senseless and arbitrary. There is no overarching critique, there is no cataclysmic destruction that promises to cleanse the world and separate the righteous from the damned, good from evil, and there is no resolution or salvation.[62]

When compared to traditional readings of the Genesis to Revelation story, therefore, postapocalyptic fictions reflect the absence of a supremely intelligent and benign order above

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[57] This suggestion will be developed in Chapters Four and Five.

[58] 'After the End', *Tvtropes* (website), last modified 4 April 2018, https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/AfterTheEnd.

[59] Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation*, xii.

[60] Cf. Kermode's *Sense of an Ending* for an account of endings as sense-making structures.

[61] Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation*, xii.

[62] Teresa Heffernan, *Post-apocalyptic Culture: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Twentieth-century Novel* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 5.

the wreckage of worldwide disaster, and with this comes 'a bleak shift in emphasis from belief in an ordered universe with a cogent history to one in which the overriding sense is of a chaotic, indifferent, and possibly meaningless universe'.[63]

Holding this assessment in tension with Yar's analysis above, though, two things might be observed. On the one hand, the disaster depicted by postapocalyptic fictions in a certain respect imitates divine intervention, destabilizing or demolishing some aspects of the status quo and, by implication, apparently condemning certain broad features of 'a social order viewed as irredeemably corrupt and unjust'.[64] On the other hand, it does so without disclosing a transcendent design or any obvious strategy for implementing paradise. From this angle, it might be summarized that postapocalyptic narratives operate less like traditional religious disclosures of a supernatural reality or even secularized end-of-the-world cautionary tales concerned with pessimistically 'positing potential means of extinction and predicting the gloomy probabilities of such ends',[65] and more like 'the jeremiad, a lamentation over the degeneracy of the world'.[66] Thus, in terms of deep structural function, the world-altering disaster of postapocalyptic fictions might be said to operate as a kind of religion-free Last Judgement, partaking of the self-righteous pleasure of uncompromising social critique without also presenting a positive alternative ideal.

In addition to undermining the specific future anticipated by Christian revelation, popular postapocalyptic fiction might also be understood to militate against the feasibility of supernatural disclosure itself. Whereas Christian revelation simultaneously discloses history's end, and its transcendent End, and with these a kind of metaphysical explanation (or at least eternal consolation) for all human anguish, in presenting no decisive end to history or suffering but only the next in a potentially unending chain of horrific disasters, it might be said that postapocalyptic fictions disclose the basic absence of such divine order and suggest in its place a fundamental supernatural emptiness. In this case, where the anticipated fulfillment of history proclaimed by Christianity is replaced by a mere intra-historical catastrophe, it is as if at a deep structural level these fictions are saying: Look, the worst has happened and some people are still around, just the same as before; some might

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[63] Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation*, xiv.

[64] Yar, *Crime and the Imaginary of Disaster*, 18.

[65] Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation*, xv.

[66] Rosen, xiv.

say these escaped, survived or side-stepped divine judgement—which would suggest the ineffectuality or impotence of the Christian God—or we might simply conclude that the bottom has fallen out of religious belief. From this point of view, postapocalyptic fictions might still be considered revelatory in a certain, if very different sense, 'revealing', as it were, a future which retrospectively demonstrates that there was never anything supernatural to reveal, no reliable religion, nothing behind the accidents of history to be disclosed.

'Post-apocalypse', so conceived, might signify *after revelation*—in the sense of having come out the other side of the relevance of traditional religious apocalypse—and only 'disclosing' a purely immanent human predicament that might involve periodic disasters yet continues on more or less as it ever had. In such a world, devoid of anything beyond empirical appearances and never able to look forward to a decisive supernatural end to suffering, the biblical post-apocalyptic anticipation of paradise is replaced by an endless future history occasionally degrading into a post-disaster wasteland. Considered in this way, these stories would seem to depict a future, and even perhaps a vision of the universal human predicament, deeply at odds with the expectations of Christian faith.

So, summarizing what has been said so far, postapocalyptic fictions take the originally religious concept of the Christian Apocalypse and subject it to a series of twists and changes that alter its meaning into something almost antithetical. Departing from the Christian anticipation of a welcome resolution to the conflicts and chaos of history, these stories borrow the tone of dread from popular culture modifications of apocalypse, yet unlike these fictions do not depict a future end of history but rather its endless, perhaps cyclical, continuation. History thus carries on in the wake of the postapocalyptic 'apocalypse', not as a paradise but as something closer to the opposite: a squalid, anarchical wasteland plagued by ruin, disease and variations on monstrously degraded humanity. Considered from this perspective, these fictions effectively alter the meaning of 'apocalypse' from divine disclosure or decisive end to mere disaster, and in so doing arguably subvert Christian expectations about the eventual culmination of history and replace it with a 'post-revelation' vision of time as an endless, immanent duration. If, then, at one level these stories entertain a vision of the future that is at least dissonant if not directly incompatible with the traditional Christian view, a tension might nevertheless be observed in the tendency to both explicitly disavow the existence of any credible religious

referents and yet to continue to draw broad patterns and resonances from revealed religion: as Frances Carey argues, in these texts 'the language, motifs and mood of the Apocalypse have survived, [even if] without the belief in redemption its original meaning is destroyed'.[67] But there is more to be said. If in what these stories mean by apocalypse there may be some superficial similarities (i.e. in motifs and mood) but more basic dissimilarities (i.e. disaster rather than disclosure) to the expectation of Christian faith, nevertheless, in *how* they represent their material there is frequently a fundamental structural similarity.

Deep Structural Parallels

Postapocalyptic zombie fictions since the millennium frequently feature the claim that their representations do not merely signify possible future disastrous events, but, additionally, that they disclose a hidden, neglected, or in-itself-unobservable aspect of the present (*figure 1*). While not all postapocalyptic fictions do so, or at least not explicitly, the claim is common enough that it might be described as part of the symbolic grammar of the genre in its contemporary form, a subtext that renders its various representations more complex than univocal depictions of the future, but also adds an additional layer of significance for the present. Hence, in frequently purporting to depict an unseen dimension underlying the appearances of regular human experience, it might be argued that these stories, however acutely they might oppose a Christian vision of the human predicament at other levels, also mirror in their deep structure the basic function of what theology calls revelation.

Several examples are required to illustrate this revelation-like intention of many postapocalyptic zombie fictions as it is articulated in a variety of tones and mimetic modes.[68] A comedic example can be seen in the British horror satire *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), the title of which is a homage to George Romero's zombie classic *Dawn of the Dead*. In its droll opening sequence, a hunched employee slowly pushes a line of shopping carts across a parking lot as a row of drooping cashiers rhythmically scans and bags and a queue of commuters stare listlessly at mobile devices, all with a similar zombie-like, dead-eyed

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[67] Frances Carey, 'The Apocalyptic Imagination: Between Tradition and Modernity', *The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come*, ed. Frances Carey (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1999), 270.

[68] For the sake of brevity, this thesis must sidestep many of the theoretical complexities in the discussion around mimesis; for present purposes *mimetic modes* signifies the various sets of conventions by which diverse texts signal, however implicitly, to relate to the real.

torpor despite the fact that their world has yet to be struck by the plague. When the apocalyptic disaster does hit, the film's title character conspicuously fails to notice, and he stumbles through his daily routine en route to an uninspiring job oblivious to the mayhem escalating around him. Its sensationalized reportage on the news, the untidy woman drooling on the bus and the groaning tramp who accosts him on the street do not strike him as anything unusual, a flamboyant if tacit comment upon the indistinguishability of his environment pre- and post-apocalypse. A similar optical irony marks the film's closing scene, which shows Shaun and his housemate playing video games, staring blankly at the screen much as they did at the film's beginning—the only significant change being that one of them has in the interim turned into a zombie. Ironic in tone, the postapocalypse in this case indicts the inhumane modes of existence lived by many in the contemporary post-industrial world, which might be just as easily undertaken by zombies.[69]

Shifting tonally towards the grave, the spinoff series *Fear the Walking Dead* (2015) uses a comparable technique to represent the relational dynamics of a 'blended' family in the wake of a divorce, doing so in such a way that these gradually fold into the generic tropes of the postapocalypse. For example, a mid-season episode opens upon a young man, Nick, floating tranquilly in a sun-drenched pool, while his stepfather Travis jogs the neighborhood to the sound of Lou Reed's 'Perfect Day'. He waves to someone off-screen, either a neighbor or perhaps, we discover as the scene unfolds, a soldier in the neighborhood's occupying military force, as the son of his first marriage sits on the roof, filming the graffiti, burnt out houses, and signs of forced evacuation he describes as 'better than TV'.[70] Coming in from his jog, Travis exclaims 'You can see the ocean!'—cheerfully overlooking the fact that the absence of LA smog is almost certainly a side-effect of freeway traffic halted by a mass epidemic—and interrupts a conversation between his second wife, Madison, and her daughter about painting the living room. While at the surface the scene could almost pass for a normal day, the subversion is in the details. The paint job they are

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[69] A similarly tacit if more understated comment upon real-world postapocalyptic conditions might be seen in 10 *Cloverfield Lane* (2016), where two strangers sit down to an uneasy dinner in the bunker of a doomsday hoarder who cheerfully ignores the monsters taking over the above ground—a darkly humorous comment, it would seem, upon the elephant-in-the-room tensions ignored over many a dysfunctional family meal.

[70] *Fear the Walking Dead*, season 1, episode 4, 'Not Fade Away', directed by Kari Skogland, written by Meaghan Oppenheimer, aired 20 September 2015, on AMC, https://www.amazon.com/Not-Fade-Away/dp/B0112SYRUM/.

discussing is intended to cover over the splatter of a summary execution that had taken place there the night before. Madison vents that she has to cook, clean, keep an eye on rehabilitating heroin addict Nick, and deal with Travis' ex-wife who is also living there but not practically pitching in, all while their house has become a literal refugee camp and her 'daughter's room is an ICU unit for strangers'. Her teenage daughter shouts down this domestic bickering, ironically insisting they stop pretending 'like you are normal people in a normal kitchen'.

In broad terms and speaking succinctly, the appearance of zombies in this series coincides with the eruption of unresolved emotional tensions at the surface of the family's *prima facie* cookie cutter suburban lives, and the ironic double-signification here has an earnest, almost desperate quality, epitomized in the series' final episode in which Travis climactically 'mercy-kills' his zombie-bitten ex-wife. The incident stretches a long, reflective five minutes with Travis weeping helplessly on his knees, overlaid by The Antlers plaintive 'Kettering' whose lyrics speak of accepting 'when they told me that there was no saving you' and 'the unpayable debt that I owed you'. Significantly, moments before, Nick compares their postapocalyptic surroundings to the most down-and-out days of his drug addiction, pointing out 'It's like I've been living this for a long time. And now everyone is catching up with me'.[71] Through the lens of this fictional postapocalypse, in other words, the audience becomes privy to several overlapping disasters, the postapocalyptic end of a civilization, the implosion of domestic false pretenses, and the ongoing cataclysmic consequences of the relational 'mercy-killing' in the series' backstory, a divorce.[72]

Frivolous or earnest in tone therefore, variety can also be observed in the conventions by which postapocalyptic zombie texts claim to relate to the real world. The cinematic equivalent of literary realism is but one set of mimetic conventions for

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[71] *Fear the Walking Dead*, season 1, episode 6, 'The Good Man', directed by Stefan Schwartz, written by Robert Kirkman and Dave Erickson, aired 4 October 2015, on AMC, https://www.amazon.com/The-Good-Man/dp/B0112SYHWA/.

[72] Ironic comparisons between pre- and post-apocalyptic existence continue in season two, for example when the group makes their way to a secure compound in Baja California, and in a private moment the Mexican matriarch Cecilia dishes Nick a bowl of pozole and asks about his heavy smile. He says he is sick of all the killing and she replies that none of this is new, 'We are just visitors. Our dead, and they are our dead, they have always walked amongst us. The only difference is now we can see them'. Madison enters and comments matter of factly, 'It's a pretty big difference'. *Fear the Walking Dead*, season 2, episode 6, 'Sicut Servus', directed by Kate Dennis, written by Brian Buckner, aired 15 May 2016, on AMC, https://www.amazon.com/Sicut-Cervus/dp/B01CYTO6RC/.

representing reality alongside others such as allegory and mixed symbolic modes, and amongst postapocalyptic fictions there are examples of each of these. An example of a zombie text that makes a sort of tongue-in-cheek claim to realism is the campy, over-the-top horror romp *Return of the Living Dead* (1984), which begins with the deadpan declaration that its narration concerns actual persons and events (*figure 2*). The status of this claim quickly becomes evident when some hapless warehouse workers unintentionally release a cloud of weapons-grade chemical, reanimating a refrigerated corpse which they cannot subdue no matter how small they chop its pieces. This deliberate flouting of the generic (il)logic by which dead bodies might resuscitate as zombies yet nevertheless remain deceased is redoubled when one character, who claims to have learned how to deal with zombies from watching *The Night of the Living Dead*, cries out in frustration, 'You mean the movie lied?!'[73] Clearly self-mocking, the manifest absurdity of this film's claims to realistic representation derives its punch from wry acknowledgement of more sincere pretensions elsewhere in the genre.[74]

An example of a purely allegorical treatment of the postapocalypse's relation to the present is the cult classic *A Boy and His Dog* (1975)*,* in which a man and his four-legged companion wander a barren, post-nuclear desert in search of women and canned food. At one level the narrative follows the misadventures of the protagonist through his seduction and entrapment in an underground civilization; the film also operates as a sequence of satirical set pieces that ridicule the false consciousness of traditional American domestic life and dreams. For example, the effeminate men in the underground community wear the same makeup as the women, and a dictatorship-like loudspeaker continually thunders homespun wisdom like 'Grandmother Conrad's recipe for rhubarb marmelade' and 'helpful hints for living' drawn from conventional patriotism and moralized Christian piety. Additionally, when a number of citizens are condemned to death by a council of bored officials, their fate is sealed in the words of the rote recitation, 'Lack of respect. Wrong attitude. Failure to obey

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[73] 'Dead Cadaver', *Return of the Living Dead*, directed by Dan O'Bannon, (1985; Century City, CA: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2002), DVD.

[74] While many postapocalyptic fictions resemble *Return,* flouting or ignoring any serious relationship to actual experience, there are is also a sizeable minority of postapocalyptic texts which do otherwise: films like *28 Days Later* (2001) or *Le Temps du Loup* (2003), respectively, labor to establish relatively plausible underlying scientific rationales for their scenarios or operate under largely realist constraints.

authority', before being sent to 'the farm', an official euphemism for the end of meaningful life.[75] When the unnamed protagonist escapes the hellhole and reunites with his dog, they promptly decide to eat the woman and resume their original quest in a tone equal parts brutal, laddish, and innocently reminiscent of a sociopathic Huck Finn lighting off to the territories. Clearly, the target of the film's highly-mannered burlesque is small town rural life and entrapment within its romantic relationships, with the barren postapocalyptic landscape in the end representing a kind of aridly masculine way of life that is a Wild West alternative to the complacency and false consciousness of old timey Americana.

Romero's films offer instances of less on the nose postapocalyptic allegory, combining cultural and political satire in different measures with protracted stretches of fairly straightforward schlock horror tropes like dismembering zombies and gruesome human deaths. *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), for example, takes place in a shopping mall where human survivors hole up from the zombies, eventually grow listless, and, amidst the surfeit of the mall's material goods, end up resembling the undead themselves—a none-too-subtle indictment, as is often pointed out, of the consequences of excessive consumerism. In Romero's later film *Land of Dead* (2005) the allegory is arguably more submerged; however, once it is pointed out that Romero consciously modelled the penthouse-dwelling tyrant of the socially-stratified postapocalyptic Pittsburg highrise upon then United States President George W. Bush's secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, the ethnic diversity of the undead hoard takes on a more textured significance, and plausibly renders the film, at least in part, 'a commentary on the Republican administration's indifference to the fate of poor black populations'.[76] Although not internally indicated by the film, once acknowledged, the allegorical 'speaking otherwise' in this film becomes relevant to meaning of the whole however unequally in the parts.

In addition to the 'realistic' and allegorical ways in which these fictions propose to represent a genuine aspect of the ordinary world, many of the most interesting

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[75] *A Boy and His Dog*, directed by L.Q. Jones (1976), streaming video, accessed 2 September 2018, https://www.amazon.com/Boy-His-Dog-Don-Johnson/dp/B002ZEGVCU/.

[76] Roger Luckhurst, *Zombies: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), 154. Luckhurst goes on to suggest that this renders the film not so much a piece of horror cinema as 'a peculiar new form of social realism', giving dramatic representation to the 'guest workers on construction sites or in heavy industry or garment factories around the world in their hundreds of thousands'. Luckhurst, *Zombies*, 183. Also cf. Mbembe's discussion of 'necropolitics', i.e. 'the social death of slavery in neocolonial form', in Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture*, xv/1 (2003), 11-40.

postapocalyptic texts employ complex mimetic modes that are a mixture of the two. Up to this point, it has been taken for granted in this chapter's analysis that most of the empirically observable world does not resemble how the world is depicted in postapocalyptic fictions, that the world as ordinarily experienced does not look like this. It can now be added that while in many cases this is true, in many other cases it is not true: it depends where you look (*figures 3 & 4*). The fictional scenarios of *The Road* (2009) and *Stakeland* (2010) are filmed against real world backdrops in the Pennsylvania 'Rust Belt', for instance, the scenery for a future postapocalypse taken directly from symptoms of present day post-industrial decline *(figures 5 & 6)*. In *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2014), living civic disintegration is raised from subtext to explicit text when the listlessly immortal vampires Adam and Eve venture out into the tedious workaday world of human 'zombies' for a nighttime tour of his favorite haunts: 'This is the famous Michigan Theater', he relates, 'They built it back in the 1920's for huge sums of money [...] And now, a car park' (*figure 7*).[77] In a charming mashup of the fantastical and the empirical, this film treats the economic depression of present day Detroit as a fitting emblem for its exploration of emotionally consonant themes,[78] treating contemporary ruins as emblems of a routinely marginalized aspect of wider, perhaps even universal, human experience. Thus, in addition to their added allegorical significances, each of these examples renders in a particularly literal fashion what other postapocalyptic texts only suggest: that the conditions they depict are already a part of the current everyday world.

Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) offers a particularly complex example of a postapocalyptic fiction that intricately weaves together several layers of ambiguity regarding what its depictions suggest about the actual state of affairs in its real world setting. At the level of the drama the film is set in a devastated, forbidden zone of alien physics, 'The Zone', whose strange occurrences have yet to be marshalled into established scientific categories by the fictional government authorities. At another level, however, the ruins on display represent a literal videographic record of actual Soviet 'Era of Stagnation' economic and social conditions. Filmed in 'a dilapidated ship repair yard, a crumbling

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[77] *Only Lovers Left Alive,* directed by Jim Jarmusch, streaming video, accessed 2 September 2018, https://www.amazon.com/Only-Lovers-Left-Alive-John/dp/B00LDSQEVC/.
[78] Detroit's economic decline is particularly striking as in 1960 the city could boast the largest per capita income in the United States (Michael Snyder, 'The Loss of a City: Detroit, Canary in the Coalmine', Axis of Logic, 5 February 2013).

hydroelectric station, an abandoned oil processing plant and other post-industrial ruins around the [Estonian] capital, Tallinn',[79] the film exposes the lie of whatever officially optimistic government pronouncements might be coming from behind the Iron Curtain under the guise of representing a fictive postapocalyptic future. At the same time a masterful instance of the Todorovian fantastic,[80] the explanation of The Zone's peculiarities remains ambiguous until the film's final moment, when a girl rumored to possess preternatural powers appears to slide a glass off the edge of a table using only her mind (*figure 8*). By situating this event in close proximity to the sound of a passing train that shakes everything in the room, arguably the film retains enough of a skein of this-worldly explanation to cloak the occurrence with an infinite deniability in anticipation of any objections by Goskino officials. Whereas the more overtly religious themes of Tarkovsky's earlier films *Andrei Rublev* (1966) and *Solaris* (1972) met with opposition from Soviet state censors,[81] in *Stalker* events that might otherwise be described as miracles are veiled by the naturalistic assumptions of science fiction.

In a final and perhaps most subtle layer of ambiguity, *Stalker* might also be said to exemplify a protracted, interpretatively-indeterminate betwixt-and-between regarding how its representations relate to the actual material and spiritual conditions of the contemporaneous USSR. Whereas overt images of economic bankruptcy might suggest the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of the regime, events that the fiction depicts as taking place as happening in their midst that are also scientifically inexplicable reinforce that there might be more to reality than officially acknowledged by Communist state-mandated atheism. Yet by presenting this 'evidence' as fiction the film cannot be finally nailed down as to what these images correspond to in the world beyond the text. As a postapocalyptic allegory whose 'speaking otherwise' consists in the fusion of real world, empirically verifiable phenomena with significances that potentially extend beyond them *Stalker* implies

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[79] Stephen Dalton, 'Andrei Tarkovsky, Solaris and Stalker: The Making of Two Inner-Space Odysseys', *British Film Institute* (website), accessed 26 June 2017, http://www.bfi.org.uk/features/tarkovsky/.

[80] Todorov describes the fantastic as an uneasy in-between discourse often hinging upon a first-person narrator's tormented inability to resolve contradictions suggested by his or her perceptions, which in its purest form preserves indefinitely the metaphysical agnosticism wherein seemingly supernatural events invite yet resist scientific explanation. Cf. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975).

[81] Dalton, 'Andrei Tarkovsky'.

something about reality's underlying metaphysical state of affairs precisely by showing what is really there.

A final example of this middle-ground kind of postapocalyptic realism-*cum*-allegory might be seen in *The Walking Dead* (2010 -), whose extended metaphors come in and out of focus and relevance as the series progresses. Like its splatter pic forebears, *TWD* dedicates substantial amounts of screen time to horror thrills like dismemberments and graphic deaths, yet as the seasons roll on sensationalism is increasingly punctuated by more reflective and allegorically-suggestive moments. Metaphor rises to the surface, for example, when Andrea, a member of Rick's group that functions as the series' collective protagonist, sits down for a drink with a character known as 'The Governor'.

> Andrea: Truth is, I don't know what I'm looking for. For the longest time it was all about survival. Nothing else mattered. So much so, I don't know what matters now.
> Governor: Pay off the car. Work fifty hours a week. Get married. Buy a house. That was survival for me not long ago.
> Andrea: A lot's changed.
> Governor: The scenery has. The landscape. But the way we think…[82]

At the surface of this scene, Andrea is acknowledging that the dire conditions of their zombie-infested world are dramatically different from the way things were before the outbreak—that is, the world as we, the members of the audience, presently experience it. Yet the Governor's ellipsis suggests that at the level of subjective experience—'the way we think'—there is a basic parity between the pre- and post-apocalyptic worlds which outward appearances only thinly conceal. The postapocalyptic world of this fiction, in other words, operates like a visible sign of what is invisible in ours. An intriguing variation on this theme develops late in the fifth season when the group arrives at a walled and sustainably-resourced community called Alexandria whose residents have been largely unaffected by the zombie plague and have managed to preserve a way of life more or less continuous the pre-apocalyptic 'ordinary' world. Compared to the dog-eat-dog conditions the group has been surviving in for years, the community appears to be a paradise that they suspect is too good to be true. It is not long before Rick attempts to expose Alexandria's seedy underbelly,

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[82] *The Walking Dead*, season 3, episode 4, 'Killer Within', directed by Guy Ferland, written by Sang Kyu Kim, aired 4 November 2012, on AMC, https://www.amazon.com/Killer-Within/dp/B009FZHYKU/.

pressing his neighbor to publicly denounce her abusive husband, insisting, 'In here, you can't see it, but it's the same. It's the same as out there'.[83]

The season examines variations on this motif, juxtaposing 'in here' and 'out there' as the members of the group find it difficult to adjust to life in Alexandria: they have been 'out there' fighting to survive for so long that the 'in here' of stable, routine domestication has become alien. They often speak of how Alexandria is a pretense and perilously sheltered from 'reality', that is, from the zombie-infested world. Enid, a troubled teenage girl who is also a new member of Alexandria, expresses this to Carl, Rick's son, with whom she regularly sneaks outside the walls. 'We're supposed to be out here. We're supposed to feel like this', she tells him, because, referring to the walking dead, 'It's their world. We're just living in it'.[84] She and several other characters are almost hypnotically attracted to the dangerous conditions outside beyond the borders of a stable society that is in appearance much like the world of its audience, ironically, in order to come into contact with what they consider to be the truer-to-life quality of the overtly fictional postapocalypse. Alexandria, in other words, simultaneously represents our world and a world less real than fiction.[85]

To summarize, whether ironically or earnestly, explicitly or tacitly, or through the conventions of realistic, allegorical, or variously mixed mimetic modes, postapocalyptic fictions frequently present their fictional scenarios of surviving the end of the world as somehow representing what humanity and the universe are actually like. While there is not a one-size-fits-all 'postapocalyptic view' of the human predicament, therefore, there is nevertheless a kind of family resemblance amongst these texts, not least in the common audacity of their claim to somehow represent their viewer's actual experience despite in some respect or other inevitably flouting its ordinary appearances. Even those texts without an internally indicated allegorical intention are susceptible to this interpretation, arguably, because, in short, allegoresis is contagious: it has been argued that all zombies after *Dawn of*

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[83] *The Walking Dead*, season 5, episode 15, 'Try', directed by Michael E. Satrazemis, written by Angela Kang, aired 22 March 2015, on AMC, https://www.amazon.com/Try/dp/B00NI1VFYI/.

[84] *The Walking Dead*, season 5, episode 15.

[85] Putting this side by side with the Governor's remarks, however, kicks off a feedback loop of self-undermining allegorical reinterpretations, wherein Alexandria's preservation of the pre-apocalypse—i.e. the world of the viewers—represents a genuine alternative to the postapocalyptic mayhem in the fiction, yet nevertheless at the same time, is itself also the skein of artificial appearances the Governor deems the viewers' to be, whose real underlying condition is revealed by the postapocalypse.

the Dead's shopping mall carry some connotation of unchecked capitalistic consumerism, and, speaking more generally, it can probably be said at this stage in the development of the postapocalyptic genre, as Roger Luckhurst suggests, that some kind of allegorical speaking otherwise is consistently 'less subtext, than overt text'.[86] But how do we make sense of this apparent contradiction, that the world both is and is not postapocalyptic, or rather, that it is even if it does not look like it?

Hermeneutical Stereoscopy

Like *The Walking Dead*'s portrayal of 'normal life' as a façade that conceals the ugly postapocalyptic truth of things, a solution to this quandary, already implied above, might be that these representations do not (or at least do not merely) signify disastrous events expected to occur in the future, but rather (or also) hidden, neglected or in-themselves-unobservable aspects of the present age. In other words, these texts would seem to suggest that in addition to the phenomena accessible to physical sight there also exist aspects of reality that are only accessible to another kind of sight that is only vision by analogy, a kind of intuition or 'second sight' which apprehends real aspects of the human predicament that otherwise escape perception by the senses.

The implications of this are many. Most neutral, perhaps, are the metaphysical and epistemological insinuations that the totality of reality ordinarily perceived by humanity is not exhausted by empirical criteria. Rather, postapocalyptic fictions articulate the need for a two-tiered interpretation of the human situation, a kind of hermeneutical stereoscopy that 'sees two different pictures at once and yet sees all the better for that'.[87] If on one level, accordingly, postapocalyptic disaster represents a future possibility that might in principle be avoided, this does not preclude its dual significance as a diagnosis of the present. In this vein, 'what we call catastrophe is merely the dramatization of a condition, the tipping point

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[86] Luckhurst, *Zombies*, 12.
[87] Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 47.

at which the tree hollowed by rot crashes down'.[88] The future ruin of society, in other words, reveals 'what it had secretly been all along'.[89]

At the same time, the possibility of depicting a cataclysm that is presently taking place would seem to imply some level of censure on those persons who do nothing to remedy it, whether through ignorance or culpable neglect. While it may be that 'the effect of ruins on things is to introduce visible evidence of the […] process of inevitable decay',[90] even when considered as a *fait accompli* the postapocalypse would seem to diagnose an active, if unwitting, collaboration by the majority of people in their own future ruin even now. The perspectives offered by postapocalyptic fictions therefore not only point to an additional dimension of reality, but also implicate humanity in the existential contradiction of living out of concert with some real dimension of their lives, an incongruity that also implies precarity. For such persons unwilling or unable to recognize the truth behind appearances,

> Catastrophe may well be defined as the moment of realization that one, we, society, have been living on borrowed time and that the pride and confidence in the endurance of that state of affairs is washed away in an instant that steals upon us unexpectedly. The moment the crack opens on the Apollonian surface of our lives, there is no going back to the protective womb of illusion.[91]

To the extent postapocalyptic depictions contradict the perceptions of empirical experience, that is, to the extent that these texts purport to disclose an ordinarily unobserved catastrophe underlying the appearances of regular experience, of the ordinary human predicament and in the 'judgement' they pass upon habitual modes of perception, it might be argued that they mirror in their deep structure the revelation of a spiritual condition that is the traditional Christian meaning of apocalypse.

Like postapocalyptic fictions, the canonical Book of the Apocalypse also presents itself as an anticipation of the future whose accent falls upon disclosing a hidden spiritual

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[88] Joan Roman Resina, 'Tragedy, the Neglected Origin of Catastrophe Theory', in *Hazardous Future: Disaster, Representation and the Assessment of Risk*, ed. Isabel Capeloa Gil and Christoph Wulf (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 38.

[89] J. Hillis Miller, 'The Two Allegories', in *Allegory, Myth, and Symbol,* ed. Morton W Bloomfield (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 363.

[90] Miller, 362-63.

[91] Resina, 'Tragedy', 40.

reality now. Cast in the dramatic symbolism of an eschatological war, the text anticipates the eventual disclosure of what its readers might also recognize in the present through the 'vision' of faith: that God is in control, attentive and benevolent, and that there is a plan in place to ultimately right all wrongs. The Book of Apocalypse, like many postapocalyptic fictions, casts this empirically unobservable reality as a genuine dimension of human experience even now, and in more general terms, the disclosure of what life, the world, humanity is *really like* in spite of appearances echoes a basic function of Christian special revelation. How the content of the postapocalyptic and Christian visions of reality compare and contrast is the subject of subsequent chapters; for now it is enough to observe that even if at other levels the views presented by postapocalyptic fictions appear antagonistic to Christianity, there is nevertheless this fundamental deep structural similarity in the way that each represents the complex human situation.

Conclusion

To summarize, this chapter has argued that despite some superficial and, indeed, significant differences, the representations offered by postapocalyptic fictions and Christian proclamation have something fundamental in common. Beyond overlaps in mood and motifs, and even deeper than the divergence between postapocalyptic prognostications and Christian expectations of the future, these fictions frequently profess to perform a function reminiscent of the traditional prerogative of religious revelation. In purporting to disclose a customarily unobserved or perhaps even unobservable aspect of reality, these stories offer what might be considered the visual, dramatic approximations of what theology describes as a spiritual condition, and in claiming to disclose a discrepancy between how the world appears and how it actually is, represents a contradiction that is nevertheless claimed to be true. The complexity of the human predicament from a postapocalyptic point of view, therefore, would seem to demand a stereoscopic sensibility reminiscent of Keats' *negative capability,* that is, one that is capable of entertaining opposing pictures at once 'without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'.[92] If, more specifically, the future disaster anticipated by postapocalyptic fictions diagnoses a disaster already implicit in the present,

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[92] Quoted in Li Ou, *Keats and Negative Capability* (London: Continuum, 2009), 1.

that is, a kind of metaphysical void, incoherence, or lack of staying power whose significance will only become fully evident in the post-cataclysmic future, then, looking ahead, this presents an additional difficulty for the purposes of this thesis. Can the content of such an abysmally bleak vision of reality ultimately be reconciled with the Christian vision of a loving creator? This will be addressed in subsequent chapters: Chapters Two and Three examine many of the broad features of what these stories show or reveal, before Chapters Four and Five build upon this to compare these perspectives to the vision of the world put forward by traditional Christianity. The principle purpose of this chapter, though, is to underscore that however different they may or may not prove to be in *what* they represent, there is a significant crossover between postapocalyptic fictions and Christian theology in *how* they represent it.

Chapter Two

'[Mankind's] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order'.[93]

Chapter One argued that despite overtly opposing several tenets of traditional Christianity, many postapocalyptic fictions share a similar deep structure towards representing reality; now Chapters Two and Three aim to extend this analysis to the content of these representations. Beginning with some of the most conspicuous aspects of the settings, characters and plots of these texts, this chapter seeks to demonstrate that the prominent motifs of overwhelming disaster, human depravity and comprehensive decay might suggest a view of human predicament that also appears to be deeply opposed to the Christian vision of reality. Specifically, the pronounced infrastructural, societal and anatomical breakdown of the postapocalyptic world coincides with a vision of reality where disintegration and incoherence would seem to extend beyond appearances to the level of metaphysical principle. Everywhere in ruin, in other words, these fictions often purport to represent a world where disaster is not merely accidental but ontological—at least at first glance. As Chapter Three goes on to argue, a more nuanced and thorough reading of these texts uncovers a more ambiguous and self-conflicted picture, and one that is potentially more compatible with a Christian vision. However, the aim of the current chapter is limited to analyzing those interlocking images, character qualities, and thematic elements which, considered in isolation, coalesce towards a view of the human predicament where everything would seem to come to nothing, and for this reason might give the impression of a universe irreconcilably antagonistic to the professions of Christian faith.

In the Beginning was Disaster

The typical postapocalyptic story takes place against the backdrop of a world where the forces of decay appear to extend to every level of human experience. Through an integrated

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[93] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 242.

symbolism of disintegration at the individual, social, environmental, and perhaps even spiritual levels, these texts create a sense of a universe in which disaster is not merely the most conspicuous feature of the human predicament, but its defining fact. Indeed, if as described in the previous chapter, the colloquial use of 'apocalypse' has largely shifted away from notions of absolute endings or divine disclosures to mere catastrophe,[94] then postapocalyptic fiction is well defined as 'a sub-genre of the disaster movie',[95] 'tales in which the Earth, humanity and life persist, but in a world where the familiar coordinates of social, cultural, political, economic and moral organisation are gone'.[96] A simple example of this can be seen in the pilot episode of the NBC television series *Revolution* (2012-14). The story picks up fifteen years after a mysterious worldwide event blacks out all electrical power. It follows Charlie Matheson, an orphaned young woman who sets out across a landscape of foliage-overgrown buildings and lawless ruffians in search of family. Dramatic questions include a query into the basic qualities of human nature—after she is nearly raped by some scavengers, a companion insists they cannot trust anyone, to which she replies, 'They can't all be monsters'[97]—and whether the artefact bequeathed by her father will solve the riddle of what made civilization collapse and, by implication, help put it back together. Her personal loss is thus closely associated with collapse at the global scale, and as the narrative develops, her individual quest to restore personal relationships merges with the broader social challenges of attempting to live with other people in a world that appears to be everywhere falling apart.

In postapocalyptic fiction such a link is regularly established between the exterior material and social circumstances and the interior personal predicaments of the lead characters. For example, living in the aftermath of some world-altering disaster, these characters consistently showcase symptoms associated with real-life cases of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It will be illuminating therefore to outline a few key concepts

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[94] Elizabeth K. Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and the Postmodern Imagination* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), xiv.

[95] Isak Winkel Holm, 'Zombies and Citizens: The Ontopolitics of Disaster in Francis Lawrence's I am Legend', in *Hazardous Future: Disaster, Representation and the Assessment of Risk*, eds. Isabel Capeloa Gil and Christoph Wulf (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 206.

[96] Majid Yar, *Crime and the Imaginary of Disaster: Post-Apocalyptic Fictions and the Crisis of Social Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 2.

[97] *Revolution*, season 1, episode 1, 'Pilot', directed by Jon Favreau, written by Eric Kripke, aired 17 September 2012, on NBC, https://www.amazon.com/Pilot/dp/B009CS1FKA/.

associated with this clinical diagnosis as well as some of the ways these have been appropriated within recent theoretical discourse.[98]

Adopted into English directly from the Greek word for 'wound', the original meaning of *trauma*, bodily injury, has since been extended to include injuries to the mind and emotions.[99] In the latter, wider sense it is often causally connected to an experience of profound helplessness or perceived proximity to annihilation, 'events that shatter all that one knows about the world and all the familiar ways of operating within it'.[100] In her influential *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an experience that overwhelms the mind and emotions, whose psychological effects linger on as unassimilated reminders of something 'experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and [which] is therefore not available to consciousness'.[101] Also described as 'a radical ending past which it is difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of life', traumatic experience has also come be associated with the term *survival*, which captures 'something of the suspension of life in the aftermath of a traumatic event'.[102] Some of the most publicized symptoms of PTSD include: intrusive memories, damaged language use, and compulsive repetitions of versions of the traumatic event in everyday life; excessive vigilance against possible threats in one's environment; 'exaggerated startle response, sleep disorders, inability to concentrate, diminished interest in significant activities, and a sense of a foreshortened future';[103] 'feelings of numbness and emotional or cognitive deadness';[104] as well as a far-

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[98] Even though still relatively young—as Shelly Rambo notes, 'the theorizing of trauma was birthed at the intersection of Holocaust studies and literary deconstruction, specifically by the 1992 publication of *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* by Dori Lau and Shoshana Felman', Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 28. Nevertheless, the range and volume of trauma studies is extensive, such that this thesis can only touch upon a few of the most salient insights.

[99] Susan Brison observes that 'One cannot make a sharp distinction between physical and psychological harm in the case of PTSD sufferers', Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 131n12.

[100] Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 4. Similarly, Brison writes 'many of those who survive life-threatening traumatic events in which they are reduced to near-complete helplessness later suffer from the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder'. Brison, *Aftermath*, 133n5.

[101] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

[102] Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 4.

[103] Brison, *Aftermath*, 15.

[104] Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 16.

reaching loss of trust, not only in the reliability of people, but also in the integrity of the world itself which can lead to psychic fragmentation and a sense of cosmic incoherence or unintelligibility.[105]

Such qualities frequently appear in postapocalyptic fiction at different levels, some of the more overt examples of which can be seen in the American SyFy Channel television series *Defiance* (2013-15). Set in a postapocalyptic future in which extraterrestrial invaders have tried and failed to technologically reconfigure the Earth's topography, in this world the once familiar terrestrial landscape has been transformed into an alien terrain.[106] Set in the futuristic mining town from which the series takes its name, Defiance is built over the site of 'Old St. Louis' whose signature arch still stands and is one of the few places where surviving humanity peacefully coexists with several species of intelligent extraterrestrials. Principal characters include ex-soldier and scavenger turned 'lawkeeper' Joshua Nolan, his adopted Irathient daughter, Irisa, and mayor Amanda Rosewater, and from early on trauma-related themes abound.

In season one, for instance, several characters openly discuss PTSD. Irisa repeatedly succumbs to debilitating flashbacks of torture sessions she experienced as a child at the hands of a pseudo-religious sect. The Earth Republic[107] representative who replaces Amanda Rosewater as mayor of Defiance suffers from unassimilated memories that recall the days he and his boarding schoolmates were locked in a chapel during the alien invasion. In an episode aptly titled 'Put the Damage On', the cyborg medic Doc Yewll confronts hallucinatory appearances of a suicidal lover, her 'orderly Indogene brain trying to process the inexplicable'.[108] In the same episode Amanda struggles with intrusive memories of a man who raped her years before and turns out to have been infected by a defective 'EGO', a nanotech military device that records memories for tactical purposes and can be caught like a virus, 'which happens from time to time on the battlefield'. Like the effects of PTSD

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[105] 'When the inconceivable happens, one starts to doubt even the most mundane, realistic perceptions'. Brison, *Aftermath*, 8-9.

[106] Figuratively true of all postapocalyptic landscapes, the alienation is in this case literal.

[107] Enough time has elapsed since the global cataclysm for the resolution of a major war with the extraterrestrials and the subsequent establishment of some scattered human civilizations, most ambitious and centralizing among them, this New York City-based power.

[108] *Defiance*, season 2, episode 5, 'Put the Damage On', directed by Allan Kroeker, written by Nevin Densham, aired 17 July 2014, on Syfy, https://www.amazon.com/Put-the-Damage-On/dp/B00KDO4O1E/.

commonly associated with the soldier returning from war, who, 'faced with sudden and massive death around him […] suffers this sight in a numbed state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares',[109] Amanda's diseased ego disrupts her recollections, gives her headaches and accelerates her self-destructive drug abuse. As an additional aspect of the series, these PTSD-informed plotlines are frequently punctuated by brief, unexplained video clips that are out of sequence with the surrounding narrative. Presumably depictions of the characters' memories, these clips echo at a structural level the 'delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena'[110] symptomatic of traumatic experience.

Further, as the second season moves towards its climax, Irisa, still uncontrollably acting out at the behest of something mysterious and deadly inside her,[111] attempts to recommence the unfinished terraforming event that originally disfigured the world. In the remains of an alien ship buried deep beneath Defiance, she confronts a little girl only she can see: this image turns out to be the memory of her tortured, child-aged self that the ship's supercomputer had co-opted to urge her to complete the planet's unfinished destruction. When Irisa chooses to defy this interior voice, in narrative terms the little girl disappears, the lasers on the verge of levelling Defiance turn their beams away and incinerate one another, and the cave collapses, reducing the spaceship and ruined underground city to dust. In therapeutic terms, arguably, this also signals that Irisa has worked through her trauma, assimilated its submerged memories and disarmed the destructive hidden power behind her compulsions. If at one level the traumatized psyches of many postapocalyptic characters mirror the real-world symptoms of PTSD, then, it is a significant feature of many of these fictions that such interior fragmentation also finds a kind of objective correlative in the disastrous conditions of their external circumstances.

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[109] The war-traumatized soldier, as Caruth observes, 'is a central and recurring image of trauma in our century'. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 12.

[110] Caruth, 11.

[111] This turns out to be a set of keys to a buried alien space ship run by a super-intelligence computer.

Traumatized Landscapes

What is often instantly and most conspicuously apparent about the physical settings of many postapocalyptic storyworlds is that something catastrophic has happened. Films and television series in the genre typically open upon sweeping of vacated cities, crumbling buildings, abandoned houses and flipped cars (*figures 9 & 10*), and extensive graffiti alongside broken, unlit windows indicate that public services and utilities like law enforcement and electricity have broken down. The streets are typically empty, with survivors to be found huddled indoors, unwashed and dressed in rags, squatting amidst an assemblage of scraps collected from the remains of the ruined order. At one level, such 'scenery gorn'[112] establishes the apparent predominance of disaster, decomposition and death in a post-cataclysmic universe where 'the principle of decomposition […] threatens to gain the upper hand'.[113]

At another level, the consistent interrelationship between such scenic breakdown and the social and personal predicaments of the characters makes it instructive to think of the setting of these stories as a species of *paysage moralisé.* Scenery that Angus Fletcher describes as 'more than a tacked-up backdrop',[114] this kind of landscape is simultaneously a surface texture and 'the carrier of thematic meaning'[115] against which 'heroes act in harmony or in violent opposition'.[116] In Jose Saramago's postapocalyptic *Blindness* (1997 novel; 2008 film), for instance, 'decay and the resulting stench become the primary objective correlatives of […] political and social corruption',[117] and establish the status quo to which characters must choose to either passively conform or actively resist. It is frequently remarked that 'the third man' of Carol Reed's enigmatically titled film of the same name (1949) may well refer to its massive, bombed-out backdrops of post-war Vienna, and in a similar fashion, the landscape in many postapocalyptic fictions 'becomes itself a

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[112] A composite term of *gore* and *pornography*. 'Scenery Gorn', Tvtropes (website), accessed 29 October 2016, http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/SceneryGorn.

[113] Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 56.

[114] Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964 [2012]), 7.

[115] Fletcher, 6.

[116] Fletcher, 7.

[117] Maria Manuel Lisboa, *The End of the World: Apocalypse and Its Aftermath in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2011), 94.

leading character',[118] 'the source of conflict, the reflected image of humanity, and the setting for human adventures, whether for damnation or salvation'[119] (*figure 11*).

Interpreted in this light, the shattered worlds of postapocalyptic fictions might therefore also be understood to grant visions of the actual world as viewed through the eyes of a trauma survivor. If as David Samuelson argues, a landscape is not so much a world as a world-as-perceived, occupying an 'in-between status […] between the empirically verifiable and the psychologically projected',[120] or what Frank McConnel calls 'a prospect with rules of perception […] a playing board',[121] then these fictional settings might be understood as ruled not merely by that mode of perception described in the introduction as a postapocalyptic sensibility, but also fictional settings specifically set up for playing out the implications of traumatic experience. Berger describes the postapocalyptic setting as shaped by events that have 'occurred and seem to leave no trace—and yet the entire landscape is an immaculate tombstone' that must be read like 'a sign, or rather a symptom'.[122] Reflecting upon her own near-death experience, philosopher Susan Brison writes that 'unlike survivors of wars or earthquakes, who inhabit a common shattered world, rape victims face the cataclysmic destruction of their world alone, surrounded by people who find it hard to understand what's so distressing'.[123] Yet by rendering 'general and public what in the present context is only piecemeal and private',[124] the settings of

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[118] Mark Rose, *Alien Encounters: Anatomy of Science Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 36-37; quoted in William Lomax, 'Landscape and the Romantic Dilemma: Myth and Metaphor in Science-Fiction Narrative', in *Mindscapes, the Geographies of Imagined Worlds*, ed. George E. Slusser and Eric S. Rabkin (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 242.

[119] William Lomax, 'Landscape and the Romantic Dilemma: Myth and Metaphor in Science-Fiction Narrative', in *Mindscapes, the Geographies of Imagined Worlds*, ed. George E. Slusser and Eric S. Rabkin (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 242.

[120] David N. Samuelson, 'Suggestions for a Typology of Mindscapes', in *Mindscapes, the Geographies of Imagined Worlds*, eds. George E. Slusser and Eric S. Rabkin (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 282-83.

[121] Frank McConnell, 'The Playing Fields of Eden', in *Mindscapes, the Geographies of Imagined Worlds*, eds. George E. Slusser and Eric S. Rabkin (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 80.

[122] James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 20.

[123] Brison, *Aftermath*, 15. 'Unlike Descartes', Brison continues, 'who had "to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations" in order to find any knowledge "that was stable and likely to last," I had my world demolished for me'. Brison, 25.

[124] Kingsley Amis, *New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction* (North Stratford, NH: Ayer, [1960] 2000), 132.

these stories might be understood to enforce confrontations with destabilizing injury at the level of the physical world that require character-defining decisions at both social and personal levels, often exacerbated by the characters' own terrible deeds and the consequent breakdown of trusting relationships.

The SyFy television series *12 Monkeys* (2015-) provides an example that overtly queries the challenge of going with the flow versus swimming against the postapocalyptic tide. The series is premised upon the invention of a time machine built to transport persons back to the past in order to stop the outbreak of a virus that kills most of the world's population, and begins with a direct address to the audience by the protagonist, James Cole:

> Where are you right now? Somewhere warm, safe next to someone you love? Now, what if all that was gone and the only thing you could do is survive? You would, right? You'd try. You'd do things, horrible things until you lose that last thing you have left: yourself.[125]

Having established the moral ambiguity of his postapocalyptic predicament, a subplot follows Cole and his friend Ramse as they join a marauding group of 'scavs'. At a certain point, Ramse objects to the brutal and systematic way they pillage and murder other survivors and takes a stand against the group's leader, Deacon, who in turn orders Cole to murder Ramse. Deacon insists, 'men like us understand what the world is now. What it takes to survive'.[126] Cole echoes this sentiment, telling Ramse that Deacon 'understands what the world is', but Ramse replies, 'Whatever this world is now, it shouldn't be this, man'. Here, consonant with the postapocalyptic ruinscape as *paysage moralisé*, the crumbling material and social conditions of these characters' fictional world establish the parameters for debate about what is and is not permissible behavior. Whereas Deacon and Cole allow the widespread collapse of society and its civic virtues to dictate their decisions, Ramse retains a sense of moral direction that does not take its point of reference from his immediate surroundings, therefore the exigencies it would seem to demand do not compel his complicity. This kind of steadfast sensitivity to conscience is nonetheless severely tested

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[125] *Twelve Monkeys*, season 1, episode 1, 'Splinter', directed by Jeffrey Reiner, written by Terry Matalas and Travis Fickett, aired 16 January 2015, on Syfy, https://www.amazon.com/Splinter/dp/B00R1NCJ1W/.

[126] *Twelve Monkeys*, season 1, episode 4, 'Atari', directed by David Grossman, written by Terry Matalas and Travis Fickett and Travis Fickett, aired 6 February 2015, on Syfy, https://www.amazon.com/Atari/dp/B00R1NCJ1W/.

by the deteriorated exterior conditions of the postapocalyptic world, since as Sibylle Machat observes, 'a more hostile environment that is more inimical to human life seems to necessitate human life being more inimical to each other in fictions of the post-apocalypse',[127] to the extent that the question of ethical behavior is often couched in terms of 'what kind of wilderness necessitates what kind of savagery'.[128]

Trauma Victims and Perpetrators

Against this backdrop there is often a marked deterioration in the social relations of the surviving humanity. Trust and cooperation are often in a perilous state of collapse between characters, who, like trauma survivors, 'because a hostile external force has violated them, they find it hard to trust people; anyone who draws near to them could be a potential attacker'.[129] This default posture can be seen in *The Survivalist* (2015), for example, an Irish film about a man who, for years after an unspecified social collapse, has been farming in solitude according to a strict policy of self-preservation. When he allows a woman and her daughter to stay and eat in return for sexual favors, he also locks them in a closet at night, taking precautions which seem excessive until we hear them whispering about murdering him to take over his plot. Subsequently, when the daughter approaches him with a straight razor, he permits her to shave him only as he holds a shotgun to her chest (*figure 12*). What in a less perilous environment might have been a simple act of intimacy becomes in this setting an intense, complex and highly armed negotiation at the brink of mutual destruction.

    The Survivalist also exemplifies what might be called a typical postapocalyptic breakdown of society in dual senses. On the one hand, the story breaks down society in the sense of analyzing its constituent elements, in this case, back-to-the-basics social operations like farming and housework. On the other hand, the story also foregrounds the dysfunctional breakdown of the basic requirements for society. The fractured domestic relationship of this couple, each member pulled in opposite directions by survivalist self-

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[127] Sibylle Machat, *In the Ruins of Civilizations: Narrative Structures, World Constructions and Physical Realities in the Post-Apocalyptic Novel* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2013), 37.
[128] Machat, 37.
[129] Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 18.

regard and the necessity of cooperation for the enjoyment and propagation of a common life, might also stand in for the many other instances of postapocalyptic damaged relationships. From families pockmarked by deaths and broken down marriages to 'sloppy assemblages of the scared and hungry, abortive communities, and hollow remnants of nuclear families',[130] in diverse ways, as shall be shown, the relations between characters in postapocalyptic fiction tend to suggest that their worlds are afflicted not only by the loss of something needed for the proper functioning of light bulbs and stock exchanges, but also for a well-functioning shared human life.

It should be pointed out that the breakdown of society in postapocalyptic fiction can sometimes play out more optimistically, though, with the elimination of recognizable society, its rules and regulations freeing up those who survive to entertain lives unencumbered by customary restrictions. David Brin describes most postapocalyptic novels as 'little-boy fantasies about running amok in a world without rules',[131] and a comic variant of this plays out in the series *The Last Man on Earth* (2015 -), where protagonist Phil Miller searches the entire USA for survivors and, finding none, settles in an unoccupied mansion in Tucson, Arizona. With no one else's needs or demands to consider, he decorates his house with museum pieces and national treasures like Monet paintings, dinosaur bones and Babe Ruth's baseball bat, all with a careless abandon epitomized by the moment he discovers the original US Constitution crumpled under a heap of trash and soda cans. He swims in a pool of tequila and margarita mix, plays ten pin bowling with sports cars and fish tanks and, instead of bothering to open doors and windows, simply shoots through them with a handgun. Even when other persons start to populate the area, none of them chooses to dwell in the same house, each choosing instead to occupy his or her own mansion on the same street in a farcical vision of untrammeled individualist excess.

The postapocalyptic genre, as *Last Man* shows, might extend beyond the stereotypically grim 'survivalist fantasies'[132] to include upbeat visions of a certain kind of fresh start and freedom from the hindrances of a competitive and densely pre-populated world. For audiences living in an increasingly urban, interconnected and globalized society,

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[130] Evan Calder Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011), 165.

[131] Quoted in David Seed, *American Science Fiction and the Cold War: Literature and Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 177.

[132] Kyle Bishop, 'Dead Man Still Walking', *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 37.1 (2009): 21.

the kind of speculative infrastructural meltdown offered by the postapocalypse opens up a fictional frontier for examining the possibilities of self-direction unimpeded by other people. Ironically, though, if on the one hand struggling along in these fictions without cable television or air conditioning might simply be the price to pay for passing a kind of final judgement upon everything else deemed annoying about contemporary society, on the other hand, at least initially, the near-miss apocalypse also operates as a kind of wish fulfillment of contemporary liberalism at its logical limit, that is, individuals granted plenty of elbow-room to do whatever they want. Arguably an adolescent idea of freedom conceived primarily in terms of the absence of constraints and impositions rather than the positive ability to do good, it might be instructively compared to the ideal of the American Wild West or a Kerouac-like open road with the promise of limitless energy and opportunities, consequence-free experimentation and uninhibited self-actualization. However, whereas *Last Man*'s version of postapocalyptic pure freedom might seem relatively sustainable in a North America glutted with a superabundance of consumer goods once it has been depopulated of everyone but a handful of healthy adults, things are seldom so simple in the postapocalypse.

More often than not, rather, post-disaster survivors in these stories live under the duress of circumstances of which scarcity is the mildest, and are frequently accompanied by persons with conspicuous vulnerabilities, such as children. The darker side of *Last Man*'s vision of pure freedom emerges in two other postapocalyptic visions of life on the open road, for example, when Travis and his son in *Fear the Walking Dead* are picked up by a guy with a truck named Brandon, who talks energetically about how great things have been since the disaster: 'We got no speed limits, no cops, no money, no work, no bills, no bullshit'.[133] Travis disagrees, but Brandon insists, 'Are you kidding? This is more than living, man. This is supernatural. We were nothing before this, man. We were less than [sic]. But now the end times made us gods'. Machat acknowledges this elevated social standing for persons in postapocalyptic settings, 'if for nothing else, then because the drastic reduction in number that humanity undergoes will leave the survivors with a keen sense of their own

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[133] *Fear the Walking Dead*, season 2, episode 10, 'Do Not Disturb', directed by Michael McDonough, written by Lauren Signorino, aired 4 September 2016, on AMC, https://www.amazon.com/Do-Not-Disturb/dp/B01CYTNIJY/.

worth and rarity in the post-devastation world'.[134] Nevertheless, the unmitigated freedom

this often presumes is not without its sinister side, as becomes apparent when Brandon and

his friend callously prepare to execute a third companion whose injuries would slow them

down.

A similar dynamic is at work in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, a novel (2006) and

subsequent cinematic adaptation (2009) that follows a man and his boy across a burnt-out

North America as they search for food, shelter and warmer weather. In a narrative

characterized by dogged pressing on, abrupt horrors and harrowing recollections of the

past, the plot follows the man's attempts—tattered and adrift, undernourished and

hyperaware of surrounding dangers—to protect his son from roaming cannibals and their

entourage of enslaved catamites. The pair are never named, rarely speak, and when they

do, it is usually with a Hemingway-like sparsity that calls to mind those traumatized persons

who 'have difficulty in speaking and remembering', 'find it hard to communicate with loved

ones and friends' and 'find it tough to sustain relationships […] because they lack energy or

optimism'.[135] As the narrative progresses and their predicament becomes more desperate, a

common postapocalyptic question arises concerning the lengths to which an ordinary

survivor might go to stay alive.[136] Indeed, one of the primary structural devices at work

across the novel is an escalating representation of what might be called humanity's capacity

for inhumanity, which proceeds through a series of murders and deceits to a group of adults

roasting a baby on a spit.

Whereas in other contexts such obscenity might be gratuitous, in *The Road* they are

intrinsic to the purpose, which is 'presented as a test of the two main characters' ability to

maintain some sort of ethical awareness in the hell that their homeland has become'.[137] At

the novel's climax, the man forces a stranger who has robbed them to strip naked on the

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[134] Machat, *In the Ruins*, 28.

[135] Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 18. Additionally, the text's missing punctuations and lack of chapter divisions 'reproduce visually the disavowal at the heart of much of McCarthy's fiction and thus help to underscore a broken, fragmented, and ultimately empty world'. Lindsey Banco, 'Contractions in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*', *The Explicator* 68.4 (2010): 276.

[136] Notably, at one point the boy's suicidal mother insists that she and her family are not survivors but 'the walking dead in a horror film', Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (London: Macmillan, 2010), 57, pt 93.

[137] Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, 'The Apocalyptic Sublime: Then and Now', in *Apocalyptic Discourse in Contemporary Culture: Post-Millennial Perspectives on the End of the World*, eds. Monica Germana and Aris Mousoutzanis (New York: Routledge, 2014), 66.

road, committing him to almost certain and arguably superfluous death. Registering as an ugly display of the unqualified will to survive, the episode challenges the readers to question whether at this point the protagonist has become a character with whom we are no longer able or willing to sympathize. While his choices up to this moment are more or less justified by the demands of his brutal surroundings, this callous act would seem to show the man abandoning some vital aspect of his humanity, a figuratively deadly decision whose significance is reinforced by the man's literal death shortly thereafter that leaves his son alone in the world. This episode also evokes a recurring postapocalyptic theme that Francesco Orlando calls the 'desolate-disconnect',[138] and is reminiscent of an earlier scene in which the man empties his wallet onto the road—among whose contents is a photograph of his deceased wife—and then simply walks on. Similarly, the boy's continued life in the wake of his father's death indicates 'the desolation of his current reality […] the disconnection that is necessary in order to survive'.[139] Yet from another angle, the boy's literal carrying on of life mirrors his resistance to the prevailing inhumanity of his circumstances; he lives 'because is able to keep compassion alive',[140] or in the language of the novel because he continues to 'carry the fire', an undefined mandate repeated throughout the narrative that is closely associated with the boy's need to identify with what he calls the 'good guys'.

While *The Road*'s almost unidirectional movement toward decline—from the deepening chill of the climate to the man's physical and ethical degeneration—reflects the 'gradual but inexorable deterioration of human society and human bonds in the post-apocalyptic world',[141] this novel, like the majority of postapocalyptic fictions, is not absolutely unremittingly despairing in its vision. It concludes, rather, with the entrance onto the scene of what might prove to be a new family for the boy followed by a few dream-like flickers of what is possibly a revivified world. Nevertheless it must be acknowledged that the overall tone of *The Road* is far less cheery than the rosy vision of *Last Man*'s 'cozy catastrophe', falling instead at the opposite end of the post-disaster spectrum that Evan

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[138] Francesco Orlando, *Obsolete Objects in the Literary Imagination: Ruins, Relics, Rarities, Rubbish, Uninhabited Places, and Hidden Treasures* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 272.

[139] Machat, *In the Ruins*, 165.

[140] Machat, 180.

[141] Machat, 156.

Williams calls 'postapocalyptic realism'.[142] In this novel, the exercise of freedom in the absence of social constraints calls into action an ugly, self-destructive side of human potential, and instantiates a trope frequently encountered elsewhere in postapocalyptic fiction, where characters subsist in a state of distrustful isolation, suspicion toward strangers is common sense and horrible dealings the anticipated norm. Whereas such disintegration in the social sphere reflects the disintegration of the characters' physical surroundings, more disconcerting, perhaps, is the characterization of postapocalyptic survivors, at least *in extremis*, as not only the victims of trauma but also as its perpetrators (*figures 13 & 14*).

The Postapocalyptic Kosmos

The Road is a representative example of many postapocalyptic texts where the breakdown of the characters' interpersonal relationships bleeds over into or spills out of the domain of their interior selves, and in a significant subset of cases this motif of humanity's descent into inhumanity also frequently takes a more fantastical form in the figure of the zombie.[143] At one level the zombie represents a kind of exaggerated literalization of persons behaving monstrously elsewhere in these fictions, in more general terms operates as a symbol of postapocalyptic decay in human form. Often described in metaphysical language as the living dead or 'a soulless human corpse',[144] phenomenologically-speaking the zombie provides an image of human-like creatures somehow both physically holding together and yet dramatically falling apart. Anthroform and ambulant yet bodily breaking down and beyond the reach of reason, it retains some vestiges of recognizable humanity but is usually missing several traditionally human qualities, for example, the capacities to speak, empathize, or do much of anything beyond the most primal instincts to kill and eat. It also frequently exhibits a conspicuous lack of 'regard for self-preservation',[145] for example,

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[142] Williams, *Combined and Uneven*, 248n61.

[143] *Zombie* unless otherwise indicated in this thesis refers to frequently recurring characteristics of a composite pop zombie assembled from its relatively contemporary iterations; for some relevant distinctions, see this chapter's discussion of the symbolic development of the zombie, 70-76.

[144] W.B. Seabrook, *The Magic Island* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, [1929] 2016), 93.

[145] Peter Dendle, *The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 15. This is in striking contrast to the frantic self-preservation of many postapocalytpic survivors.

heedlessly walking on broken ankles or into entanglements with razor wire. These indications of disintegration at the individual level are also mirrored at the collective level, with the zombie typically found not in organized groups but only in uncoordinated mobs temporarily aggregated to consume and propagate destruction.[146] Indeed, this creature pushes the postapocalyptic motif of human descent into inhumanity to an extreme, embodying a pseudo-humanity that is not only emptied of many human characteristics but whose *raison d'être* seems to be the destruction of human beings *en masse*, whether by killing, eating or by converting them into more zombies.

Often operating symbolically within these fictions as nightmare images of morally diminished human survivors, there is an additional sense in which the zombie might be described in inverse terms, that is, as the personalization of the wider decomposition of the postapocalyptic world. As the embodiment of a more encompassing decadence, the zombie incorporates in a human figure the otherwise abstract and impersonal forces of fragmentation all around it, and for this reason can be instructively related to what Angus Fletcher calls a *kosmos*.[147] Derived from the root of both the English *cosmic* and *cosmetic*, what he calls the *kosmos* is that relatively superficial manifestation of the deeper constitution of a fictional universe. He calls it the 'essential type of an allegorical image',[148] and lists several of its characteristics:

> First, it must imply a systematic part-whole relationship; second, it should be capable of including both metonymy and synecdoche; third, it should be capable of including 'personifications;' fourth, it should suggest the daemonic nature of the image; fifth, it should allow an emphasis on the visual modality, specifically on visual or symbolic 'isolation', not to say surrealism; finally, it should be such that large-scale double meanings would emerge if it were combined with other such images.[149]

The zombie seems to satisfy most if not all of these criteria in the context of the postapocalypse. For example, at the physical level the crumbling buildings of the postapocalyptic ruinscape find a parallel in the gory, decomposing corporeality of the

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[146] Such masses are also notable for what might be called a democratic lack of bias against previous occupation, station or state of dress.

[147] His revival of Aristotle's term which he notes in Greek has a double meaning, denoting 'both a large-scale order (macrocosmos) and the small-scale sign of that order (microcosmos)'. Fletcher, *Allegory*, 110.

[148] Fletcher, 109. Fletcher notes that this is a formal rather than an ontological description.

[149] Fletcher, *Allegory*, 109.

zombie, and more immaterially, the lack of constructive human relations in post-disaster emptied urban spaces parallels the zombie's lack of relationships and vacuous interiority. As the human-shaped synecdoche of postapocalyptic ruin, the zombie is both the victim and the perpetuator of the disaster that plagues society, and as such it also concretizes the conflict between the human survivors and the hostile conditions of their environment. In other words, in their struggle against the zombies, human survivors battle against human ruins, the cause, symptom and anthroform embodiment of the breakdown of the postapocalyptic world. As a consequence, the faceoff between the survivors and the zombies not only throws into conflict two images of traumatized humanity in different degrees, it also forces the survivors (and the viewers with them) to face a universe of decomposition in another human face, effectively operating both as a mirror of traumatic experience and as what might be called the *kosmos* of a postapocalyptic *paysage moralisé* (*figure 15*).

If within these stories, at a general level, the conflict between these two types of trauma victim represents a struggle to retain one's humanity, it is also susceptible to a myriad of additional significances. It has been argued, for instance, that in recent zombie films the focus is often 'less on the insatiable hunger of the zombie and more on the danger of the bite and transfer of the virus';[150] additionally, this has been interpreted as an expression of anxieties about literal contemporary contagions like AIDS, SARS or other potential global pandemics. More generally, this might be extended to anything both contagious and undesirable. Worth noting in this regard is a distinction between two ways characters descend into the subhuman zombie state in these fictions: according to the varying logics of these stories, either a person dies and his or her body undergoes reanimation, or a person who is still living catches some kind of a personality-deforming contagion. Outwardly the differences between 'the dead risen' and 'the infected living'[151] may be subtle, but these entail important differences of symbolism and for possible resolutions of the plot. For example, if the cause of zombification after death is undeclared, generalized or attributed to some 'systemic event',[152] decline into this subhuman condition will probably be inescapable. By contrast, if one becomes a zombie through a bite, it is much

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[150] Williams, *Combined and Uneven*, 75.
[151] Williams, 141.
[152] Williams, 141.

more likely that whatever the contagion may be can be isolated and curtailed; in this case the mechanics of 'becoming zombie' correspond to 'the one-to-one logic of the slasher [film]' with its clear moral economy and 'localizable causality'.[153] Whereas according to the latter logic, one become less-than-human through unfortunate circumstances, i.e. getting 'bitten' in the wrong place at the wrong time, according to the former, paradoxically, less-than-human constitutes something like the inevitable, universal human condition.

While the survivors' struggle against images of decomposing humanity might be understood to dramatize any number of concerns depending upon whatever ills the zombie might represent—psychological, physical, or 'social ills' like helpless poverty, social alienation, or inarticulate political disenfranchisement, etc.—for present purposes it will suffice to focus on the general sense in which zombies imaginatively represent the experience of real-world trauma victims. In a book significantly entitled *Death in Life*, for example, Robert Jay Lifton uses zombie-like language to described Hiroshima's *hibakusha*—'survivors' or 'explosion-affected persons'—whose experience of 'a sudden and absolute shift from normal existence to an overwhelming encounter with death'[154] produced a sense that their lives had so fully merged with death as to become contagions of it. Primo Levi describes Nazi concentration camp detainees as 'the doomed' whose 'number is endless […] an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer […] they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand'.[155] Giorgio Agamben theorizes in a similar vein about the average citizen of the modern totalitarian state, who lives in a state of exception that has been extended indefinitely after 'a temporary suspension of the rule of law on the basis of a factual state of danger',[156] and consequently whose 'bare life' subsists in 'a limbo-like state that is largely preoccupied with acquiring and sustaining the essentials

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[153] Williams, 141.

[154] Robert Jay Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 21. Cf. also, Robert Jay Lifton, 'The Survivors of the Hiroshima Disaster and the Survivors of Nazi Persecution', in *Massive Psychic Trauma*, ed. H. Krystal (New York, 1968), 168-203.

[155] Primo Levi, *If This is a Man*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Orion Press, 1959), 103. Also cf. Zdzislaw Jan Ryn and Stanislaw Klodzinski, 'Between Life and Death: Experiences of the Concentration Camp Musulman', in *Auschwitz Survivors: Clinical-Psychiatric Studies*, trans. E. Jarosz and P. Mizia, ed. Z.J. Ryn (Krakow, 2005), 111.

[156] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Rozen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 169.

of life'.[157] Such a person 'excluded from the law by the law'[158] Agamben calls *homo sacer*,[159] is epitomized by the *Muselman*, the Muslim of the concentration camp who is outcast even by other prisoners and thus offers a model of the person definitively excluded from 'the fraternity of the social sphere'.[160] The primary interest of Agamben's theory here is how in its terms the violence intrinsic to the modern state effects a kind of systemic or perpetual possibility of traumatic experience that extends to all persons of a society, and, as a consequence, can reduce even a majority of its citizens to an 'interstitial state of being between life and death'.[161]

Also relevant for appreciating the symbolic link between zombies and traumatic experience is the distinction frequently observed in the literature on trauma between the processes of 'acting out' and 'working through', that is, the compulsive, often destructive reliving of traumatic experience in daily life and its gradual assimilation into a healthy and productive post-trauma existence. Whereas these are described as distinguishable in principle, in practice they are often deeply intertwined, with recovering trauma victims often alternating between what Kirby Farrell calls depressive withdrawal and 'berserking',[162] phases that might be correlated closely to the alternating modes of the zombie's typical behavior, listless and aggressive. In this light, the zombie interpreted as both the victim and perpetrator of the postapocalyptic disaster offers a fantastically exaggerated image of a traumatically wounded humanity that compulsively wounds in turn.[163]

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[157] Jon Stratton, 'The Trouble with Zombies: Bare Life, Musselmänner and Displaced People', *Somatechnics* 1.1 (2011): 188-89.

[158] Peter Y. Paik, *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe* (Minneapolis: Minneapolis, 2010), 67.

[159] The category is derived from an antique designation of persons whom 'cannot be sacrificed and can therefore be killed with impunity', 'hovering at an indeterminate threshold between life and death', (Paik, *From Utopia*, 67) against whom 'no act committed…could appear any longer as a crime'. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 171.

[160] Stratton, 'The Trouble with Zombies', 188-89.

[161] Stratton, 188.

[162] Farrell also describes a third principle mode for coping with traumatic stress, 'social adaptation and relearning'. Kirby Farrell, *Post-traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 7.

[163] A comparable kind of victim-cum-perpetrator dynamic has been attributed persons in historical circumstances like the Nazi jailers or those soldiers fighting in the Korean and Vietnam wars whose psychological condition contributed significantly to the clinical diagnosis of PTSD.

'We are the Walking Dead'

Building upon this suggestion, it can be observed that in these fictions the human survivors of traumatic disaster and their zombie antagonists operate as mirror images of each other to the extent that they are often implicitly or explicitly identified. This is a prominent theme in *The Walking Dead* (2010-), which, as a television series stretching across several seasons, entertains the scope to explore many human responses to the challenges of postapocalyptic circumstances, and the consequences of these choices upon the ability to retain a distinctly human life. In the first two seasons, the characters Herschel and Shane represent diverging philosophies on how to relate to the undead. From the time of the outbreak until Rick's group arrives on his farm, Herschel keeps a group of zombified relatives and neighbors in his barn, believing them to be merely sick and referring to them by name: 'Lou as in "Louise"', he characteristically insists, 'She has a farm up the road'.[164] Shane, by contrast, persistently questions the human cost of survival as he pushes the boundaries of what is permissible to do in order to stay alive, and his character-defining moment comes when he deliberately injures a fellow survivor to ensure his own escape and leaves him to be eaten by a ring of zombies. Following this brazenly utilitarian act, he shaves his head, an outward sign of his philosophy radically shorn of the nonpragmatic, and gives up in his attempts to heal his widening relational rifts with the other members of the group. Subsequently, when Shane falls out with Rick concerning what the group must or must not do to survive, he resolves to kill Rick, gets killed by Rick himself, and as a result becomes the first among the lead characters to turn into a zombie. The nadir of Shane's moral degeneration thus coincides with his 'conversion' from human to undead, the literal and symbolic completion of the arc of his gradually diminishing humanity.[165] In general terms, this suggests that in the world of *The Walking Dead*, the more that characters conform to the survival-only attitude the zombie postapocalypse seems to demand, the more they become indistinguishable from the monsters they are attempting to outlive.

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[164] *The Walking Dead*, season 2, episode 7, 'Pretty Much Dead Already', directed by Michelle MacLaren, written by Scott M. Gimple, aired 27 November 2011, on AMC, https://www.amazon.com/Pretty-Much-Dead-Already/dp/B005RUUUAI/.

[165] Significantly, the incident also reveals that in *The Walking Dead*, it is not necessary to be bitten to become a zombie as everyone, it turns out, is already infected by the virus and the only thing remaining is to die: in this fictional universe every survivor is literally a zombie in germ, with the distinction between human survivors and zombies merely a matter of time.

From the end of the third season the series expands upon this theme, exploring the tension between the horrific decisions expedient to survival and the opposite imperative to preserve some sense of civilized humanity. This comes to a head in the contrasting leadership styles of Rick and The Governor, for example, the latter of whom, in contrast to Rick's more humane exercise of authority, keeps his fortified town of Woodbury secure at the cost of a ruthless tyranny. On the brink of war with Rick's group now ensconced in an abandoned prison, the Governor demands that Rick hand over Michonne, a member of Rick's group who earlier executed the Governor's zombified daughter with a samurai sword. Milton, the Governor's resident scientist tasked with looking for a cure, asks how such revenge will help Woodbury, and the Governor asks in response if he believes 'the biters' still have a spark in them of who they were. Milton says yes and the Governor fires back, 'Then that was my daughter, wasn't it?'.[166] In the next scene Amy, a one-time member of Rick's group who has since taken up residence with the Governor, discovers that even if Rick surrenders Michonne, the Governor plans to attack the prison anyway; she attempts to shoot him but Milton intervenes, and in a clear echo of the previous scene justifies his action, saying, 'I knew Philip before he became the Governor. That man still exists'.[167] At this point in the series, in other words, the 'good guys' are still primarily associated with the resolve to preserve whatever humanity might remain in either the living or the undead.

A decisive shift occurs in the final episode of the fourth season, when Michonne recalls to Rick's son Carl about her experience in a refugee camp following the outbreak of the plague: it was overrun, she relates, her child was killed, and in response she killed the two men responsible, carving them into toothless zombies she then dragged around on leashes like pets. As it turns out, their escort then cloaked her from detection by other zombies: 'The walkers didn't see me anymore. I was just another monster. That was me. I was gone for a long time'.[168] Shortly after this conversation in the same episode, his

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[166] *The Walking Dead*, season 3, episode 14, 'Prey', directed by Stefan Schwartz, written by Glen Mazzara and Evan Reilly, aired 17 March 2013, on AMC, https://www.amazon.com/Prey/dp/B009FZHYKU/.

[167] *The Walking Dead*, season 3, episode 7, 'When the Dead Come Knocking', directed by Dan Sackheim, written by Frank Renzulli, aired 25 November 2012, on AMC, https://www.amazon.com/When-The-Dead-Come-Knocking/dp/B009FZHYKU/.

[168] *The Walking Dead*, season 4, episode 16, 'A', directed by Michelle MacLaren, written by Scott M. Gimple and Angela Kang, aired 30 March 2014, on AMC, https://www.amazon.com/A/dp/B00F880BWG/. Carl describes himself as just another monster, too, but Michonne goes on to describe how connecting with the persons in Rick's group brought her back.

convergence between human and zombie is dramatically reinforced when Rick, Carl and Michonne hear a man cry for help but leave him to be eaten by zombies on Rick's orders to conserve their ammunition. The moral consequences of such callous calculation play out the next morning when the trio is captured by another group and Rick shocks everyone by ripping out a man's jugular with his teeth, a clear statement in the series' visual language that Rick has committed the most zombie-like of acts.

The significance of these choices upon the wider group's decline into a zombie-like condition are discussed outright throughout season five. In an early episode Rick and Bob speculate about what the world will be like after the zombies have been eradicated, and how the things they have done in the meantime will affect them:

> Bob: We push ourselves and let things go. And then we let some more go and some more. And pretty soon there's things we can't get back. Things we couldn't hold onto even if we tried … Eugene's gonna cure all this. And you gonna find yourself in a place where it's like how it used to be. And if you let too much go along the way, that's not gonna work. You gonna be back in the real world.
> Rick: This is the real world, Bob.
> Bob: Nah. This is a nightmare. And nightmares end.[169]

Bob goes on to thank Rick for accepting him into their group, which ended his nightmare, he says, knowing there were 'good people left'. Intimating that what they believe about the true nature of the world bears directly upon their decisions and consequently their characters, this acknowledgement is ironic, following as it does directly upon Rick's brutal execution of a large portion of the members of Terminus, a settlement whose members initially offered to take them in peacefully but turned violent when the group proved too suspicious to accept. While the decision turns out for the best in retrospect—the Terminus residents had resorted to cannibalism to survive, in turns out, thus conforming to zombies themselves by 'severing the last connection to pre-disaster American values'[170]—here again as with the Governor, the leader of Terminus represents not only a momentary antagonist for Rick but a permanent possibility of the type of leader he himself might become: if his

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[169] *The Walking Dead*, season 5, epidosde 2, 'Strangers', directed by David Boyd, written by Robert Kirkman, aired 19 October 2014, on AMC, https://www.amazon.com/Strangers/dp/B00NI1VFYI/.
[170] N.B. 'The cannibalistic act remains the index of savage otherness'. Roger Luckhurst, *Zombies: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), 55.

recent ruthless unwillingness to accommodate anyone who puts his group at risk becomes definitive of his character, he effectively becomes the same kind of person as his enemies who sacrifice other people to ensure their own survival.

The topic of how the survivors' beliefs bear upon their behaviors and ultimately upon the character of their humanity arises again one night when the group finds temporary shelter from an incoming storm in a barn:

> Rick: I used to feel sorry for kids that have to grow up now. In this. But I think I got it wrong. Growing up is getting used to the world. This is easier for them.
> Michonne: This isn't the world. This isn't it.
> Glenn: It might be. It might.
> Michonne: That's giving up.
> Glenn: It's reality.
> Rick: Until we see otherwise, this is what we have to live with. When I was a kid I asked my grandpa once if he ever killed any Germans in the war. He wouldn't answer. He said that was grown-up stuff, so … so I asked if the Germans ever tried to kill him. But he got real quiet. He said he was dead the minute he stepped into enemy territory. Every day he woke up and told himself, 'Rest in peace. Now get up and go to war'. And then after a few years of pretending he was dead he made it out alive. That's the trick of it, I think. We do what we need to do and then we get to live. But no matter what we find in DC, I know we'll be okay. Because this is how we survive. We tell ourselves that we are the walking dead.
> Daryl: We ain't them.
> Rick: We're not them. Hey. We're not.
> Daryl: We ain't them.[171]

Significantly, in this scene the members of the group can tell themselves with equal conviction that they are and are not the walking dead and that their postapocalyptic condition is and is not the real world. On the one hand, some members of the group resist the conclusion that there is no other world than the one inhabited by zombies, because, to their thinking, this amounts to resigning to becoming zombie-like themselves. On the other hand, continually waking up in the 'enemy territory' of a postapocalyptic warzone where one would seem to have no option to but try to survive at all costs is described here as

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[171] *The Walking Dead*, season 5, episode 10, 'Them', directed by Julius Ramsay, writetn by Heather Bellson, aired 15 February 2015, on AMC, https://www.amazon.com/Them/dp/B00NI1VFYI/.

scarcely distinguishable from living death. As the season continues, these themes merge with the symbolism of the road (*figure 16*), whose associations with exile and the antithesis of civility are discussed in shorthand as the insidious effects of being 'out here too long'.[172] As discussed in Chapter One, when the group is welcomed into the stable, sustainable community of Alexandria that has been relatively untouched by the horrors and chaos of the zombified world, it becomes a pressing question whether the group, so inured to life 'out there', will be able to adapt. As they come increasingly to manipulate and dominate the 'soft' Alexandrians, it becomes for perhaps the first time in the series thoroughly ambiguous whether Rick's group are still persons with whom the audience can and should sympathize, or, instead, if they have degenerated into indisguishable reflections of the zombified world.

Conclusions thus drawn from *The Walking Dead* might also carryover to the many other postapocalyptic zombie narratives wherein the conflict between the human survivors and zombies 'recedes into the background and other—inter-human, social—problems become prominent during the unfolding of the plot'.[173] In such cases the survivors, while outwardly fighting for their physical lives, are often also fighting to preserve some minimum of human sensitivity and relationality which makes their lives distinctly human.[174] When this is sacrificed there becomes gradually less to distinguish them from what they have hardened themselves to destroy, and 'humans and monster become very hard to distinguish'.[175] If on one level, then, zombies embody the threat implicit in the wider postapocalyptic setting, and a second level also function as 'doubles of the survivors' preapocalyptic selves',[176] symbolically dramatizing an inter-human struggle that 'merely pits

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[172] Uses of the phrase include the perfidious security guard whom Rick mercilessly runs him down with a car, and Michonne after Rick admits that he killed a woman at a hospital just because he wanted to do it.

[173] Lars Bang Larsen, 'Zombies of Immaterial Labor: The Modern Monster and the Death of Death', *E-Flux Journal* 15 (April 2010). The survivors in such stories are often skittish, manipulative and dangerously self-interested, to the extent that it can be difficult not only to tell a friend from an enemy: as *Fear the Walking Dead*'s Nick matter-of-factly replies when challenged about walking disguised amongst the dead, 'Safer than the men with guns'. *Fear the Walking Dead*, season 2, episode 8, 'Grotesque', directed by Daniel Sackheim, written by Kate Barnow, aired 21 August 2016, on AMC, https://www.amazon.com/Grotesque/dp/B01CYTNCR2/.

[174] Kyle Bishop observes similarly, '*Night of the Living Dead* is the story of humanity's struggle to retain its sense of humanity'. Kyle Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (And Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2010), 119.

[175] Kim Paffenroth, *The Gospel of the Living Dead: George Romero's Visions of Hell on Earth* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 10.

[176] Victoria Nelson, *Gothicka* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 156.

one set of walking dead against another;'[177] at a third level the zombies might also be understood as the projections or objective correlatives of the traumatized survivors' intra-human conflict. In this light, like other monsters in horror and science fiction, the zombie reifies 'our fear of that projected Other who ultimately turned out to be our armed-up selves',[178] and in battling against it the disaster survivor is also symbolically confronting an aspect of his or her own disaster-afflicted humanity.

This breakdown of the binary between survivors and zombies is also evident in other recent postapocalyptic zombie fictions, where, notably, it is not always presented as a bad thing. Jim's run with a pack of zombies in *28 Days Later*, for example, during which 'he sides with the zombies […] and even the zombies can't tell that he's not one of them',[179] marks a decisive upward turn in his prospects of overthrowing the established military baddies. The resolution of *World War Z* hinges on an even more interiorized identification with the undead, when the protagonist Gerry is able to pass unnoticed among zombies after infecting himself with a lab-concocted plague. All ends happily for Timmy's family in *Fido* (2006) when his mother develops amorous feelings (apparently reciprocated) for their domestic servant zombie, and in *The Girl with All the Gifts,* the school teacher who insists upon the ongoing personality of her infected pupils is the only human to survive into a new age of zombie-human hybrids. Thus, while zombies can usually be readily distinguished from human survivors in these stories on a literal plane, figuratively the two are often identified to the extent that one comes to stand in for the other. A result of this is that the basic unit of postapocalyptic conflict might be considered an internally-conflicted fusion of human and zombie, each one half of a greater, internally-conflicted whole that we might call a survivor/zombie complex.

Subjectivizing Abjection

This identification of human survivors and zombies is conveyed with especially vividness by those fictions told from the perspective of undead protagonists, and which thereby

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[177] Luckhurst, *Zombies*, 194.

[178] Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Hoarders, Doomsday Preppers, and the Culture of Apocalypse* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 18.

[179] Jen Webb and Sam Byranand, 'Some Kind of Virus: The Zombie as Body and as Trope', *Body & Society* 14.2 (2008): 86.

necessarily imbue them with some degree of subjectivity. In the BBC miniseries *In the Flesh* (2013-14), for instance, the discovery of a neuro-regenerative drug in the wake of 'The Rising' makes possible the social rehabilitation of once 'feral' zombies. The drama follows Kieren Walker, a 'Partially Deceased Syndrome' sufferer who returns to an ambivalent reception in his small town community in northern England: his younger sister is a decorated hero of the 'Pale Wars' who drinks with her fellow veterans at the Legion of the Human Volunteer Force while grumbling about the amnesty granted the 'rotters'. Major themes of the drama include Kieren's difficulty reintegrating into society, his guilty recollections of murders committed whilst 'rabid', and his ongoing troubles involving a same-sex love interest—as the series develops, the marginalization he experiences as a zombie converges with the social opprobrium directed towards his anathematized romance, so that the one comes to stand for the other.[180]

Setting aside all questions of sexual ethics, what is most notable about this story formally speaking is how the monstrous 'other' is the protagonist and therefore the narrative's primary site of 'identification, sympathy, desire and self-recognition'.[181] The story's structure of sympathy, it might be said, not only starts out from a 'fear of disenfranchisement from society',[182] but depicts such alienation as a normative point of view. As such, the role of zombies in this fiction represents a reversal of the conventional horror plot in which 'the restoration of symbolic, normative boundaries was celebrated in the violent climaxes of [...] return to social and symbolic equilibrium',[183] converting a traditional symbol of a monstrous social outcast into a sophisticated symbol of social critique. Deployed in this way, 'humanized' zombies become not 'terrifying objects of animosity expelled'[184] but the mouthpieces through which one might 'hear the unseen speak rationally out of the irrationality of managed life'.[185] The zombie in such cases lends itself to an examination of Foucauldian power dynamics, for example, wherein subalterns

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[180] In the second season, some 'rabid' PSD suffers are explicitly described as terrorists.

[181] Fred Botting, 'Aftergothic: Consumption, Machines and Black Holes', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 286.

[182] Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic*, 97.

[183] Botting, 'Aftergothic', 286.

[184] Botting, 286.

[185] Williams, *Combined and Uneven*, 104.

who are '"silent" in terms of official politics and culture'[186] might be given a voice to resist

their 'thingification',[187] or more broadly, any person who desires to 'speak what we feel, not

what we ought to say'.[188] Victoria Nelson extends this to include the articulation of

repressed religious sensibilities in a highly secularized culture, asking,

> What does it mean to become the monster? In part it means identifying with the dark and rejected
> aspects of the self that exist in every person, including the taboo primal energy around violence and
> sex. [...] But it also means desiring to experience a reality beyond the material world, even if the need
> itself is not consciously acknowledged and even if the only vehicles available are the uniformly dark
> imaginary supernatural characters that pop culture presents outside organized religion.[189]

While it has been argued that this kind of sympathetic representation of zombies is only

possible 'when they have ceased precisely to be zombies, when language, movement, and

sentience have mysteriously returned'.[190] For present purposes the debate over whether

zombies are 'unrecuperable as they are'[191] is of less interest than observing how it is not

unheard of for postapocalyptic zombie films released since the millennium to spin the

'degeneration' of human characters on its head, using zombie-like creatures to signify more

than merely human moral decline, but to do so as part of a wider narrative indictment of

social conditions that constrain persons to behave in less than ideal ways. In other words,

what is structurally most interesting about the restoration of subjectivity to zombies in

fictions like *In the Flesh* is how they bestow fresh form upon a common postapocalyptic

device: namely, the collapse of the distinction between human disaster survivors and the

undead. Whereas many postapocalyptic fictions articulate this through explicit declarations

or through parallel imagery that indicates the inward identity of outwardly differentiated

character types, in this case the survivor/zombie complex is rendered as a single character,

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[186] Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic*, 71.

[187] Bishop, 70.

[188] William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 5.3, in *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Orgel and A.R. Braunmuller (New York: Penguin, 2002), 1572.

[189] Nelson, *Gothicka*, 133.

[190] David Cunningham and Alexandra Warwick, 'The Ambassadors of Nil: Notes on the Zombie Apocalypse', in *Apocalyptic Discourse in Contemporary Culture: Post-Millennial Perspectives on the End of the World*, eds. Monica Germana and Aris Mousoutzanis (New York: Routledge, 2014), 176.

[191] Cunningham and Warwick, 176.

relocating the common postapocalyptic conflict between two parties, as it were, to a struggle inside a single chest.

Taking in the broader picture, the single internally-divided survivor/zombie complex might be seen not merely as an individual with split allegiances, but also as a particular member of a community in conflict—for instance, over what constitutes a genuinely human life. Among the ramifying implications of such a dramatic self-contradiction, through this lens survivors and zombies, even in those fictions where they are physically differentiated, come to represent two sides of every member of a society who wants simultaneously to destroy *and* preserve some aspect of their society, the conflict with zombies coming to serve as '"monstrous placeholders" for an anomic society at odds with itself'.[192]

Additionally, if the postapocalyptic survivor is, indeed, at another level also the zombie, this means he is both victim and perpetrator, oppressor and oppressed, feeling at once or by turns like a person whose well-being is under attack and a dehumanized outcast hungry for a more meaningful life. If, by implication, the struggle between survivors and zombies is therefore also a struggle between humans and humans, then it also suggests a kind of civil war, potentially at several levels simultaneously: the wars within his personal relationships, between groups in his society, and even between the principles of integrity and decay in the physical universe he inhabits replicate and contribute to the conflict within the survivor's own head, heart and soul. His divided allegiances mirror the unresolved disputes tearing apart the postapocalyptic world.

Finally, if traumatized postapocalyptic survivors in many of these fictions really are just alternate images for the zombies and *vice versa*, it is not only the zombie that turns out to be a *kosmos* of the postapocalypse: the survivor is one, too. From one point of view, he represents the microcosmic embodiment of his world's meso- and macro-cosmic conflicts, and from the reverse angle, the warring postapocalyptic world becomes an outward projection of his interior unresolved complexity. The postapocalyptic protagonist thus stands like one particular victim against the background of a universally traumatized world.

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[192] Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro, Introduction to *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human*, Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro, eds. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 3.

To summarize, it has been argued that while often outwardly still distinguishable, the difference in substance between humans and zombies in postapocalyptic fictions is often narrowed to the extent that each comes to serve as a symbol of the other. Amongst other things, the resulting survivor/zombie complex gives personal form to what may be the basic conflict at the center of these stories, a struggle between fundamental forces of integrity and decay which at the social level takes the form of internecine battles between groups of traumatized persons attempting to preserve some vestige of their humanity. By subjectivizing the zombie, a fiction like *In the Flesh* renders this complex unit as a single character, which not only introduces an added layer of ambivalence into postapocalyptic plots by overtly 'humanizing' both sides of the survivor-zombie conflict, but also thereby calls into question the disaster survivors' perhaps unexamined presuppositions about what actually constitutes a distinctly human life and society. Accordingly, at its most suggestive, the basic imperative for disaster survivors in these fictions would seem to be not merely to preserve or restore a vision of the pre-disaster status quo, but to come to some new discovery of the complexity of his humanity across the course of participating in a deeply ambiguous and self-divided battle where he has an interest in both side of a conflict whose parties each seek to defend a vision of the genuinely human world.

Desecration and Revelation

Up to this point this chapter has analyzed the integrated symbolism of decay in postapocalyptic fictions at each of the levels of the physical landscape, interpersonal relational breakdown, and intrapersonal interior conflict; the chapter will now conclude by examining some of the ways in which comparable conditions are also frequently purported to pertain at a fundamental level. In other words, if the typical postapocalypse depicts self-conflicted individuals struggling in crumbling societies against the wider backdrop a decomposing physical universe, such micro-, meso-, and macro-cosmic disintegration often suggests a diagnosis of what might be called the absolute character of the postapocalyptic human predicament. As Joan Resina writes, the 'catastrophe is merely the dramatization of

a condition [... whose] malady was rather metaphysical'.[193] On this view, the disintegration everywhere apparent in the accidents of the postapocalyptic world become the outward perceptible attributes of its unperceivable substance, with the same interior void or breakdown witnessed in the deficient humanity of the zombies understood as the basic fact behind all things. Accordingly, the things that at every level of postapocalyptic fictional worlds are barely holding together come to signal the absence of some elementary principle of integration or coherence in the world as a whole.

The primary way these fictions indicate the metaphysical vacuity of the world is through the use of traditional religious symbols evacuated of their traditional religious significance. Several clear examples of this are described in Chapter One; however, a subtler presentation in a comparable register might be detected in the film *El Desierto* (2013), where oblique religious references combine with and reinforces other motifs that suggest the fundamental emptiness of things. Set in a sweltering postapocalyptic world whose decay is signaled from the first moments by the synecdochic buzz of flies, this Argentine chamber piece focuses on the claustrophobic and erotically charged close-quarter interactions in the apartment of a trio of survivors, Jonathan, Ana and Axel. The interrelated themes of a destructively objectifying gaze and a reciprocal interior dehumanizing desire are established early on when Jonathan deliberately exposes his sleeping lover Ana's naked body to Axel. Fascinated by a kind of impersonal observation of others, Jonathan also tries to persuade Ana and Axel to stare at one another on multiple occasions, challenges Axel to a staring contest, and once during a game of truth or dare obliges Axel to stare into the vacant eyes of a zombie. Jonathan is also driven by what would seem to be the desire to provoke and disclose whatever is monstrous in the world, prodding the potential jealous violence in his flatmates like he offers his arm to the zombie he and Axel drag in off the street, repeatedly pulling it away just before getting bitten.

The motif of interior vacuity is lent a religious resonance by the intimate video recordings each character makes in private and then locks in a crate as with the seal of a confessional. Jonathan, significantly, almost never confesses, claiming to have nothing to say. Axel secretly pries into the locked box and watches Ana's videos, and when she

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[193] Joan Roman Resina, 'Tragedy, the Neglected Origin of Catastrophe Theory', in *Hazardous Future: Disaster, Representation and the Assessment of Risk*, ed. Isabel Capeloa Gil and Christoph Wulf (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 38.

discovers this she retaliates by invading his physical privacy as he has psychologically invaded hers. These two subsequently use the recordings to communicate self-disclosures too vulnerable to speak in person, building a kind of mediated intimacy which Ana attempts, at Jonathan's encouragement, to consummate in the flesh. Axel stops her, and she reacts by destroying the tapes and allowing the captured zombie bite her. The audience watches as she turns into one of the undead, a literal version of the flattened and hollowed out kind of humanity Axel has arguably already rendered her through the pornographic observation of the screen.

Such interior emptiness both presupposed and inflicted finds parallel expression in one of the film's most starkly symbolic motifs: as the plot progresses, Axel tattoos insects all over his body and declares that when he runs out of skin he will leave the flat for the outer world where survivors and zombies are treated indiscriminately. There is a subtle change of register when he starts to tattoo his face—an act of literal defacement that, significantly, he cannot perform himself but asks Ana to do—and shortly thereafter he undertakes the long-anticipated staring contest with the zombie. Previously stablished as never looking directly at anyone, the zombie shocks Axel by appearing first to look straight at him and then, to his astonishment, to look away, effectively losing the contest, perhaps because Axel's humanity-evacuating gaze has become too much for even it. The final image of the film is a close up of Axel staring desolately into the camera, whether as into a mirror or out at us, examining, it would seem, whether there is room for any more flies (*figure 17*).

The film suggests that a deep emptiness inside human beings ultimately renders the distinction between the living and the undead superficial. Human interactions here inevitably involve a 'Medusa observer's gorgonic gaze'[194] that 'reveals' the inner nothingness of both the beholder and the beheld, an objectifying stare both proceeds from and rediscovers in its object this ultimate lack of substance. For this reason, the desire to enter another's inner sanctum is always in this film either impersonal or dehumanizing: the only physical intimacy occurs between Ana and Jonathan, whom she insists has never been passionate and 'fucks like an engineer'.[195] Whereas Ana and Axel's unsuccessful attempts at

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[194] Isabel Capeloa Gil, '(E)Spectating Disaster: A Cultural Condition', in *Hazardous Future: Disaster, Representation and the Assessment of Risk*, eds. by Isabel Capeloa Gil and Christoph Wulf (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 47.

[195] 'Scene Two', *El Desierto*, directed by Christoph Behl (2013; Sherman Oaks, CA: Cinedigm Home Entertainment, 2014), DVD.

emotional intimacy eventually turn each character into a monster: Ana, a literal zombie; Axel, covered with symbolic flies; and Jonathan, most subtly of all, an interiorly bankrupt voyeur. *El Desierto* therefore presents a stark articulation of the postapocalyptic text's penchant for exposing the underlying ugliness or emptiness of human experience, in this case integrated into a kind of total philosophy of a basic absence or disintegration underlying every apparently solid and substantial thing.[196] Consonantly, the argument might be made, however oxymoronically, that the conspicuous breakdown in these stories often tends toward the positive revelation of an ultimate negative, that is, the view that behind and beneath every *something* is a vast, limitless, all-encompassing Nothing.

At a narrative level, therefore, these texts frequently evince what might be described as a drive towards what Susan Sontag calls a *negative epiphany*,[197] a kind of 'masochistic enlightenment'[198] whereby 'near-death experience becomes a postapocalyptic appeal to the numinous'.[199] That is, not only does disaster come to diagnose and depict the basic condition of postapocalyptic worlds, but the narratives that take place within them frequently take on the countours of quests in search of some definitive, climactic encounter with it. This negative epiphany often finds visual expression as graphic violence, for instance, in the infamous scene from *Zombie 2* (1979) in which a splintered piece of wood slowly penetrates the eyeball of someone helpless to stop it.[200] This scene might function as a type for many instances of such horror, wherein the impending approach of a spectacle whose content approximates the worst thing one can imagine and is for the victim as-good-

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[196] Also, despite what may seem at times like creeping pacing, the film is in fact leanly and astutely put together: the tarrying camerawork and editing stays the viewer's gaze, requiring us to linger, for instance, over the half-clothed body of Ana and thereby rendering us complicit in the kind of depersonalized and depersonalizing stare which the film critiques.

[197] Reflecting upon her experience of seeing images of Europe's liberated Nazi concentration camps for the first time, Sontag writes 'one's first encounter with the photographic inventory of ultimate horror is a kind of revelation, the prototypically modern revelation: a negative epiphany'. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Harmondsworth, 1977), 19-20.

[198] Emily Horton, 'The Postapocalyptic Sublime: A Gothic Response to Contemporary Environmental Crisis in John Burnside's *Glister* (2008)', in *Apocalyptic Discourse in Contemporary Culture: Post-Millennial Perspectives on the End of the World*, ed. by Monica Germana and Aris Mousoutzanis (New York: Routledge, 2014), 80.

[199] Horton, 81.

[200] While not all contemporary postapocalyptic zombie fictions are schlock horror films or 'video nasties', these nevertheless continue provide the genre with an important background and subtext. Even a contemporary, relatively thematically sophisticated development of the genre like *The Walking Dead* relies steadily upon the shock value of such violations, making it a point in each episode to offer fresh inventive ways of brutally incapacitating the undead.

as-world-ending significantly replicates some aspects of traumatic experience, pushing characters (and viewers with them) towards the realization of a 'radicality of being that could only be tested on the threshold of annihilation'.[201]

At the same time, it could be argued that the violence in these fictions indicates precisely the opposite of anything profound, only offering superficial spectacles that titillate amidst 'feelings of numbness and emotional or cognitive deadness'.[202] It has been commented, for example, that the original 'teenagers who flocked to theaters to see *Night of the Living Dead* were probably more interested in the film's ability to shock, disgust, and push the boundaries of propriety than they were concerned about any social and cultural work the movie was doing'.[203] In a similar register it could be said that these texts' gory spectacles of humanity ripped to pieces do not signify anything about the status of things beyond appearances but deliberately have nothing to say beyond them. However, ignoring a question is its own kind of answer, and even the resolute sensationalism of a given fiction can be interpreted to provide a tacit comment upon the substance of its fictional world. For instance, if at one level the gory violence of many of these texts suggests that beneath the polite appearance of functioning humanity there is ultimately only blood and guts, physical matter, and waste, as an element in these text's integrated symbolism of decay—i.e. gore corresponding at the level of the individual body to the disfiguring isolation experienced by 'cut off' members of the social body and civic ruins at the level of the decaying physical universe—it might be inferred that the breakdown everywhere perceivable in the phenomenal world diagnoses a basic deficit or void as the fact behind all things. It might also be considered relevant that this 'revelation' is also often accompanied not only by revulsion but by outrage, that is, a visceral as well as a higher order response. In this light, whereas the oozing, gushing aesthetic of many zombie films, in which what were once considered human beings degrade into 'the abject matter that comprises waste',[204] might, indeed, be understood to indicate merely 'the nasty return of materiality'[205] in a world where there is nothing else to reveal, at the same time, such spectacles also tend to arouse

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[201] Gil, '(E)Spectating Disaster', 50.

[202] Jones, *Trauma and Grace*, 16.

[203] Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic*, 133.

[204] Sophie Gee, *Making Waste: Leftovers and the Eighteenth-Century Imagination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 7.

[205] Williams, *Combined and Uneven*, 142.

a sense of the stuff of 'life in the wrong place',[206] in which violated humanity degrades not merely into matter but into 'objects of moral disgust'.[207] Even in those texts where violence would seem to be presented merely at the level of sensation without any sustained reference to its ethical or metaphysical intelligibility, this sense of rightness and wrongness, perhaps impossible to demonstrate, as a kind of rippling at the surface of things of a negative version of profound experience.

The Biological Gothic

A final treatment of metaphysical matters in these fictions might also be discerned in connection with the peculiar ontological status of the zombie. Often occurring in tandem with the outright discussion of religious questions and negative epiphanies of obscene violence, the fundamental oddity of the zombie does not so directly declare the ultimate emptiness or traumatic incoherence of reality but raises these possibilities like questions, frequently left lingering and unresolved. If as described above, phenomenologically-speaking the zombie appears to be a conjunction of decaying materiality and an inexplicably persistent kind of physical integrity, the overt discourse of these fictions often describe it in more ontological terms, that is, as a *kind of thing* that is simultaneously, impossibly, both living and dead. However this is conceived—i.e. as a blurring of the lines between life and death, introducing the possibility of a gradience between ordinarily antithetical conditions, or as stipulating the possibility of concurrent qualities of life and death at different levels or according to different categories of being—the zombie consistently resists the customary binary of whereby a thing is either alive or dead, and as such, might be said to embody a physical contradiction. By introducing an oxymoronic or surd element into the postapocalyptic fictions in which it appears, the zombie suggests the reality of something, if not positively supernatural at least negatively resistant to an exhaustive reckoning in naturalistic, perhaps even intelligible, terms.

In this, the zombie can be related to the wider function of the monstrous in fiction. Often described as ontological fusions, mergers or 'thirds' between previously distinct

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[206] Aurel Kolnai, *On Disgust*, eds. Barry Smith and Carolyn Korsmeyer (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), 62.
[207] Gee, *Making Waste*, 8.

ontological categories, monsters challenge or flout culturally received understandings of the world and organizations of common experience,[208] demonstrating 'where the true contours of that system may lie'.[209] The specific way in which the zombie's indeterminate physical status challenges assumptions about the scientifically understood universe and implicitly invokes considerations of the possibility and structure of a spiritual realm can be traced to the way it has developed as a popular cultural symbol, from religious origins to the highly secularized monster generally recognized today.

The development of the pop zombie might be divided into three major phases.[210] In the first, as seen in the zombie's cinematic debut in American horror films of the 1930's (*figure 18*), significant aspects of its origins in Haitian Vodou folk belief are still evident.[211] In this this religious context, persons' souls are conceived of as two-part entities: when a person dies the *gro bonanj*, 'which represents the individual's conscious being', departs and joins the world of ancestral spirits (called the Iwa), while the *ti bonanj*, 'which represents the individuality or will of that particular being, remains'.[212] The latter is susceptible to capture by a practitioner of the black arts called a *bokor*, who, administering a poison that makes his victim appear to have died, later exhumes the buried body and performs Vodou rites to take possession of his or her *ti bonanj*. The *bokor* might trap this part of the soul in a small clay jar and hide it away in a secret place wrapped in one of the victim's possessions, a process in which the 'soul is replaced by a Iwa controlled by the bokor', 'the victim becomes a slave of the bokor, unable to think or feel',[213] and is subsequently left with 'no personality

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[208] Cf. Foucault's *Order of Things* which challenges the presupposition that there are any 'permanent ahistorical standards of evaluation', and Elaine Graham's deduction that 'The frontier between humanity and divinity is arguably as much a product of modernity as the problematic objectification of nature', Elaine L. Graham, *Representations of the Post/human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 217.

[209] Graham, 62.

[210] 'Pop zombie' here designates a distinction from the 'folk zombi' of Haitian folk belief, and is the primary sense in which 'zombie' used in what follows, unless otherwise indicated. N.B. 'From the 1960s, however, in its cinematic form this figure has largely lost its link with Haitian folklore and assumed radically different character [...] we are really speaking of two different creatures, to the extent that a distinction should be made between the Haitian "zombi" and the American "zombie"'. Michael Richardson, *Otherness in Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 121.

[211] N.B. a distinction might be maintained between the Vodun of West and Central Africa, Vodou of the Caribbean and New Orleans and voodoo of popular culture.

[212] Zachary Graves, *Zombies: The Complete Guide to the World of the Living Dead* (London: Sphere, 2010), 37.

[213] Graves, *Zombies*, 38.

or will, and lives a deadened life'.[214] Notably, this kind of zombie, tantamount to an automaton controlled by a magician, is not horrible in the same way as the zombies commonly known today; rather, in its depressed state of helplessness, this first phase of the zombie represents a 'sort of a slave's nightmare'[215] of eternal labor in the Caribbean sugar cane fields.[216]

Radically reconfigured in the second phase of its development, the zombie that appears in George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) is the hunger-driven animated corpse probably at the back of most minds today (*figure 19*).[217] Significantly, in this film the rise of zombies is not attributed any magical or supernatural cause but to cosmic radiation from a crashed satellite, marking the start of a trend whereby the earlier religious metaphysical explanation is substituted for pseudoscientific ones. A televised scientist in the film recommends the reductionistic viewpoint that zombies are 'just dead flesh and dangerous',[218] an attitude that Michael Richardson interprets in terms of 'a total loss of any link with the ancestors and implies a world in which there is no possibility of the sacred'.[219] On this reading, the illogic of the zombie would seem to represent within its world both the result of and a kind of revenge against a purely materialistic common sense, arguably a complex embodiment of the decadence of the 'profane society in which we live today, a society which reifies everything, treating all things as devoid of any sacred quality'.[220]

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[214] Graves, 37.

[215] 'For the slave the only hope of release was death and the possible promise of a blissful afterlife. But if a dead slave's body was reanimated for labor as a zombie, then the slave's existence would continue even after death'. David Cohen, *Voodoo, Devils, and the Invisible World* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1972); quoted Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry, 'A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism', *Boundary 2* 35.1 (2008): 97.

[216] Cf. 'the zombie narrative is [...] a story of slave rebellion'. Lauro, 'A Zombie Manifesto', 96.

[217] Interestingly, these seminal 'phase two' zombies are never referred to as such in the film, but only in the context of its journalistic reception.

[218] 'Mass Hysteria', *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), directed by George A. Romero, (1968; Troy, MI: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2002), DVD.

[219] Richardson, *Otherness*, 132. Christopher Moreman argues, similarly, that Romero removes the supernatural elements from zombies which are distinct from vampires, for instance, in that they 'do not respond to any holy symbols'. Christopher M. Moreman, 'Dharma of the Living Dead: A Meditation on the Meaning of the Hollywood Zombie', *Studies in Religion,* 39.2 (2010): 270.

[220] Richardson, *Otherness*, 132. It must also be said that, without qualifying or diminishing the significance of this phase two transition of the zombie as a symbol, as the zombie remained a marginal cultural figure of the cinematic underground in subsequent decades, residual characteristics of the Haitian folk zombie still occasionally surface, as when another of *Dawn*'s characters explains the zombie uprising in words recalled from his Trinidadian grandfather: 'You know Macumba? Voodoo?'. 'No More Room in Hell', *Dawn of the Dead*,

It is not until the zombie's third generation,[221] often associated with the *Resident Evil* video games and Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (*figure 20*), that a new pop variant appears which abandons the previous supernatural or pseudo-scientific explanations of the zombies' peculiar mode of being in favor of an 'entirely medicalized explanation'.[222] In *The Walking Dead*, for example, a scientist in the Center for Disease control diagnoses the zombies' mobility in terms of a virus that kills the victim yet overruns and preserves the basic motor functions area of its brain. *The Girl with All the Gifts* offers a similar if more detailed version of this, identifying 'the hungry pathogen as a mutant *Cordyceps*', a known South American rainforest fungus, the spores of which 'adhere to the underside of [an] ant's thorax […] sprout mycelial threads which penetrate the ant's body' and take over its nervous system 'with expert forgeries of its own neurotransmitters'.[223] While genre purists and internet flame warriors may denounce the zombie's transition from pseudo-resurrected shambolic monster to crazed sprinting outpatient as a change in kind, less partisan observers can note that in this third phase, 'zombie' can designate a range of things across different fictional worlds.[224]

Consequently, insofar as one attempts to speak in the singular of a uniform kind of zombie appearing on screens today, it will almost certainly be an amalgam of the diverging symbolic possibilities introduced during these three historical phases; and as a consequence, arguably, it will also almost certainly be deeply incoherent. Whereas in its original religious context, a two-part soul establishes the possibility of a zombie-like creature that is, however doubtful in practice, is at least internally consist in principle, phase

directed by George A. Romero (1978; Troy, MI: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2002), DVD. Oblique allusion to the Haitian folk tradition might even be detected in a contemporary postapocalyptic fiction as recent and apparently disconnected from zombies as *The Leftovers* (2014-17), in whose second season a Kevin visits someone described as a 'magic black man' on the outskirts of town who issues a poison that apparently kills and then resurrects him.

[221] Tanya Krzywinska, 'Zombies in Gamespace: Form, Content, and Meaning in Zombie-Based Video Games', in McIntosh and Leverette, *Zombie Culture*, 159; quoted in Allan Cameron, 'Zombie Media: Transmission, Reproduction and the Digital Dead' *Cinema Journal* 52.1 (2012), 73.

[222] Luckhurst, *Zombies*, 170. Cf. Nelson's comment that 'a nonsupernatural base narrative [… in which] Armageddon has come and gone, and it was man-made, in the form of nuclear or viral destruction […] did not move into mainstream consciousness until after 2000', Nelson, *Gothicka*, 154.

[223] M.R. Carey, *The Girl with All the Gifts* (Orbit, 2014), 59.

[224] The radical departure of third generation pop zombies from the folk zombie's religious origins is perhaps nowhere more in evidence than in the low-budget Australian film *Wyrmwood* (2014) where zombies emit combustible gas that can be harnessed to power post-petrol era automobiles.

two and three zombies exchange this metaphysical presupposition for a scientific account that harmonizes better with contemporary assumptions at the structure of the universe but does so at the cost of basic intelligibility.

Examples are legion. In *The Walking Dead,* living corpses without legs indefinitely drag themselves along with spilled entrails, and heads no longer attached to bodies can snap their teeth at the living. A zombie under laboratory observation in *Day of the Dead* (1985) does not abate in its efforts to eat despite having its stomach removed. At an absurd extreme, in Peter Jackson's *Braindead* (1992) a clump of merely mashed up teeth and viscera chases after its potential victim, crawling along like a diabolical inchworm. In those cases where the animation of corpses is vocally attributed to a virus, for example, the contagion might be said to operate in the same way as magic, a 'scientific' rationale that 'explains' how zombified bodies behave in ways that defy their anatomical limitations.

The oxymoronic preternaturality of the zombie's peculiar metaphysical status might therefore be compared to the gothic monsters in other fictions whose existence suggests 'a speaking from the "beyond"',[225] specifically, from beyond what is fully explicable in terms of 'the rational, material world'.[226] At the same time, cloaked in the ill-fitting robes of scientific discourse, the zombie operates according to a kind of 'dream logic'[227] typical of what we might call the biological gothic, where physical explanations persist alongside phenomena that defy them. If, then, in its various later-phase apparitions the zombie becomes less coherent than it had been in its original folk cultural context, arguably this might be understood in the light of a secularizing trajectory that retains, even beneath the veneer of science-like explanations, the basic substance of a creature that is genetically, if now only vestigially, religious.[228]

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[225] Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960), 226.

[226] Fiedler, 226. In this respect zombies are similar in some respects to what Berger describes as the 'corporeal ghosts' appearing elsewhere in recent literary fiction, such as in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: 'Being somatic, these ghosts are, properly, symptoms; wounded, they wound in turn. They haunt the present because they live in it, and through them the past lives too'. Berger continues, 'And to exorcise them would be another act of murder. It is, rather, the present that must change in order for the past to heal'. Berger, *After the End*, 52.

[227] Richardson, *Otherness*, 131.

[228] The zombie might now be said to operate like what Saussure and Lacan call a *floating signifier*, that is, as 'figures uprooted from older schemes of mythology and legend that, because of their uprooting, can come to suggest very current cultural fears and uncertainties'. Jerrold E. Hogle, Foreword to Kyle Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (And Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, 2010), 3.

If on the one hand the zombie might be said to gothicize the postapocalypse, on the other hand as the *kosmos* of its post-disaster universe this 'distinctly modern contribution to the Gothic tradition'[229] also implies a world whose basic metaphysical status is uncertain or indeterminate. Secularized and yet off-scientific,[230] the alternate terrains (or *alterrains*) evoked by many postapocalyptic zombie narratives might thus be constructively compared to what Lubomír Doležel's calls modern myths, hybrid worlds such as those in Kafka's stories, according to whose internally-supplied logic:

> Physically impossible events cannot be interpreted as miraculous interventions from the supernatural domain, since no such domain exists; all phenomena and events of the hybrid world, both those physically possible and those physically impossible, are generated within this world, spontaneously and haphazardly.[231]

Similarly, in the typical third generation zombie postapocalypse, as he continues, 'The alethic conditions in the hybrid world require us to abandon the natural/supernatural opposition',[232] as the neither-living-nor-dead reanimated corpse of the zombie pulls at the seams the purportedly medicalized universe without recourse to a credible metaphysical alternative. The human-shaped instantiation of the kind of inexplicable event Doležel calls *bizarre*, the zombie calls into question the fundamental conditions of its world, the embodiment of a destabilizing illogic that challenges traditional religious *and* secular assumptions. Dwelling 'at the gates of difference'[233] between life and death, the oddity of the zombie at least for the duration of a given story, requires its viewers to suspend judgement about how its existence is even possible and what this entails about the

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[229] Luckhurst, *Zombies*, 10.

[230] 'Off-scientific' is indebted to 'off-modern', Svetlana Boym's term that signifies an attentiveness to 'the side alleys of twentieth-century history, the alternative heterogeneous perspectives, eccentricities, and asperities that survived despite modernism's single-minded progressivist narrative', Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle, 'Introduction' to *Ruins of Modernity,* eds. Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle (Duke University Press, 2010), 9. By derivation, 'off-scientific' here does not refer to the definitively 'non-', 'un-' or 'anti-scientific' but to the 'side alley', eccentric or hard-to-reconcile phenomena which are not completely accounted for by the discourse of modern empirical science.

[231] Lubomír Doležel, *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 188.

[232] Doležel, 188.

[233] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 7.

fundamental nature of reality. The narrative adventure through a zombified postapocalyptic world might thus be said to take on the contours of a quest for negative epiphany, but also of a metaphysical query concerning the basic structure of the universe and, specifically, the limits of the scientifically explicable. In their apparently incoherent conjunction of life and death, the scientific and the gothic, zombies might stand as monstrous placeholders for an anomic society at odds with itself over some of the 'large, general, speculative questions that ordinary fiction so often avoids',[234] specifically, the interrelated questions of what it means to be human, the meaning of 'alive' and 'dead', what happens after death, and the ultimate conditions of reality that bear upon these. The protagonist's encounter with these monsters in a 'fantastic romance in which magic has been replaced by the materialist discourse of science',[235] therefore, not only represents the vicarious encounter with a disjunct that demands a revised interpretation of the real,[236] but does so in such a way that the discrepancy often simply persists without resolving the questions raised by a walking contradiction.

Finally, whereas the spectacles of profaned places of worship and obscene violence might seem to overtly militate against a Christian sensibility, even these are rendered complex in the context of the zombie's symbolic development. In the variety of their current forms, zombies suggest a deeply self-conflicted posture towards their fictional surroundings often internally diagnosed as emptied of the sacred: whereas on the one hand the zombies are often explicitly described in purely material terms as so many post-human assemblages of dead matter, on the other they also represent a breach in the naturally explicable world defiant of any would-be totalizing scientific account. While it might be argued with good reason that 'above all the zombie reflects the loss of a sacred relation to the world within modern consciousness',[237] therefore, even beneath the most brazen repudiations of traditional religion in these fictions there might be discerned a structural ambivalence

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[234] Amis, *New Maps of Hell*, 156.

[235] Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), xi.

[236] Cf. 'The seeming exception is in reality very often the symptom that shows us the insufficiency of our previous schema of order, which helps us to break open this schema and to conquer a new realm of reality'. Ratzinger, Joseph. 'Concerning the Notion of Person', in *Anthropology and Culture*, eds. by David L. Schindler and Nicholas J. Healy (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2013,) 114.

[237] Richardson, *Otherness*, 130. He continues, 'Having reduced existence to the material fact of life, we have placed a burden upon the living which is so great that even when dead they do not feel they have been released from it but must return to continue a meaningless existence'.

regarding the coherence of alternatively supplied metaphysical accounts. In a word, its evocation of an unintelligible phenomenal world raises doubts about the sufficiency of *any* metaphysical rationale; its manner of existence flouting the commonsense expectations of the scientifically understood universe just as much as it does a religiously understood one. The zombie's 'monstrous body is pure paradox, embodying contradictory states of being, or impossibilities of nature',[238] whose boundaries might be said to mark where the daylight logic of consistent reasoning breaks down, and a dream- or nightmare-logic of intuition, myth and imagination begin. At its most unreservedly oxymoronic it might even be described as a *coincidentia oppositorum*, an apparent absurdity in which antitheses cohere unreconciled.[239] Without needing to speak, these creatures say by their very mode of existence that the world deep down may not make sense, that the disastrous disintegration so conspicuous at the surface of things may extend all the way down to the murky depths of a fundamental predicament that indefinitely resists logical capture.

Rather than being limited merely to overt statements of religious doubt or violent evocations of a kind of absolute negativity, postapocalyptic zombie fictions might be understood to suggest a multilayered susceptibility to questions of religious concern—if in an intensely self-divided fashion whereby 'masked by a secular vocabulary and now largely unconscious, the old religious themes nevertheless continued subtly to inform Western projects and perceptions'.[240] Symbolically representing, both-at-once, a desecrated person and a creature whose mysterious off-scientific ontology resists the conclusion of a totally desacralized universe, the inconsistent, interiorly-irresolute zombie might be understood to evoke an interpretation of the human predicament where not only unstable psychic and social conditions and the decay of the physical universe, but even the basic conditions of reality militate against the retention of personal, social and material integrity. In other words, trauma disintegrates the perceivable world, and as a consequence, reality defies reason.

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[238] Graham, *Representations of the Post/human*, 53.

[239] This might be instructively compared to what in technical theological parlance is called a *mystery*: 'Gothic fiction […] is about nothing if not mystery', Alison Milbank, 'Gothic Theology', in Angela Wright and Dale Townshend, *Romantic Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 362.

[240] David F. Noble, *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 104.

Perhaps this is all there is to say. If so, it is here that the zombie postapocalypse is arguably at its farthest from an understanding of the universe as configured in the light of the Christian good news. And yet, this is not all that these stories have to say. Rather, there is another, subtler side to these texts in which even if images and motifs of disintegration remain what are most conspicuous, yet at the same time their worlds retain at every level a mysterious integrity, held together by something, even when whatever it is might remain unknown, unnamed, ignored, or at least not uncontested. Things may be manifestly falling apart yet they are also persistently holding together, and it is this other side of the apparent absurdity of the postapocalyptic world that is examined in Chapter Three.

Conclusion

To summarize, 'the end of the world as we know it', as depicted in postapocalyptic zombie fictions might be understood to signify the full appearance of the destructiveness and unmitigated horror of what might be called its world's repressed aboriginal trauma. Depicting a universe in conspicuous decline through an integrated symbolism of individual, social, environmental, and perhaps even spiritual decay, the stories depict the human predicament at every level as deeply damaged, scarcely holding together in what may be the fundamental absence of a coherent and well-functioning whole. Apparent on a grand scale in the landscapes of these fictions, the disintegration of the non-human natural world finds parallels in the breakdown of the characters' social relations as well as their interior selves. The breakdown of in-fighting and monstrously behaving humanity is also paralleled by the nightmare image of subhumanity, the zombie, to the extent that survivors and zombies are often represented as two sides of the same coin. The survivor/zombie complex in these stories thus comes to serve not only as the outward projection of individual interior conflict, but as a visible sign of an unseen struggle that might extend all the way to the level of metaphysical principle. Side by side, therefore, the postapocalyptic survivor and zombie arguably represent dual images of the trauma victim against the background of a thoroughly traumatized world, the anthroform manifestation of its basic underlying condition. This is consistent with the analysis of these texts in Chapter One on two counts: first, in the two-tiered, potentially self-contradictory vision of human predicament, and second, in its reinforcement of an overt preoccupation in many of these texts, that the underlying

condition of reality is a principle of universal decomposition, fundamental void, or absolute negativity. If considered only on the basis of what is most conspicuous in these texts, therefore, they would seem to present a view of the human predicament that is in fundamental respects antipathetic to the vision of Christian proclamation. However, it has also been suggested that these stories raise additional pertinent considerations, and it is to these that we now turn.

Chapter Three

The attitude toward what remains, in the ruins, is often more complex than it appears. In many science fiction post-apocalypses, what survives is some version of humanity in the midst of the inhuman. Humanity in its essence—such is their claim—is what these apocalypses unveil.[241]

Whereas Chapter Two focuses upon what may be most obvious about postapocalyptic zombie fictions, namely, their representations of worlds that are conspicuously falling apart, this chapter underscores what is arguably just as elemental to these stories if sometimes less emphasized, that is, characters struggling to live distinctively human lives against this background. While in no way diminishing the observations of the previous chapter, it is critical to observe that even if the typical postapocalypse takes place in a thoroughly traumatized world, it nevertheless tends to retain enough residual integrity, forces of regeneration, and grounds for hope that characters can be seen not merely attempting to survive but to cultivate meaningful shared lives. A deep ambiguity runs through most of these stories whereby both disaster and resistance to it remain basic elements of the human predicament, and yet, perhaps surprisingly on the basis of the prospects presented at their beginnings, often move towards narrative conclusions whose visions of personal and social renewal are, relatively speaking, cautiously optimistic. In the attempt to redress a shortcoming in the secondarily literature that emphasizes the nihilistic appearances of these fictions, this chapter stresses the numerous ways in which these stories' structurally-enforced confrontations with decomposition often reinforce the discovery of what remains vital, beautiful, and intact. The chapter concludes by offering what might be called a composite postapocalyptic view of the human predicament that is perceived as thoroughly ambiguous, dramatic, and quite possibility, although not certainly, absurd. These observations will conclude the portion of the thesis dedicated to a purely analytical reading of postapocalyptic zombie texts, before moving on to the specifically theological reflections upon them in Chapters Four and Five.

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[241] James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 10.

Is Disaster Definitive?

Gary Wolfe usefully describes the prototypical postapocalyptic plot as proceeding according to what he calls five 'large stages of action':

> (1) the experience or discovery of the cataclysm; (2) the journey through the wasteland; (3) settlement and establishment of the new community; (4) the re-emergence of the wilderness as antagonist; and (5) a final, decisive battle or struggle to determine which values shall prevail in the new world.[242]

While a summary this general *per force* leaves out much of the variety, complexity, and nuance of particular texts, for present purposes it helpfully delineates not only how the wilderness and new community constitute the equivalent of characters pitched in conflict, but also how the outcome of their struggle discloses the basic values of the fictional world. While additional implications of this will be examined below, here it suggests a simple observation: whereas a postapocalyptic narrative necessarily begins with a disaster, as a story it also necessarily raises the question of whether it must end there.

At the level of individual characters, this question often translates into the struggle between merely attempting to survive versus desiring to live what is variously described as something like a meaningful human life. An example of characters in postapocalyptic texts overtly asking this question can be found at several moments in the novel *Lucifer's Hammer* (1978), whose sweeping narrative stretches from the period immediately preceding a comet strike which wipes out most of the civilized world, through a vivid portrayal of the ensuing mayhem, to the post-disaster foundations of a new civilization. The narrative follows several characters, one of whom, a pragmatic professional named Eileen, takes note of the heavy rain and probability of impending floods in the immediate aftermath of the cataclysm, and as 'some were helping the injured, some were disconsolately staring at the ruins of their

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[242] Gary K. Wolfe, 'The Remaking of Zero: Beginning at the End', *The End of the World*, ed. Eric S. Rabkin et al. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 8. N.B. Whereas Peter Nicholls nominates Richard Jeffries' *After London* (1885) as the first 'proper' postapocalyptic tale (Peter Nicholls, *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1979), 290f), reckoned on Wolfe's model the laurel might rather go to *The Aeneid*.

homes and shops and stores, some were running around aimlessly',[243] resolves, 'If … When. When we've got to high ground, when we know what's happening, we can start thinking civilization again … Until then, we survive'.[244] A similar theme is raised later by a senator's daughter named Maureen who reflects upon the same distinction whilst standing atop a rainy cliffside and wondering, 'What's the difference between meaningless survival in Washington and meaningless survival here?'[245] As frequently in postapocalyptic fiction, a distinctively human way of life is contrasted here to a life of mere survival. For many characters in postapocalyptic fictions, having outlived the apparent end of the world is not enough, and they, like Maureen, come alive to a need for something additional that will make prolonged living worthwhile.[246]

A recurring answer in postapocalyptic fictions to the question implied by this search involves a pedagogy in the importance of prioritizing intimate personal relationships. The Spanish film *Los Ultimos Dias* (2013) offers an example of a postapocalyptic text where this theme features as a prominent subtext. The drama centers upon Marc, a young tech-industry professional who is trapped at work after the residents of Barcelona are stricken by a mysterious and deadly agoraphobia. No one can go outside without succumbing to a fatal sickness, but Marc, after striking a bargain with a co-worker with a GPS, ventures through the city's metro and sewer systems in search of his *novia*, Julia. His express fear of starting a family in the competitive professional world before the apocalypse are obviously exaggerated by the impediments of his post-disaster situation, and yet there are significant parallels. Here, as in *Revolution*,[247] the apocalyptic calamity coincides with a breakdown at the level of the central characters' intimate relationships, in this instance Marc's definitive prioritization of his professional concerns over family life. A flashback reveals that just before Marc went to work on the ominous day Julia had broken off their relationship over his settled resistance to having a child, and, subsequently, after discovering that Julia is pregnant, his progress through the city's decaying interior spaces parallels a figurative

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[243] Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, *Lucifer's Hammer* (London: Futura Publications, 1978), 254.

[244] Niven and Pournelle, 249-250.

[245] Niven and Pournelle, 421. 'Even before', she later acknowledges, 'I was existing'. Niven and Pournelle, 497.

[246] It may also be noted that the events of *Lucifer's Hammer* readily conform to Wolfe's paradigm—shortly after this utterance, for instance, Maureen's mountaintop community fights a momentous battle against an army of religiously fanatical cannibals.

[247] Cf. Chapter Two, 39.

journey through his own conflicted psyche whereby he must come to terms with his fear of becoming a father. Also, like in *Revolution*, the protagonist is socially isolated by the cataclysm; yet whereas Charlie is literally orphaned, Marc is more subtly isolated by impediments that are psychological and perhaps even institutional. On a more than literal level, they are the accoutrements of contemporary urban living—from office conflicts, choked public transportation and materialist competitions played out in shopping centers—which stand between him and getting home.

This struggle is climactically expressed in a symbolically charged trial which requires Marc to cross a street-wide stretch of the outdoors to join Julia who is laboring to deliver their child. Whether the city's anti-domestic atmosphere has become too noxious or Marc's single-minded existence has enfeebled him for life beyond it, attempting to bridge this gap between professional and familial space proves nearly fatal. When Marc does reach her, it is suggested that he and Julia never again leave her gynecologist's office except vicariously through their son, a boy of about ten, whom we see in the film's final sequence venturing out into an urban world overgrown with plant life in the company of other youths armed with spears. While Marc and Julia might be trapped in professional space by mysteriously pathology-inducing civic conditions, in this postapocalyptic fictional world their renewed commitment to family life also establishes the conditions for intergenerational hope.

It is also worth noting how the converging motifs of the film's denouement—childbirth, the resurging natural world, an anticipation of civic or at least social renewal—tie into the wider postapocalyptic tropes of symbolic regeneration. Specifically, the spear-carrying youths evocative of Rousseauian savage innocents and the implied imperative to return to nature operate in *Los Ultimos Dias* as a kind of symbolic counterpoint to the modern city, its culture or even the wider efforts of humanly constructed order.[248] If urban spaces principally signify 'the triumph of the inorganic' and humanity's 'capacity to give shape and order against the decay of all things',[249] those postapocalyptic worlds in which cities have reverted to a state of vegetative reclamation signal the resurgence of nature, the organic, or the pre-, alter- or anti-cultural. Evaluatively, this resurgence might be for good or

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[248] N.B. It has been suggested that the notion of the 'noble savage' is generally wrongly associated, except perhaps to an early, Rousseau. Cf, J. Hall, 'Noble savage', in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Western Philosophy*, by Nicholas Bunnin and Jiyuan Yu (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 473.

[249] Evan Calder Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011), 158-59.

ill. For example, if in general the city serves as an objective correlative to the less tangible reality of a human 'organization of life', then, should this organization be deemed healthy and fruitful, its postapocalyptic ruin will imply the tragic recursion into a less functional mode of human existence with the natural world operating as a force, for instance, of 'decline into barbaric chaos'.[250] Conversely, if the city in question represents an unstable, unduly restrictive or actively harmful human cultural order, its collapse and overtaking by nature might signify a salutary form of advancement that, for instance, undermines the 'enfeebling luxury'[251] of a decadent civilization and situates persons back into more fruitful contact with what is essential to human nature. Williams helpfully lists some of the forms the conflict between nature and culture takes in these fictions:

> 1) gently resilient nature which persists as a melancholic reminder of humanity's (probably self-) destruction;
> 2) teeming nature which ceaselessly resists human attempts to manage it;
> 3) destructive and uncontrollable nature which sooner or later overthrows the fragile veneer of civility;
> 4) immaculate non-human nature which humanity corrupts;
> 5) simply enduring nature as a marker of indifferent otherness.[252]

To this list the example of *Los Ultimos Dias* might be added a sixth possibility, a basically benign nature that cannot be definitively suppressed but demands to be accommodated and harmonized with.[253] It is also worth emphasizing that however conspicuously postapocalyptic landscapes might be marred by signs of cultural decline, across the broad sweep of the genre it is overly simplistic to interpret such decadence as all-encompassing. The description of these fictional worlds as places where there is 'death but there is no birth'[254] does not take into account the current example nor many other instances of

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[250] Williams, 158-59.

[251] Anna Laetitia Barbauld, 'Eighteen Hundred and Eleven, A Poem', *The Poems of Anna Letitia Barbauld*, eds. William McCarthy and Elizabeth Kraft (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1994), 154.

[252] Williams, *Combined and Ueven*, 173-74.

[253] It is worth noting that a seventh conceivable option, that is, nature which has already been integrated harmoniously into human culture, is ruled out by the parameters of cultural decline assumed by postapocalypse.

[254] Teresa Heffernan, *Post-apocalyptic Culture: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Twentieth-century Novel* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 5.

postapocalyptic vegetable, animal and human fecundity. It is also a mistake to speak of the resurgence of non-human nature in these worlds as simply and thoroughly, always and everywhere anti-cultural. While the postapocalyptic collapse of the humanly organized world does imply the failure of a given citizenry to adequately accommodate the forces of nature, this failure is often only partial, as testified to by the remnant of cultural life that persists on the other side of disaster.[255] However chastened and reformed, some residue of human culture continues beyond the collapse. Indeed, 'the very term [postapocalypse] implies that if you can survive whatever tribulations befall mankind, there can be life afterwards and that you can exercise some control over your destiny'.[256] Furthermore, if the resurging nature in these stories includes anything of *human* nature, then the survival of some portion of the preapocalyptic human population would seem to imply both cultural continuity and critique, a tension that will be visited again below. For now, it suffices to observe that while what is usually most conspicuous about the postapocalypse are the images of disaster, disintegration, and death, there is often a countervailing symbolism at work in these fictions of life, growth, and regeneration, if sometimes only subtly, observed, as it were, in the grass between the cracks.

Community and 'Collective PTSD'

The basic theme of renewing familial relationships against the background of a disintegrating world is also seen in *The Leftovers* (2014-17), a television series broadcast by the American cable channel HBO, whose treatment of the motif might serve as a limit case for what might be called an ambiguous postapocalyptic optimism. The series begins with the sudden disappearance of a small percentage of the world's population in some sort of rapture where there is no discernable common denominator among the persons taken, and picks up three years later. The drama follows a handful of the persons who have survived the departure, residents of the small town of Mapleton, New York, as they attempt to resume regular lives and cope with the loss amidst various speculative explanations about

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[255] For an engaging account of the *de facto* inextricability of nature and culture, cf. 'Mapping the Post/human' in Elaine L. Graham, *Representations of the Post/human: Monsters, Aliens and Others in Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 1-19.

[256] K. Scott Bradbury, *The Post-Apocalyptic Primer* (Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2010), 32.

the event of October 14th and no definitive answers. For them, the daily drama of human affairs is complicated and intensified by the ongoing effects of what executive producer Damon Lindelof describes as a kind of 'collective PTSD'.[257]

The impact of 'The Fourteenth' upon Mapleton's chief of police Kevin Garvey and Department of Sudden Departure employee Nora Durst, is not so much the disappearance of individual relationships but of the complete loss of family. For Nora this is true literally, her husband and two children—all of the members of her household—number among 'the departed'. For Kevin the event is comparably cataclysmic, although none of the members of his family disappeared, nonetheless the event triggered the final collapse of their strained familial relations: after the 14th his wife Laurie leaves to join a post-departure cult, The Guilty Remnant ('GRs'); his son Tom drops out of college to follow an itinerant miracle worker, Holy Wayne; and his daughter Jill remains at home but becomes emotionally remote. It is also significant that the postapocalyptic romance between Kevin and Nora begins at City Hall where each has come to file for divorce, and that the motif of feral dogs runs throughout the season, animals whose bonds have broken with their masters: in a fundamental sense, the world-ending disaster that defines the lives of the main characters in *The Leftovers* is the breakdown of the family.

Several elements in the series lend a particular quality to its climactic affirmation of the ongoing importance of family, and it bears stressing, for instance, that the signs of familial decomposition were already a tacit part of the Garveys' world before the departures. An episode late in the first season is structured around an extended flashback to the days immediately before the 14th, where the several members of the Garvey family are depicted as almost unbelievably happy in juxtaposition to Kevin's life of quiet domestic desperation. He sneaks away from his father's birthday party to smoke a symbolically charged cigarette, gets caught by the guest of honor and admits that he thinks something might be wrong with him. He asks why 'it' isn't enough, and his father replies, 'Because every man rebels against the idea that this is fuckin' it. Fights windmills, saves fuckin' damsels, all in search of greater purpose. You have no greater purpose. Because it is

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[257] Damon Lindelof, 'I Remember: A Season One Conversation with Damon Lindelof and Tom Perrotta', *The Leftovers - Season One*, DVD (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2015).

enough. So cut the shit, ok?'[258] But the gruff slap on the back does not solve Kevin's difficulty, and in the season's climactic episode he confesses to the preacher Matt Jamison across the table in a diner that 'Before it happened, the, uh, the Fourteenth? I wanted to leave. I wanted to be free of my family. I slept with another woman. I don't know her name. She, uh, she disappeared'.[259] Immediately after this, he continues, he went looking for his children and when he found them,

> They were scared. I just remember the look on their faces when they saw me. They were so … happy. And we went back to the house, and Laurie had already gone home … and she was different. I mean, I think we all were. But I just wanted to be with them. And I wanted to hold them. And then I started to lose them. One by one.

Kevin sobs as he recollects the series' original trauma, which for him coincidentally involves a fundamental change in his society and the betrayal of his family: it is only with the implosion of his marriage that he realizes its importance to him.

Another relevant dramatic element of the series is the ambiguity involved in several characters' remembrance and mourning of the social trauma. The preacher Matt, for instance, takes it upon himself as a religious duty, however unpopular, to dredge up and publicize the seedy histories of departed persons in order to remind those left behind that the 14th was not the Rapture. The world-altering event is also memorialized by the Guilty Remnant, the cult Kevin's wife Laurie joins, whose members dress in all white, observe a vow of silence, smoke cigarettes with disciplined abandon and persevere with nonviolent public protests against the resumption of 'normal' civil life. Their beliefs are not codified and therefore intriguingly underdetermined; however, inside the GR houses there are signs reading, 'We smoke so they remember', 'We don't smoke for enjoyment, we smoke to proclaim our faith' and 'We are living reminders'. Additionally, in the second season when Laurie is pressed for an explanation of what the GRs believe, she bursts out, 'They believe

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[258] *The Leftovers*, season 1, episode 9, 'The Garveys at Their Best', directed by Daniel Sackheim, written by Kath Lingenfelter and Damon Lindelof, aired 24 August 2014, on HBO, https://www.amazon.com/The-Garveys-at-Their-Best/dp/B017L02E5K/.

[259] *The Leftovers*, season 1, episode 10, 'The Prodigal Son Returns', directed by Mimi Leder, written by Damon Lindelof & Tom Perrotta, aired 7 September 2014, on HBO, https://www.amazon.com/The-Prodigal-Son-Returns/dp/B017L02E5K/.

the world ended'.[260] Their aim, it would seem, is to give themselves over fully to a kind of witness that perpetuates the past disruptive event, preventing society at large from forgetting that they inhabit a perpetual post-traumatic end of the world, a posture that might be compared to Dominick LaCapra's description of the second-hand trauma experienced by many second- and third- generation Shoa survivors,

> If we who have not been severely traumatized by experiences involving massive losses go to the extreme of identifying […] with the victim or survivor, our horizon may unjustifiably become that of the survivor, if not the victim, at least as we imagine him or her to be. In other words we may come to feel that it is enough if we simply survive and, at most, bear witness [… and] our sense of possibility becomes severely constricted, especially in social and political terms.[261]

The GRs compel other people to remember without also aiding them in the integration of this memory into a new narrative of ordinary life, behavior that resembles the repetition compulsions of acting out trauma rather than of working it through. The latter, LaCapra continues, involves efforts to 'counteract or at least mitigate it in order to generate different possibilities […] in thought and life, notably empathic relations or trust not based on quasi-sacrificial processes of victimization and self-victimization'.[262] By testifying without integrating, the GRs are perceived by many of their fellow citizens not merely to memorialize the trauma of the 14th, but to perpetuate it like terrorists.

Accordingly, in the mixed tone broadly characteristic of postapocalyptic visions of social renewal, the climactic sequence of the first season finale dramatizes the townsfolk of Mapleton responding to this unremittingly disruptive witness, while simultaneously suggesting what kind of intimate relationships might be possible in the wake of unforgettable loss. After the GRs plant mannequin replicas of the departed in homes all over town, its citizens react violently, attacking its members and setting fire to the GRs' compound. Nora, traumatized afresh by the seeming reappearance of her husband and children, resolves to break things off with Kevin and permanently leave Mapleton. The letter she writes to say goodbye, which she reads over silent images of Kevin rescuing his daughter

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[260] *The Leftovers*, season 2, episode 3, 'Off Ramp' directed by Carl Franklin, written by Damon Lindelof & Patrick Somerville, aired 18 October 2015, on HBO, https://www.amazon.com/Off-Ramp/dp/B01A9G8RPE/.

[261] Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 211.

[262] LaCapra, 71.

Jill from a burning GR house, is worth quoting at length, as it articulates an unstable intermixture of the post-traumatic search for safety, remembering and mourning along with their associated 'intimately linked but analytically distinguishable processes' of acting out and working through. In this instance these general qualities are inflected by doubt as to whether Nora will be able to heal from the past and remain open to the possibilities of future relationships:

> Dear Kevin, I need to say goodbye to someone I care about, someone who's still here, so I'm saying it to you. You were good to me, Kevin, and sometimes when we were together, I remembered who I used to be before everything changed. But I was pretending, pretending as if I hadn't lost everything. I want to believe it can all go back to the way it was. I want to believe that I'm not surrounded by the abandoned ruin of a dead civilization. I want to believe it's still possible to get close to someone but it's easier not to. It's easier because I'm a coward and I couldn't take the pain, not again. I know that's not fair, Kevin. You've lost so much, too, and you're strong. You're still here. But I can't be, not anymore. […] It took me three years to accept the truth, but now I know there's no going back, no fixing it. I'm beyond repair. Maybe we're all beyond repair. I can't go on the way I'm living but I don't have the power to die. […] I'm not sure where I'm going, just away. Away from all this. I think about a place where nobody will know what happened to me. But then I worry I'll forget them. I don't ever want to forget them. I can't. They were my family. I think I loved you, Kevin. Maybe you loved me, too. I wish I could say this to you instead of writing it. I wish I could see you one last time to thank you and wish you well and tell you how much you mean to me. But I can't.

Nora's voiceover finishes as she reaches Kevin's front porch, and, in the same place she intends to deposit the letter, discovers an abandoned child. The concluding image of the series' first season shows Nora holding the baby and greeting Kevin, who walks up the neighborhood street holding hands with his daughter and the leash of his dog, but what superficially might resemble the ordinary reunion of a suburban household is in reality a much more fragile and subversive arrangement: Kevin and Nora are not married but lovers meeting coincidentally on the brink of separating for good; Kevin and Jill are begrimed by soot from the fire a mob incited against the cult she has just joined; the baby is an interracial foundling, the offspring of a murdered cult leader subsequently abandoned by its mother at a truckstop; the dog's fur is still matted from its days as a feral animal and the leash Kevin holds is actually a thick rope hastily severed by a kitchen knife. In the place of a traditional happy family, this is a tottering simulacrum, held together by fraying threads and

only barely escaped, literally and figuratively, from the wreckage of a smoldering disaster. As writer Tom Perrotta and lead actor Justin Theroux (aka Kevin) observe, 'season one ends with a glimmer of a new family being created literally out of the fire of the finale', but, at the same time, 'It's not a family that has a lot of cohesion in it. […] there are several very broken components, even right down to the dog'.[263] In the vision of the series, it is precisely having gone through calamity and surviving to the other side—with mutual recognition of having done so—that somehow makes plausible the possibility of a new postapocalyptic family. Thus, while postapocalyptic fictions often move from spectacles of decomposition toward renewed, if chastened, visions of human society, in a postapocalyptic world this movement is almost always an ambiguous and complex affair.

For a similar postapocalyptic pedagogy in the human importance of intimate relationships even amidst the ongoing repercussions of calamity, an understated film *The Rover* (2014) offers a comparable perspective albeit in a tragic rather than comic mode. Taking place in a rural Australian landscape ten years after an unspecified near-future 'collapse', the action begins with the ferocious car crash of criminals in flight from the scene of a bungled heist, the survivors of which steal protagonist Eric's car. He subsequently sets off after them across an arid terrain the film's production notes describe as populated by 'refuse and survivors', circus performers, refugees, 'traumatized shopkeepers and the remaining fragments of a besieged and disillusioned military trying to hold the world together'.[264] The tone is brutal—for example, when Eric cannot pay the asking price for a gun, he simply loads it and kills the vendor in cold blood—and the drama begins when Eric chances upon the brother of one of car thieves, the needy and stuttering Reynolds ('Rey'), who was shot during the heist and left for dead. The two team up pursue the hijackers together.

When the pair stop at a ramshackle hotel, Rey mistakes a little girl for a policeman and shoots her through the door, and in doing so also sets up one of the film's important themes, the apparent unintelligibility of human existence. They flee the hotel, and later that

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[263] Justin Theroux, 'Beyond the Book: Season Two', *The Leftovers - Season One*, DVD (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2015).

[264] 'Production notes to The Rover', *Theroverfilm* (website), accessed 10 August 2016, http://theroverfilm.com/production-notes/.

night across a campfire Rey relates how he grew up on a farm where the neighbors had eight tractors, none of which worked properly. Every morning, he says, they would roll each one down the hill until they got one of them started, then use that one to tow the others back up. 'They did that every day', he concludes, and when they died their family found all sorts of useless things in their house. Eric asks why he shared this and Rey says, 'It interested me. Not everything has to be about something'.[265]

The next morning policemen apprehend Eric, and the cop processing him boasts that it's all over for Eric. Eric responds, 'Whatever you think is over for me was over a long time ago', and then asks the cop whether he knows it is over for him, too. The cop thinks Eric is threatening him, but Eric clarifies, 'A threat means there's still something left to happen'. He goes on to describe how ten years before, he murdered his wife and her lover caught in the act of adultery, and no one ever came after him. 'I never had to explain myself', he recounts, 'I never had to lie to anyone. I never had to run and hide. I just buried them in a hole and went home'. That hurt him more than getting his heart broken, he says, 'Knowing it didn't matter. Knowing you can do something like that and no one comes after you. You do a thing like I did and that should really mean something. But it just doesn't matter anymore'.[266] Significantly, the time passed since his crime corresponds to the 'ten years after the collapse': at the literal level this probably accounts for why no one came after him, his crime coinciding with the moment of infrastructural breakdown,[267] but at a symbolic level the coincidence suggests a micro- and macro-cosmic correlation. The loss of ethical intelligibility in his personal world coincides with the collapse of a coherent social and political order and makes Eric's world doubly postapocalyptic: rent into pieces by social cataclysm yet also without absolute ethical clarity, outwardly disintegrating and inwardly devoid of moral coherence.

This motif is subtly reinforced when Eric proceeds to ask the cop an odd question, about a certain feeling he might have had when lying in bed in the morning before his feet touch the floor. Although toned down in the released version of the film, the script makes it more obvious that this refers to the kind of depression one might feel when thinking ahead

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[265] 'Scene 10', *The Rover*, directed by David Michôd (2014; Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate, 2014), Blu-Ray Disc.
[266] 'Scene 11', *The Rover*.
[267] David Michôd, *The Rover* (film script), 71, Scribd (website), accessed 31 March 2016, https://www.scribd.com/doc/239090060/The-Rover-by-David-Michod.

towards an apparently meaningless day. In the script, Eric follows up this question by asking why the cop does his job, and, getting no response, presses him,

> Do you think when cavemen were rubbing sticks together, or the Romans were building their monuments to themselves, they had a sense that everything was moving forward, everything was improving?…Because I remember having that feeling once. It's just a feeling of possibility, you know what I mean? It's a feeling of something like future…That's a powerful feeling….This now doesn't feel like that. This doesn't feel anything like possibility anymore.[268]

The cop responds that it makes no difference to him, he doesn't care what direction things are moving, 'So long as I've got somewhere to be every day is all I need to think about'. Eric thinks about this for a moment, his eyes 'pinned and desolate on the cop', and responds, 'I tried that'.[269]

Shortly thereafter Rey liberates Eric by killing the policemen, and the two press on toward a raid on the house of Rey's brother and his criminal gang, an event whose significance is anticipated in an earlier conversation. Over the same campfire mentioned above, Eric interrogates Rey about his brother's whereabouts. Rey names a place and Eric asks whether he knows it to be true or if it is something his brother told him. 'Both those things',[270] Rey replies, but Eric insists that his brother cannot be trusted. When the two raid the house, Eric holds the leader at gunpoint while Rey does the same with his brother in a back room. Rey demands an explanation for why his brother abandoned him at the scene of the heist, and at the height of this confrontation Rey's brother shoots him dead. The climactic image of brothers at gunpoint succinctly expresses the film's theme of basic relational breakdown and proves that Rey has learned a lesson from Eric about radical distrust. When Eric enters the bedroom, the remorse-stricken brother asks Eric what he did to Rey. Eric says he didn't do anything, but the brother insists, 'Yes, you did',[271] before Eric shoots him.

Yet Eric also deliberately refrains from shooting an old man who watches silently from the room's other twin bed. In contrast to the world-shattering backstory decision in

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[268] Michôd, 72-73.

[269] Michôd, 73. N.B. A drained investment in everyday affairs and an inability to imagine a future distinct from the present are also among the commonly described symptoms of trauma.

[270] 'Scene 10', *The Rover*, directed by David Michôd (2014; Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate, 2014), Blu-Ray Disc.

[271] 'Scene 15', *The Rover*.

which Eric murdered his adulterous wife and her lover, here his act of restraint suggests that he, too, has learned a lesson from Rey about the possibility of inhabiting a world that is not ultimately coherent, where 'not everything has to be about something'. As Eric burns Rey's body, the tear he sheds might also signify his rediscovery of a residual capacity for human connection. This interpretation is quietly reenforced when Eric retrieves his stolen car, opens its trunk and reveals a dead dog inside, presumably the referent of the film's title. If at the beginning of the film this animal constituted Eric's only emotional tie to life—which would account for the extreme dedication and callousness of his pursuit—at the film's end he has apparently regained some ability, or at least rediscovered the prerogative, to love and with it, a prospect for life beyond mere existence. Yet because everyone he has loved has already died, he is nevertheless left alone in a downbeat ending of jagged loss.

While the ongoing repercussions of disaster, disintegration and death in this fiction prove decisive for the protagonist, the practical benefit of his postapocalyptic education is reserved for the audience. A final version of postapocalyptic cautious optimism regarding the possibilities of post-cataclysmic social renewal can be seen in *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* (1981), the trope-setting postapocalyptic film whose plot, like many of its successors, follows the protagonist's progress from aboriginal solitude towards the possibility of incorporation into a new family or society. The film takes place in the aftermath of society's collapse after the world runs out of fossil fuel,[272] and where, in the ensuing civilizational implosion, looting breaks out, nuclear bombs fall, and 'men began to feed on men'. Highway battles are fought in souped-up cars over tanks of gasoline and 'only those mobile enough to scavenge, brutal enough to pillage would survive'. The opening voiceover introduces the film's protagonist while describing the bleak, savage conditions of the post-nuclear badlands:

> And in this maelstrom of decay ordinary men were battered and smashed. Men like Max, the warrior Max. In the roar of an engine, he lost everything and became a shell of a man. A burnt out, desolate

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[272] As a humorous acknowledgement of this film's establishment of many generic patterns, it has been observed, 'in any post-apocalyptic story created after the release of *Mad Max*, it is almost assured that the obvious and natural way for the world to look after a civilization-destroying cataclysm is 'the Australian Outback'. There is no need to explain this. Global catastrophe turns the world into an anarchist Australia with interwarring gangs. It just follows logically'. 'After the End', Tvtropes (website), accessed 26 April 2016, http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/AfterTheEnd.

man. A man haunted by the demons of his past. A man who wandered out into the wasteland. And it was here in this blighted place that he learned to live again.[273]

Notably, the words 'he lost everything and became a shell of a man' are voiced over images of Max's intimacies with a woman intercut with her carrying a child in her arms and getting run down by motorcyclists. These scenes are also double exposed with images of billowing smoke and flames, whether from an oil fire or a nuclear explosion, effectively fusing all three elements: the loss of his wife and child, the nuclear devastation which ruined the world and the reason he is now a shell of a man. Thus, as with *Revolution*, *Los Ultimos Dias* and *The Rover*, there is a structural correspondence between a global disaster which alters society and the protagonist's personal trauma, and, as shall be seen, the plot which aims at ameliorating the latter also carries implications for the former.

In *Mad Max*, the theme of social wariness as a result of personal trauma develops throughout the film. After getting driven off the road by marauders, the eponymous lone wolf comes across a fortified community of oil refiners under siege by attackers in sadomasochistic dress. Max offers to help the community but only temporarily, and after he fulfills his duty prepares to leave. The leader asks Max to join them permanently and start a new civilization, but Max points to his car topped with petrol, his dog and the wandering solitary lifestyle they represent and claims he has all he needs. 'You don't have a future', the leader insists, 'I could offer you that. Rebuild our lives'. When Max still refuses, the leader presses for a reason: 'Tell me your story, Max. What burned you out, huh? Kill one man too many? See too many people die? Lose some family? Oh, so that's it. You lost some family'. He pushes further, insisting that this kind of loss is customary in a postapocalyptic world and does not require giving up on people:

> That make you something special, does it? Eh? Listen to me. Do you think you're the only one that's suffered? We've all been through it in here, but we haven't given up. We're still human beings with dignity. But you, you're out there with the garbage. You're nothing!

Relevant here may be Judith Herman's description of the three major stages of healing from traumatic violence, which might be correlated to major movements in the plot of *Mad Max*

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[273] *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior*, directed by George Miller (1981), streaming video, accessed 2 September 2018, https://www.amazon.com/Mad-Max-2-Road-Warrior/dp/B000KJZWMW/.

and of other postapocalyptic fictions as well.[274] The first stage she describes, *establishing safety*, correlates directly with the postapocalyptic motif of characters searching out places of refuge or relative stability. Max's entry into the oil refinery represents such a place. The second stage, *remembering and mourning*, connects with a common distinction in the literature on trauma between 'acting out' and 'working through': the former is generally conceived as involving unreflective perpetuation of trauma, i.e. 'repetition compulsions', whereas the latter involves facing the horrible thing that has happened and internalizing the altered conditions of the world.[275] These 'intimately linked but analytically distinguishable processes' correlate with much of the pre-resolution (i.e. Act Two) conflict in postapocalyptic fiction.[276] When Max refuses to confront the memory of the family he has lost and then reactively rejects the welcome into the new 'family' of the oil refiners, he perpetuates his isolated condition, and thereby persists in this second stage of unresolved mourning. The final stage in Herman's description of healing from traumatic violence, *reconnecting with ordinary life*, is typically exemplified in these stories only as a nascent or implicit possibility projected into the future, as characters begin to emerge from postapocalyptic states of emergency and assume new roles in refounded post-calamitous communities. In Max's case, when his car gets destroyed and his dog killed—and with them his petrol-powered, self-sufficient lifestyle—he returns to the compound of oil refiners and throws his lot in with theirs.

However, as it turns out, in this particular case Max's consummate act in solidarity with the community is tonally ambiguous: he acts as a diversion so that the community's members might escape the marauders, yet in so doing gets left behind. While on the one hand this might be interpreted as a voluntary sacrifice for the ongoing life of a civilization, on the other, as the closing shot pulls away from the once-again-solitary road warrior silhouetted against the horizon, there is a sense of rugged glamour that mitigates any sense

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[274] Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 155.

[275] N.B. 'Working through does not mean avoidance, harmonization, simply forgetting the past, or submerging oneself in the present. It means coming to terms with trauma, including its details, and critically engaging the tendency to act out the past and even to recognize why it may be necessary and even in certain respects desirable'. LaCapra, *Writing History*, 144.

[276] LaCapra 71. Also for an account of the second act of the traditional plot involving, e.g. making allies and enemies, cf. Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting* (London: Methuen, 2014).

of loss. In response to the film's explicit question about whether such an isolated, scavenging life is worthy of 'human beings with dignity', this conclusive apparent valorization of anti-sociability persists in tension with the destiny of the next two most important characters, another solitary, the so-called Gyro Captain, who had aided Max's return to the compound, and the half-wild orphan who, although wanting to follow Max into the desert, ends up staying behind with the oil refiners. The final voiceover describes how the Gyro becomes the community's next leader, and the kid—who turns out to *be* the voiceover—grows up to become the 'chief of the great northern tribe'. Both of these characters go on to live a communally-integrated existence contrary to Max's, and it is therefore not clear from the conclusion alone whether Max's sacrifice is meant to indicate his realization of the transcending good of an ongoing civilization or whether, perhaps because of irrecoverable personal loss, he abandons it in despair, leaving that kind of life to others as he escapes back into self-imposed exile. If this is not simply a return to character-development-square-one, but instead signifies the kind of pedagogical progress suggested by the prologue—'in this blighted place […] he learned to live again'—then it follows that Max, while not personally able to enjoy the social end prescribed by his education has at least, like Eric in *The Rove*r, rediscovered it, and perhaps more importantly, demonstrated it to us.

In the climax to this genre-establishing example of postapocalyptic fiction, Max's self-sacrifice on behalf of the community crystallizes not only a theme of persistent disintegration, both personal and civic, but also the opposing movement, an imperative to preserve civilization, yet in such a way as the two are deeply and ambiguously entangled. In terms of recovering from trauma and integrating into a new community, the haunted-yet-redeemed loner Max resists the binary between, on one side, completely resolved traumatic loss by way of integration into a new community, and, on the other, the final triumph of disintegration expressed by the abandonment of this ideal. As such, the film might be said to exemplify a third possibility for postapocalyptic stories in addition to those of 'cosy catastrophes' and 'post-catastrophic dystopian realism',[277] neither dismissing the ideal of recovery nor ignoring the persistence of forces that resist its realization.

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[277] Williams, *Combined and Uneven*, 248n61. Whereas the first type tends to be a story in which a small band of survivors pull together to rebuild and repopulate the world, and the second is one in that Williams describes

In the examples studied so far social breakdown enforces a climactic confrontation with relational decomposition that brings the audience to the border of a balancing recognition. While the most prominent features of these imaginary worlds might remain disaster, disintegration and death, their plots also implicitly emphasize the opposite, what draws and holds people together. As Zhaohui Xiong observes, 'the death images of separation, stasis and disintegration provoke the struggle to affirm the connection, movement, and integrity of life', making it possible to think of the postapocalyptic story 'at every moment as moving between two poles: imagery of total severance (death imagery) and imagery of continuity (symbolic immortality)'.[278] The pedagogy that Eric in the *Rover* undergoes through his interactions with Rey, for example, takes place against the backdrop of a fictional world saturated by violence and ongoing breakdown, which, as a *paysage moralisé*, suggests the prudence of treating all other persons like potential attackers; yet by the film's conclusion, trust and companionship are presented as inseparable from what it means to live for a meaningful human life.[279]

To summarize, although it is accurate to describe many postapocalyptic stories as survival fiction in the sense that they often involve characters scrambling to secure the basic necessities of animal existence, at the same time they are seldom limited to this and represent some kind of human society or civilization, however still compromised by disaster, as a *sine qua non* for recognizably human living. On the one hand, narratives that begin by requiring their audiences to face physical and social breakdown often proceed to underscore the centrality of trust and cooperation not only for a personally satisfying life, but also for healthy social relations and a productive civilization. They present being human as 'about more than basic hungers' but 'individuals organizing to achieve aims'.[280] On the other hand, the process of coming to recognize this also involves an acknowledgement that

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as an abortive attempt at the first, whose 'bleak vision confirms that if there is a likely repopulation or recreation, it will not be human'.

[278] Zhaohui Xiong, 'To Live: The Survival Philosophy of the Traumatized', in *Trauma and Cinema: Cross-Cultural Explorations* eds. E Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 210-11.

[279] By comparison, 'because traumatic violence so decisively violates one's personal-physical-emotional borders, the desire to build emotional protective armor around oneself [can become] all consuming and, sadly, results in a sense of dramatic isolation'. Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 28.

[280] Jen Webb and Sam Byranand, 'Some Kind of Virus: The Zombie as Body and as Trope', *Body & Society* 14.2 (2008), 89.

under the challenging circumstances of these traumatized worlds, 'the very thing that one needs to heal, trusted and close relationships, requires engaging the reality that one fears most, other people'.[281] If according to the vision of each of these examples, a distinctively human life requires relationships and relationships require trust, nevertheless the wary and uncertain tone that characterizes many of the stories' conclusions suggests that it probably overstates the case to maintain that postapocalyptic fictions 'which begin with cataclysm often include some of the most luminous visions of affirmation in the whole of fantastic literature'.[282] What can be more certainly stated, however, is that these dramas that begin with disaster do frequently also proceed to focus upon attempts to rebuild relationships and civilization albeit even if doing so amidst the ongoing effects of disintegration, and that even examples that preliminarily seem to exalt the necessity of self-sufficiency also tend to transition into extended meditations upon the opposite, that is, upon the importance and virtues of community living. In a phrase, the examples studied thus far suggest that the attempts to rebuild or rediscover a city, community or family is frequently just as important to the postapocalypse as the initial demolition of these.

Coexistence and Otherness

In addition to highlighting the importance of intimate relationships, the visions of distinctively human living put forward by postapocalyptic fictions often include a more fundamental pedagogy in the intrinsic value of other persons. Like the way the importance of family is underscored amidst circumstances that put it in serious jeopardy, so too the basic dignity of human persons is often asserted alongside or even, paradoxically, in the midst of flagrant violations of it. Whereas Chapter Two examined some of the forms such violation takes, from displays of broken down and depraved humanity to excesses of explicit gore and violence, these are nevertheless frequently balanced, if sometimes subtly and

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[281] Webb and Byranand 18. Dominick LaCapra also reflects that damage to persons' ability to trust might be linked to a widespread sense of depression, comparable to what Eric describes as the feeling before his feet hit the floor, i.e. of there being nothing left to happen: 'The attitude of trust, which is, I think, common in people and especially evident in children, opens one to manipulation and abuse. […] Indeed, one might suggest that the intensity and prevalence (not the mere existence) of melancholia may be related to the abuse or impairment of trust, and melancholia is often pronounced in those who have experienced some injury to trust'. LaCapra, *Writing History*, 74n43.
[282] Wolfe, 'Remaking of Zero', 19.

indirectly, by the opposite, that is, positive examinations of residual personal integrity and fundamental human good. Ironically, it may be that among postapocalyptic fictions this lesson is put forward most forcefully in the 'person' of a four-foot chimpanzee.

He is called Caesar, leader of the genetically enhanced apes in *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* (2014) who share many basic characteristics with human persons like conscience and elementary speech, and in the ten years since the closing events of *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011) he has overseen the establishment of a veritable simian civilisation. Its monkeys ride horses, organize hunting parties and systematically instruct their young in ethical principles, primary among them, 'Ape not kill ape'.[283] When a human expedition crosses the rusty Golden Gate Bridge and enters ape country, Caesar's son is shot and his 'people' clamour for war. Yet with a glance at his nursing wife and newborn infant, Caesar signs a silent question: 'And how many apes will die?'[284] His concept of justice is not one of destroying problematic enemies, but of doing what is necessary to cultivate lives, and to this end he seeks peace with the neighboring human community.

As compared to many of the other postapocalyptic fictions discussed up to this point, in which a rugged individual must learn the value of relationships against a background of overwhelming societal decline, *Apes* begins where this inquiry leaves off. By contrast with Mad Max, who wanders the postapocalyptic wastes alone, and to *The Last Man on Earth*'s individualized mansions, for instance, in *Apes* the human survivors of a lab-concocted global pandemic cram together in a single building in a vegetatively overgrown San Francisco. Whereas many postapocalyptic stories also start out expressing fantasies about a certain kind of freedom from constraints, the dramatic vision here might be said to start where *Los Ultimos Dias* ends, with characters not trying to shake off the yoke of parenthood but struggling against forces that impede their taking it on. This next-stage focuses not upon the discovery of the necessity of community but upon discernment between its genuine and pathological forms, and in *Apes* the narrative pedagogy moves towards the anticipation of a society in which substantial unity exists amidst differences without recourse to exile, eradication or assimilation into a less complex unity.

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[283] 'Scene 3', *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, directed by Matt Reeves (Century City, CA: 20th Century Fox, 2014), DVD.

[284] 'Scene 12', *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, directed by Matt Reeves (Century City, CA: 20th Century Fox, 2014), DVD.

However, there are also opposing forces at work in this world. A faction of the ape community rallies around Koba, Caesar's second-in-command who is hideously scarred and embittered against humanity from his days as a laboratory test animal, and he leads an assault upon the human compound, brutally murdering and imprisoning all who resist in a fashion worthy of his namesake.[285] On the human side, Koba's genocidal ambitions find a double in the tiny contingent of soldiers who clandestinely take it upon themselves to wipe out all of the apes by laying a series of underground explosives. It is up to Caesar and his symbolic double amongst humankind, Malcolm, to prevent both calculated slaughters, and their success turns upon a mutual discovery of their shared membership in a community of good-willed persons that transcends species demarcations (*figure 21*). The inter-species ceasefire they broker might be said to presuppose a kind of sympathy Kaja Silverman calls *heteropathic identification*,[286] a kind of generosity that discovers sameness and risks solidarity even with a *prima facie* threatening alien other.

Despite the lessons learned by Caesar and Malcolm, however, the film ends on a mixed note. The small-scale triumph between individual members of the human and simian communities is followed almost immediately by resignation to an implacable distrust on the part of persons as a whole: as Caesar laments, 'Apes started war, and humans…humans will not forgive'.[287] That this is true amongst the apes as well is represented by the tormented Koba, who becomes a symbol of traumatized, hate-twisted personality that only seeks to retaliate rather than reconcile, and according to whose philosophy 'the deaths of millions on the slaughter-bench of history are merely the unfortunate but obligatory outlay'[288] to eliminate the problems of society. Caesar's deliberate execution of Koba at the film's climax signals both his rejection of this philosophy and, almost a contradiction, his resignation to the necessity of implementing superficially identical practices in extreme circumstances: specifically, the necessity of eliminating persons who refuse to acknowledge the ineliminable dignity of other persons. This is importantly juxtaposed with Caesar's

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[285] 'Koba' was one of the nicknames of Joseph Stalin; cf. Robert Service, *Stalin: A Biography* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2008), xii.

[286] Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 23.

[287] 'Scene 38', *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, directed by Matt Reeves (Century City, CA: 20th Century Fox, 2014), DVD.

[288] Peter Y. Paik, *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe* (Minneapolis: Minneapolis, 2010), 41.

commitment to forego further conflict with human beings in an at least temporary deferral to the hope that a suspicious and unforgiving human population might still be brought around. He makes this decision despite the narrative's clear suggestion that humans and apes will continue fight and kill one another, the final gesture in the film suggesting that forgiveness, faith in other persons, as well as the discovery and accommodation of an otherness that is not intrinsically hostile to human flourishing are essential to the future of any true community.

It is also a significant structural feature of *Apes* that this philosophy is already implicit in the fact that the narrative focuses upon the perspective of Caesar, whose humanly sympathetic and understandable personality is thereby presupposed. Like the medically stabilized zombies in *In the Flesh*, Caesar therefore not only represents an alternative form of personhood that is contrasted with human personality and must be reconciled with *as other*, but is also shown to be in some ways more virtuous, which is to say more human-like, than many human beings. In other words, otherness in this case also serves the purpose of enforcing a confrontation with a neglected aspect of humanity, and by extension might critique the limited scope and perhaps pernicious implications of a society's prevailing common sense. It has been argued up to this point that surviving the cataclysmic end of civilization in postapocalyptic fiction can function as a mechanism for testing or revealing the residual powers of integrity and reconciliation, and here the human engagement with otherness serves an overlapping function, namely, of instructing by way of a contrast that demands recognition of an underlying, more-encompassing identity between parties that might initially, outwardly appear irreconcilable.

If in each of the examples so far the forces of unity and reconciliation persist amidst antithetical powers of disintegration, suspicion and the ongoing woundedness of humankind, a text that addresses this kind of conflict at its most internalized is *Warm Bodies* (2013), a *Romeo and Juliet*-inspired romantic comedy (or 'zom rom com') whose central relationship occurs between a zombie and a living teenage girl. Here the basic postapocalyptic conflict between repercussive disaster and regenerating integrity plays out in the theatre of the zombie protagonist's divided subjectivity, as he struggles to come to terms with his conflicting desires, romantic and gastronomic, towards the living. As *Warm Bodies* offers one of the rare examples of a postapocalyptic fiction where zombies are able

to recover at least some degree of human being, this interior turmoil is layered in symbolic significance and draws together many of the genre's recurring themes.

Unlike the typical zombie, the protagonist here, known simply as 'R', is wryly aware of his predicament. The audience is privy to his humor-inflected, soul-searching monologues: in the film version, for example, he asks 'What am I doing with my life? I'm so pale. I should get out more. I should eat better. […] What's wrong with me? I just want to connect. Why can't I connect with people? Oh, right. It's because I'm dead'.[289] The gallows humor is also edged with a sense of existential dislocation, as when he describes his typical day:

> I shuffle around, occasionally bumping into people, unable to apologize or say much of anything. […] I don't want to be this way. I'm lonely. I'm lost. […] I wonder if these guys are lost, too. Wandering around, but never getting anywhere. Do they feel trapped? Do they want more than this? Am I the only one?[290]

Appearing in the film with slumped shoulders and a tattered hooded sweatshirt, R's zombified condition typifies at once the slacker, the emotionally inarticulate youth whose primary struggle is to locate some kind of motivation in himself, yet at the same time the more earnest seeker after meaningful engagement with the outside world despite feeling alienated from any sense of meaning or purpose, as related in the novel, 'adrift on a foggy sea of ennui'.[291]

It is a significant innovation of this fiction that in its world there is a second kind of undead, a species called *boneys*, which are zombies that have shed all outward semblance to living humanity and subsist as mere skeletons, 'dead-eyed ID photos, frozen at the precise moment they gave up their humanity […] that hopeless instant when they snipped the last thread and dropped into the abyss'.[292] Having lost all hope and given themselves over definitively to destructive desires, boneys will 'eat anything with a heartbeat', and if R

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[289] 'Scene 1', *Warm Bodies*, directed by Jonathan Levine (Santa Monica, CA: Summit Entertainment, 2013), DVD.

[290] 'Scene 1', *Warm Bodies*.

[291] Isaac Marion, *Warm Bodies* (London: Vintage Books, 2013), 79.

[292] Marion, 168.

bashfully admits that he will, too, he adds, 'at least I'm conflicted about it'.[293] Importantly, this articulation of interior struggle locates the conventional zombies of this fiction on a middle ground between the irrecoverable boney and the still-fighting human survivor. It is another relevant detail of this postapocalyptic world that the zombies' desire for human flesh is not merely a material appetite, but represents what is called the 'new hunger' that 'grudgingly accepts the brown meat and lukewarm blood, but what it craves is closeness'.[294] Also glossed as a 'dark negative of love', this drive is 'the grim sense of connection that courses between their eyes and ours in those final moments',[295] a faux intimacy that 'demands human suffering'[296] as the price of momentarily spanning the 'chasm between me and the world outside of me. A gap so wide my feelings can't cross it. By the time my screams reach the other side, they have dwindled into groans'.[297] The best treatment for this painfully intense desire for 'closeness', and the remedy for what R calls the 'flatline of my existence',[298] is eating the brains of human survivors. This momentarily submerges the zombie into the memories of the deceased, and 'for about thirty seconds, I have memories. Flashes of parades, perfume, music … *life*'.[299] The experience is fully immersive, such that when R kills and takes a bite of the brains of Julie's boyfriend Perry, for example, there is an immediate collapse between the identities of consumer and consumed, signaled in the text by an abrupt shift in the referent of the first person pronouns: 'I am Perry Kelvin, a nine-year-old boy growing up in rural nowhere'.[300] The principal value of the zombie's brain-eating, here, is the emotional or existential sustenance this provides, an experience that is often glossed, interestingly, in spiritual terms—'I recently killed her lover, ate his life and digested his soul'.[301]

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[293] 'Scene 1', *Warm Bodies*, directed by Jonathan Levine (Santa Monica, CA: Summit Entertainment, 2013), DVD. Although the theme is excluded from the film, in the novel the boneys are associated with a kind of negative spirituality of perpetual death described in explicitly religious terms. Julie witnesses a gathering of the boneys, for example, recounted as 'a church service in progress […] the congregation of the Dead, swaying and groaning. The skeletons rattling back and forth, voiceless but somehow charismatic, gnashing their splintered teeth'. Marion*, 37-38.

[294] Marion*, 9.

[295] Marion, 9.

[296] Marion*, 37.

[297] Marion*, 8.

[298] Marion*, 47.

[299] Marion*, 7.

[300] Marion*, 17.

[301] Marion*, 28.

R's zombified state, or what might be called his condition of *zombeing*, is thus depicted as being caught in a habitual loop of desire that alternates between fleeting moments of transcendence and apathetic resignation to a dispiriting and emotionally confusing postapocalyptic ruinscape where 'nothing lasts'[302] and the world is called a liar, 'Its ugliness is overwhelming; the scraps of beauty only make it worse'.[303] The philosophy of such a metaphysically desiccated outer world is echoed amongst the human survivors by the character of General Grigio, Julie's dad and the grimly utilitarian leader who has ordered the survivors holed up in a sports stadium to till up the turf for crops but, significantly, no flowers. Survival is his sole concern, as Julie summarizes, 'Dad's idea of saving humanity is building a really big concrete box, putting everybody in it, and standing at the door with guns until we get old and die'.[304] When later in the novel she presents him with the evidence of R's rejuvenation, Grigio simply disregards it insisting that 'The Dead don't change, Julie! They are not people, they are things! […] We've done tests! The Dead have never shown any signs of self-awareness or emotional response',[305] to which she responds, 'Neither have you, Dad!'[306] Committed to a kind of rigid moralism disconnected from any immaterial values—'When every real thing decays there is nothing left but principle and I will hold to it'[307]—Grigio's philosophy ultimately makes him indistinguishable from the boneys, literal embodiments of existence devoid of flesh and feeling. This parity is dramatically represented when, just after he believes Julie to have become infected and gives the order for her to be executed, he is confronted by a boney that 'takes hold of Grigio's arm gently, tenderly, as if leading him into a dance', and bites into his throat, a moment in which they are described as 'silhouetted against a smouldering sky of pink

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[302] Marion, 113.

[303] Marion, 155. Compare with Kathleen Raine's suggestion that 'Modern secular man finds no burning bush, no Presence which commands "put off thy shoes from thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground". But in losing the capacity for awe, for wonder, for the sense of the numinous, the sacred, what we lose is not the object but that part of ourselves which can find in tree or churinga-stone or the dread cavern of the pythoness the correspondence of an aspect of humanity of which these are the objective correlative, the correspondence, the mirror, the "signature"'. Kathleen Raine, 'Nature and Meaning', in *The Underlying Order and Other Essays* (London: Temenos Academy, 2008), 50.

[304] Marion, 70.

[305] Marion, 198-99.

[306] Marion, 199.

[307] Marion, 219.

clouds and sickly orange haze […] their figures […] indistinguishable'.[308] This recalls Julie's earlier remark, 'Dad's dead, Rosy. He just hasn't started rotting yet',[309] a variation on the recurring postapocalyptic theme whereby human beings become more zombie-like to the extent that they surrender all considerations beyond a total survivalism, 'diminishing ourselves in ways we couldn't even name'.[310]

R makes his character-defining decision in response to precisely such a philosophy, a confrontation cleverly conveyed through a narrative device whereby, in tandem with literally eating Perry's brain and enjoying his memories, R also internalizes fragments of the deceased's nihilistic outlook. 'Do you think it's stupid', Perry asks, 'to fall in love […] to waste time on stuff like that in a world like this',[311] where 'everything dies eventually. […] People, cities, whole civilizations';[312] it seems absurd, he continues, 'to attach an emotion to something so pointless and brief'.[313] In the novel this way of thinking is also linked with a utilitarian ethic, as when Julie describes Perry's emotional disintegration in the wake of the world-altering disaster, when he 'flipped over into a different person':[314]

> Something […] happened to him. A lot of things, actually. I guess there came a point where he just couldn't absorb any more […] He was this brilliant, fiery kid, so weird and funny and full of dreams, and then […] just quit all his plans, joined Security […] it was scary how fast he changed. He said he was doing everything for me, that it was time for him to grow up and face reality, take responsibility and all that. But everything that made him who he was—just started rotting. He gave up, basically. Quit his life. Real death was just the next logical step.[315]

Overloaded by disaster and a sense of futility, Perry's resolution to 'grow up and face reality' corresponds to the resignation represented by General Grigio and the boneys, an outlook

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[308] Marion, 225. Additional parallels include when Grigio, after the fashion previously attributed to the boneys, 'stands there vibrating with rage', and when R describes his howl of anger in the same scene as reminding him 'so much of another sound, a hollow blast from a broken hunting horn', that is, the boneys' characteristic 'reverberating roar, like an eerie, airless horn blast' Marion, 200, 66.

[309] Marion, 202.

[310] Marion, 122.

[311] Marion, 111.

[312] Marion, 113.

[313] Marion, 91. The import of the query clearly extends beyond the immediate zombie crisis, as indicated by his interlocutor's response, 'When I met your mom […] I asked myself that. And all we had going on back then was a few wars and recessions'. Marion, 111.

[314] Marion, 55.

[315] Marion, 55.

where disintegration and despair reign supreme and in the world of the novel represents the final, irreversible condition of living death. As the middleground type of zombie between humanity and boneys, however, R embodies an as-yet-unresolved conflict between this philosophy and the hope symbolized by his budding romance with Julie, and the two are intertwined in his interior to the extent that R is represented as the singular embodiment of two distinct personalities at once. As Perry remarks inside R's head, 'You and I are victims of the same disease. We're fighting the same war, just different battles in different theatres [...] because we're the same damn thing. My soul, your conscience, whatever's left of me woven into whatever's left of you, all tangled up and conjoined'.[316] Both having deeply internalized the pessimistic subjective correlatives to the most conspicuous outward appearances of postapocalyptic decline, the defining difference between R and Perry turns out to be their opposite choices regarding the possibility of something more.

Whereas the film's Hollywood-style dramatic resolution might recommend a rather naive confidence in the ability of teenage romance to overcome the objections of a naysaying parental regime, the conclusion of the novel is subtly yet significantly more complex. Consisting in a final epic battle between the boneys on one side and humanity aided by R and a contingent of recuperating zombies on the other, the battle externalizes the psychomachia between competing philosophies in R's head, and its resolution offers an all-encompassing answer to a series of interlocking questions entertained throughout the novel: for example, whether zombies (and humanity) have souls; whether there is any non-expendable, non-utilitarian dimension to human society; whether the world contains any satisfaction to the new hunger for 'closeness'; whether there is love, life or a principle of integrity that is more powerful than disaster, disintegration and death, et al. In opposition to the boney-tending utilitarian and reductively-materialistic outlook advocated by Perry and General Grigio, that the heart's desires ultimately signify nothing, R chooses instead to 'Peel off these dusty wool blankets of apathy and antipathy and cynical desiccation. I want life', he insists, 'in all its stupid sticky rawness'.[317] This decision, importantly, is not a retreat into self-delusion about the prevailing conditions of the world but is made only after deeply

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[316] Marion, 160.
[317] Marion, 229.

internalizing the pessimism they would seem to recommend—e.g. in the form of Perry's voice—and having withstood the external agents of resignation and decay in the person of General Grigio and an army of boneys. R faces the towering prospect of universal disintegration and chooses to love, to associate with his desire for reconciliation and hope for renewal despite the overwhelming opposite appearances of his world. A choice with implications at the psychological, social and cosmological levels, this character-defining decision is followed by R's renewed contact with a kind of elemental power of in the universe:

> I can feel it. My hot blood is pounding up through my body, flooding capillaries and lighting up cells like Fourth of July firework. I can feel the elation of every atom in my flesh brimming with gratitude for the second chance they never expected to get. The chance to start over, to live right, to love right, to burn up in a fiery cloud and never again be buried in the mud.[318]

This resurging power of life is described in terms of a metaphysical Independence Day, the regenerative antithesis to and deliverance from that 'dark negative of love' which spurts up from below 'the rock bottom of the universe'[319] into 'this dry corpse of a world'.[320] R's redemption consists in his willful prioritizing of the desire for life—'I'm not a general or a colonel or a builder of cities. I'm just a corpse who *wants* not to be'[321]—and the fortuitous discovery that in his postapocalyptic world, there is in fact something even more powerful than the apparently overpowering forces of disaster, disintegration and death.

The film closes a montage of images that suggest constructive survivor-zombie social relations, for example, the demolition of the wall surrounding the survivor's city—i.e. an outward symbol of disarmament, openness to risk, and sociability. Cast in a comic idiom, most humorous among these is probably the zombie who attempts to play catch but is hit in the chest by a baseball without even attempting to raise its glove. More profoundly, these interactions also imply the practical value of several social virtues in a world that still bears the marks of postapocalyptic disaster, perhaps principal among these the negative capability that can countenance irresolution without any irritable reaching after premature

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[318] Marion, 229.
[319] Marion, 229.
[320] Marion, 229.
[321] Marion, 207. Emphases added.

solutions. This implies the positive ability to live in the company of what may be less-than-ideal, or what Silverman calls the 'good enough', a category that dismantles 'the binary opposition of ideality and abjection'[322] and recognizes that when it comes to people, ideals 'are only ever partially fulfillable'.[323] It might even be said that the denouement of *Warm Bodies* implies that finding a way to accommodate its revolutionary elements is paradoxically intrinsic to the hope for a stable society. In this case, this is not least because the middleground zombie does not, or at least does not merely, represent a force of destruction. Inextricably associated with the 'new hunger' that subverts utilitarian social relations, *Warm Bodies'* interiorly-conflicted zombie represents an ambiguous, repressed aspect of humanity whose revolutionary resurgence has the power both to destroy and rejuvenate.

Accordingly, the basic conflict in this postapocalyptic fiction is not between the survivor and zombie *per se*, but between competing philosophies ascribed to by subsets within each group. On the one side, there are those survivors and zombies who acknowledge and attempt to integrate this desire into a working model of common life, and on the other side those who do not. In the vision of the novel, the line that runs down the center of each groups also marks the division between the possibilities for a fully human kind of communal existence and the repressions of a pathological civilization.

From this angle, the subtextual hero in these stories, as suggested by Gary Wolfe's model above, might be identified as civilization itself, whose *agon* tests whether the characters in a given story will prove able overcome its equally intangible antagonist, the principle of universal decomposition. Concretely played out as conflict between their respective *kosmoi*, the prospect of a truly human community struggles against its antithesis in the forms of individual antagonists, groups of them, or an unseen atmosphere of violence, distrust, and despair. Beginning with the apparent breakdown of civilization, these stories implicitly cede the opening advantage to disintegration, and thus, mortally wounded and disfigured, some broken version of human civilization carries on like a trauma survivor or zombie, the nexus of ongoing forces of breakdown as well as organically regenerating life whose narrative trial asks which will prove more powerful.

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[322] Silverman, *Threshold of the Visible*, 4.
[323] Silverman, 4.

As has been observed across many examples, often the protagonist finds him or herself at the epicenter of this conflict, strongly influenced by both of these opposing principles. For instance, the initial disadvantage of civilization is typically paralleled metonymically by the protagonist's expulsion from it, and as in other instances of the allegorical progress tale, 'there is usually a paradoxical suggestion that by leaving home the hero can return to another better 'home'.'[324] The ensuing plots frequently follow a pattern that Fletcher calls the national epic, quests to discover or found a city that in ideal terms also signifies the stable, nurturing community, and concurrently, the ordeals faced by the *kosmic* hero in his 'struggle to identity the true, rather than the false, community'[325] which educate him or her in the virtues necessary to be worthy of membership in it. However circuitous, this progress provides the scope not only for the hero's education, but vicariously also the audience's, and in this light, at its best, such fiction fills a vital gap in the hero's and viewers' capacity to belong to and substantially contribute to a healthy network of relationships, for 'by the end of many films, the community has discovered the importance of the hero, and the hero has simultaneously discovered the importance of community'. [326]

It is also worth emphasizing at this juncture how the interiorly-divided *kosmic* zombie protagonist mirrors the function of the survivor/zombie complex in other postapocalyptic zombie fictions.[327] In a series like *The Walking Dead*, for instance, which entertains myriad reactions to zombies yet (to date) remains thoroughly conventional with regard to the possibilities of transformation between the living and the dead in that the change only ever happens in one direction—i.e. whereas there is plentiful opportunity for human beings to become monsters, there is not a complementary movement of zombies becoming more human—the frequently stipulated identity between survivors and zombies suggests that in a figurative sense, human beings are also always already zombie-like in significant ways. Additionally, the repeated instances of feral, murderous, survival-obsessed human characters who eventually re-socialize and integrate into new, postapocalyptic 'families', suggests that even if literally-speaking there is no turning back once one has

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[324] Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964 [2012]), 152.

[325] Howard Suber, *The Power of Film* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wise Productions, 2006), 86.

[326] Suber, 86.

[327] For this thesis's treatment of it calls the survivor/zombie complex, see Chapter Two, 81ff.

'turned' into a zombie, figuratively-speaking it remains possible for these zombie-like characters to recover their humanity-constituting personal relationships.[328] In those few postapocalyptic zombie fictions that entertain the possibility of the literal re-humanization of the zombies, this might be understood as simply translating this counterpunctual movement of regeneration from the plane of the figural to the literal. Thus, the 'exceptional' zombie protagonist of *Warm Bodies* and *In the Flesh* represents what is arguably one of the most characteristic postapocalyptic narrative motifs given an additional turn of the screw, simply another version of traumatized humanity struggling to recover the conditions of a genuinely human life.

Thus, the joint progress of the disaster-orphaned postapocalyptic protagonist, whether a zombie or survivor/zombie complex, along with the nascent city he or she represents would seem to involve at least two basic uncertainties. First, there is the struggle to discover what aspects of genuine humanity and a humane civilization can be recovered and, second, to prove whether these can withstand the antagonistic representatives of disintegration at the psychological, interpersonal, and cosmic levels. The common question underlying the typical postapocalyptic quest, therefore, is not merely whether forces opposite to disintegration and chaos exist, but, typically finding that they do, whether these will prove strong enough to withstand or even overcome the powers of destruction and death which have held sway since the days before the story began, with failure and success broadly dividing stories in the genre between its tragic and comedic strains.

At the same time, as several of these examples already suggest, even though many postapocalyptic narratives develop towards visions of renewal at many or all levels of human experience, such visions, especially when it comes to social renewal, are seldom simplistic, airbrushed pictures but frequently contain elements that mar the utopian ideal of consummate harmony. In some ways still affected by the story's aboriginal disaster, renewal here does not entail perfection. Indeed, flaws tend to persist even amidst regeneration and suggest that even the individuals of a disaster-chastened society are still susceptible to sickness, and consequently personal and institutional pathology might continue to impede a significant portion of postapocalyptic survivors from living distinctively human lives. Even in

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[328] For this reason, while the consistently downbeat tonality of *The Walking Dead* makes it understandable to describe the series as cordoning off 'a diminishing terrain of being human' (Luckhurst, *Zombies*, 193), as a total account it does not do justice to the series complex treatment of this issue.

the fresh paint of refounded societies, in a phrase, the cracks of the next cataclysm might already be seen to spread. Nevertheless, while this might signal an unending cycle of net neutral civilizational change and a possibly fatalistic outlook this implies, it might also indicate a sophisticated appreciation of how progress and imperfection might continue hand in hand or how the genuine advancements of an era might lay the foundations for their own constructive subversion.

The outward projection of the kind of conflict R experiences as an interior struggle over metaphysical ideals might be witnessed in the *Divergent* series, originally a trilogy of young adult novels (2011-13) subsequently adapted for the big screen (2014-), in which the question of whether a specific set of civic virtues might guarantee the future of humane society and preserve it from the necessity of revolutionary disruptions is asked outright. The stories explicitly consider what dispositions allow people to live together in the face of apparently overwhelming disintegration and decline and are set in a postapocalyptic Chicago whose citizenry has been divided into distinct communities according to personality traits. In what is known as the 'faction system', adolescents are tested and then divided according to five clustered propensities: Erudite, Dauntless, Amity, Candor and Abnegation. Perhaps with a nod to Plato's *Republic*, the guiding principle of this stratification is that each person, in being assigned a role necessary to the maintenance of social order in accordance with a basic drive in his or her personality, will live in peace with the others and help prevent another such disaster as unraveled the preceding civilization.

The authorities governing over the system identify the primary threats to the factions as 'divergents', those who do not exhibit any single predominant personality trait but test as competent in them all. The plots follow teenage divergent Tris in her escalating conflict with Jeanine, the head of Erudite, who has staged a coup deposing Abnegation, the established governing faction. In the opening monologue of the series' second film *Insurgent* (2015), Jeanine telecasts her campaign against the divergents on giant screens throughout the city, insisting that they are 'in essence the worst of what humanity used to be: rebellious, defiant, and uncontrollable' and that they 'despise our system because they are incapable of conforming to it'. She continues:

> I've exercised my right as acting council leader to declare martial law until I'm confident that any
> threat to our security has been eliminated. [...] We are all that's left of humanity. The vast wall that

encloses this city may protect us from our toxic surroundings, but it is up to us to confront any element that can poison us from within. Because when you are civilization's last hope peace is not merely an ideal, it is an obligation. And it is up to all of us to take a stand against its one true enemy.[329]

The expedience of martial law is rationalized through reference to the only named alternatives, anarchy or (the implied equivalent) reverting to the state of postapocalyptic devastation still regnant outside the city's wall. Some personality traits—rebelliousness, defiance, refusal or inability to conform—are deemed threats to the longevity of civilization, whereas others—corresponding to the names of the factions—constitute a tidy list of virtues deemed necessary to it. At this level, *Insurgent* is explicitly preoccupied with the personal qualities necessary to holding society together in a post-disaster world.

Yet the *Divergent* series also provides an interesting variation on this theme. That is, while the stories are presented as taking place in the wake of civilizational meltdown, what we see in fact, at least at the beginning, are images of a stable society, which only later descends into civil war and subsequently moves towards the establishment of a new civic order. Relatedly, we eventually discover that the supposedly toxic region around the city is actually an artificial ruse and the 'postapocalyptic' Chicago a social experiment designed by its founders as a kind of school of virtues whose personality partitions were meant to be one day transcended. Consequently, the disruption of the divergents' war, while ostensibly taking place within the confines of an established state over against a chaotic postapocalyptic landscape, turns out to have acted in accordance with the values of the outer, wider civilized world. The city was set up to be overthrown, it turns out, and revolution becomes an ingredient of ultimate civic order. Chaos and order in *Divergent* nestle inside each other like Russian dolls, and preliminary evaluations of civil vice and virtue bend and reverse in its artificially-imposed postapocalypse. Hence, whereas initially it may have seemed reasonable for Jeanine to justify her emergency state policies as a buffer against a chaotic outer world—and there seems at least some reason to agree with her assessment of the presumed viciousness of rebellion against a functional established order—the divergent-lead overthrow of their tightly schematized penta-partite society

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[329] *Insurgent*, directed by Robert Schwentke (2015), streaming video, accessed 2 September 2018, https://www.amazon.com/Divergent-Insurgent-Shailene-Woodley/dp/B00YI7OR4G/.

transfigures into civic virtue once it is seen to accord with the values of the outermost civilizational frame. The *Divergent* series explicitly considers the content of civic virtues in the context of a viciously 'stable' society, and, intriguingly suggests that the lists of these virtues and vices are not fixed but might switch in the light of circumstance, specifically in this case when established injustice demands correction and therefore some measure of disruption. In the postapocalyptic world of the *Divergent* series, becoming holistically human at the individual and social levels requires a kind of ongoing revolution that persistently reintegrates the undesirable, problematic, and disruptive elements of humanity into fresh, more suitable social arrangements.

The limit case of this process would seem to involve an unceasing, all-but-total overhaul of humanity like what can be witnessed in the novel (2014) and subsequent film adaptation (2016) *The Girl with All the Gifts*. As mentioned in Chapter One, the story follows the attempt by a cohort of medical and military personnel to find a cure for the plague caused by a fungus that first turns its victims into rampaging zombies and then consumes its hosts, as raw material for sprouting city-sized networks of tree-like stalks and spores. Aside from the uninfected human survivors, an exception to this two-stage transformation is the handful of school children, who, although infected and driven by hunger for human flesh, still retain normal human abilities like learning, talking, listening to stories, forming emotional attachments, etc. As the fungal forest spreads, fills the air with its contagions, and makes postapocalyptic Britain uninhabitable for anything but the infected, this hybrid species of human-zombie emerges as the sole intelligent species evolutionarily adapted to the new era. In the closing image of the film, the children continue their school lessons seated outside the air-locked trailer that houses their teacher, presumably the last remaining uninfected human being in the newly post-human world. Like in *Divergent*, unassimilated elements of humanity here require an ongoing evolution of social structures, but in this case the reform of post-disaster society is so extreme that its transformation approximates eradication of what came before. One implication is that this underscores the fundamental ambiguity of the postapocalyptic 'return to nature'. At one level a fairly straightforward example of non-human nature reemerging over against the organizations of human culture, *Girl* adds a deeper layer of ambiguity in that non-human nature also invades human nature as a force of both destruction and renewal. In this instance, whereas, literally, a fungus destroys the bulk of humanity by degrading them first into mindless zombies and

then into vegetation, while in a minority of cases it also incubates the postapocalyptic successor species to humanity; figuratively, it might also be said that a revolutionary element within humanity instigates both the overthrow and renovation of humanity.

This interpretation might be tied into a more general reassessment of the ambiguities represented by the survivor/zombie complex, wherein the identity-in-difference of disintegrating and persistent humanity raises the question of what is really essential to humanity and human society. Whereas zombies clearly disrupt society, what if that society needs disrupting? The cause, result, and diagnosis of civic decadence, in other words, zombies might also represent the remedy. Like a near death experience might prompt a person to reevaluate what is important in life, so might the advent of this destructive, disintegrating image of humanity call for a reevaluation of individual and civic health. The asocial, irrational zombie in a given instance might therefore stand in for socially subversive desire or a radical social critique, the embodied vendetta of some genuine aspect of human beings that has not or cannot be fully integrated into a culture's operative assumptions concerning individual identity, civil society or the non-human world, and in this respect, *Girl's* broken down city overgrown by plant life bears certain broad parallels to cities in other fictions overthrown by zombies. Whereas considered in stasis and isolation, it might be tempting to view zombies as mere privations of humanity, when considered as mirrors of humanity and as part of a narrative progress, they potentially transfigure into harrowing forces of individual and civic reform. As the conjunction of destroyed and preserved humanity, the zombie might even simultaneously represent both a revolutionary disruptor of society and a participant in its radical renewal. In *Girl*, notably, this postapocalyptic imperative to recognize and accommodate an otherness that is not intrinsically hostile to established modes of human flourishing is pushed to the limit of retaining only a minimum of recognizable humanity.

The deep ambivalence of this ending, where renewal approximates eradication, might be interpreted in several ways. Like the multiple types of conflict between nature and culture outlined at the beginning of this Chapter, zombie-propagated anarchy might also signify a just rebellion within human nature against a vicious, oppressive or misguided human cultural order; a perverse refusal to abide by a social order which is good and healthy for humanity; a view of human nature which is simply, and more value-neutrally, asocial and resistant to any cultural attempts at order, et al. Generally speaking, to

whatever extent that the ruin of the pre-apocalyptic order is lamented or cheered, the agents or powers responsible for its destruction will almost certainly be, too. However, because the destruction of an entire civilization in all its complexity is unlikely to be unqualifiedly greeted or grieved, so too, the zombie, as the agent of this breakdown, naturally provokes a more or less complex ambivalence.[330]

A final interpretation of the fundamental ambiguity of the revolutionary element in *Girl* might also discern in it a kind of fusion of pessimism and optimism in what might be called an uncompromising idealism. In this radically revolutionary vision, what it means to be human, paradoxically, requires becoming more, other, or additional to what is typically considered 'normal'. Pushing human improvement to the brink of human extinction, this vision of postapocalyptic renewal might with equal justification be described as misanthropic hatred or extreme humanism. Closing with an image of the last human being at the threshold of the post-human future, *Girl* stops at the last human outpost, as it were, at the frontier of a new, alien territory. The limit of what can be represented in strictly human terms, beyond this point there can only be intimations of what has transcended the recognizably human. In this sense, the radical renewal in *Girl With All the Gifts* can be said to offer a final image of revolutionary humanity at the brink of the unimaginable.

The Revised Sublime

Having examined a variety of the tropes of integrity, residual and regenerative, in postapocalyptic fictions at the individual, social, and natural levels, this chapter will now consider a few examples of what such micro-, meso-, and macro-cosmic renewal might imply about the condition of the absolute in these fictional worlds. Whereas it has been observed that in most postapocalyptic fictions renewal is ambiguous in some way or other, involving some form of constructive dialectic with antagonistic otherness, the same conditions might be supposed to pertain at the level of the basic nature of things. The ontological primacy of the powers of regeneration in a postapocalyptic setting is most

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[330] Notably, the cultural critique implicit in such conflicts might extend beyond the material conditions of a civilization to include the philosophical and ideological sense-making structures upon which they were built.

evident, perhaps, in *Nausicaa: Valley of the Wind* (1984), a Japanese animated feature film and accompanying manga comic series stretching over a thousand pages.

The story is set a millennium after all but a few scattered fragments of human civilization is destroyed in the Seven Days of Fire, and the known world has since been covered by the Sea of Corruption, a toxic forest of fungi and giant insects that steadily encroaches upon the remaining pockets of warring humanity. The heroine, Nausicaa, is the daughter of the chieftain of the Valley of the Wind, a small independent nation whose lands remain habitable due to the steady ocean breezes that keep away the noxious miasma of the Sea, and whereas the majority of the survivors in this fictional world are as deeply embattled against each other as against the poisonous natural world, Nausicaa consistently works towards reconciliation and peace. In one of her first depicted acts she uses nonviolent means to rescue a fleeing survivor from a raging *ohmu*—the gigantic, semi-personal insects that appear to rule over the sea of corruption—and shortly thereafter she pacifies a frightened 'squirrel fox' by permitting it to bite her without retaliating. In a postapocalyptic world poisoned by inhumanity and inveterate, monstrous conflict, Nausicaa's 'intense bond 'with every living thing','[331] as Peter Paik observes, discloses the deep ambiguity involved in human conflicts, and suggests that 'the wellsprings of political conflict generally lie in the tragic struggle between two irreconcilable forms of the good'[332] and that 'violence and strife arise not through evil as such but from the fact that evil is inescapably entangled with the good'.[333] Tying in Weil's essay 'The *Iliad*, Poem of Might', Paik also insightfully describes how Nausicaa, who is endowed with a sense of extraordinary equity and free from the intoxication of might,

> is able to look upon the perpetrators of war and oppression with the readiness to oppose them but also without hatred, regarding them not as inexplicable monsters maliciously carving their own bloody, self-glorifying temples out of the flesh of human realities, but rather as slaves weighed down by the burden of some implacable and inexorable compulsion.[334]

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[331] Paik, *From Utopia to Apocalypse*, 121.

[332] Paik, 19.

[333] Paik, 104.

[334] Paik, 104-105. As relevant here as for those postapocalyptic texts with zombies, Simone Weil comments upon de-personalizing effect of the exercise of force, which 'unavoidably blinds those who wield it, deluding them into the belief that those persons they reduce to the condition of 'inert matter', whether in the form of the slave or the corpse, belong to a wholly 'different species' for which 'degradation' constitutes an 'innate

As in other films directed by director Hayao Miyazaki, in *Nausicaa* 'the heroics of peacemaking'[335] is a prominent theme, a subtle example of which is the heroine's quiet cultivation of flora taken from the Sea of Corruption. She waters these from a well that draws from deep below her people's valley and discovers the plants to be harmless once untouched by the pollution in the soil; indeed, the Sea of Corruption turns out to function as a vast biological mechanism for neutralizing the chemical fallout of human civilization and in the manga, at least, actually produces non-poisonous gases that are only toxic to humanity grown too accustomed to pollutants. This expresses the film's broader ecological theme of the inherent goodness of nature (both non-human and human) at a level more basic than the corrosive influence of human ambition, vengeance or fear.

In the climax of the film, Nausicaa takes a stand on this belief, literally holding her ground between the in-fighting human beings wrestling to marshal a weapon of mass destruction and an overwhelming stampede of *ohmu* whose 'rage is the fury of the earth itself'.[336] In attempting to reconcile these inveterately opposed factions, she manages to prevent another apocalyptic disaster but is killed; then, miraculously, she is restored to life through a supernatural intervention by the *ohmu* (*figure 22*).[337] Here, depictions of the regenerative power and basic goodness of the natural world are reinforced by a more than natural power capable of not only of preventing a repetition of the primordial disaster or of reversing its several species of ongoing disintegration, but also of overturning death itself. At the deepest level, this suggests a reality where the physical forces of life and wholeness are supported by the fundamental nature of things. More generally, the optimistic postapocalyptic vision of *Nausicaa* also shows that the structurally-enforced encounter with decomposition in these fictions does not always and everywhere mean engaging with what is fundamentally and unqualifiedly ugly, nor does it merely underscore the 'sheer contingency of goodness […] in the face of devouring affliction',[338] but can also provide the

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vocation'.' Simone Weil, 'The *Iliad*, Poem of Might', in *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George Panichas (Wakefield, RI: Moyer Bell, 1999), 181.

[335] Paik, *From Utopia*, 96.

[336] *Nausicaa: Valley of the Wind*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki, (1984; New York: GKIDS, 2017), DVD.

[337] Suggestively, while the outraged powers of nature respond to this gift of self, the human-made WMD disintegrates on its own.

[338] Paik, *From Utopia*, 108-109.

occasions for discerning beneath the appearances of overwhelming disaster an even more basic good.

It is fitting at this point also to observe that there is a flipside to the negative epiphanies in many of postapocalyptic texts.[339] Stated simply, to the extent horrific disruption is conceived on a massive scale, e.g. at the level of worldwide catastrophe, it converges with the discourse on the numinous,[340] the experience of which 'at best destabilizes subjective confidence in the self and, at worst, terrifyingly annihilates it'.[341] Of particular relevance to postapocalyptic fictions, Emily Horton speaks of the *revised sublime*, 'an idea of eco-critical enthrallment specific to postindustrial experience',[342] in which an awed fascination with nature is inseparable from evidence of human destructive power. In this aesthetic mode we do not see 'the soldiers bombing the landscape – action pictures – but the landscape shattered by bombs',[343] with 'the more devastating the destruction and the more beautiful a landscape is, the deeper the feeling of the Revised Sublime'.[344] John Burnside's novel *Glister*, for example, describes the water in a polluted world as revealing 'a whole history of piss and sick and insecticide, laid down in a submicroscopic, illegible script that will take centuries to erase',[345] with protagonist Leonard commenting on the post-industrial waste of his native British headland, 'But then, isn't a war zone beautiful too, if

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[339] For the discussion of negative epiphany, see Chapter Two, 68-69.

[340] Burke famously describes the sublime as 'whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror'. Edmund Burke, *On the Sublime and Beautiful*, vol. XXIV, Part 2, *The Harvard Classics* (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14), Bartleby.com, accessed 31 October 2016, www.bartleby.com/24/2/.

[341] Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, 'The Apocalyptic Sublime: Then and Now', in *Apocalyptic Discourse in Contemporary Culture: Post-Millennial Perspectives on the End of the World*, eds. Monica Germana and Aris Mousoutzanis (New York: Routledge, 2014), 58.

[342] Emily Horton, 'The Postapocalyptic Sublime: A Gothic Response to Contemporary Environmental Crisis in John Burnside's *Glister* (2008)', in *Apocalyptic Discourse in Contemporary Culture: Post-Millennial Perspectives on the End of the World*, eds. Monica Germana and Aris Mousoutzanis (New York: Routledge, 2014), 78. Horton seems to have incorrectly attributed the term to Rebecca Solnit, who speaks of the *post-modern sublime* (Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Landscape Wars of the American West*, new ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 47.); the term *revised sublime* appears to have been introduced by Christopher Arigo in 'Notes Toward an Ecopoetics: Revising the Postmodern Sublime and Juliana Spahr's *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*', *How2* 3.2, https://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_2/ecopoetics/essays/arigo.html.

[343] Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Landscape Wars of the American West*, new ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 47.

[344] Arigo, 'Notes Toward an Ecopoetics'.

[345] John Burnside, *Glister* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), 119.

you look at it the right way?'.[346] Horton observes that this outlook 'stands as a foundation for the novel's larger neo-Gothic vision',[347] in which the environment which bears the literal watermarks of terrifying power 'is now a victim'.[348] In such traumatized landscapes, the combined consequences of a native beauty and humanity's capacity for ugliness might serve as the basis for describing postapocalyptic fictional ruins as 'beautiful wreckage',[349] the aesthetics of which stretch between the far poles of the 'barren and the teeming […] loners wandering the evacuated sites of life and abandoned hordes swarming in some reclaimed outpost […] at once the excess of bodies and the apparent desolation of life'.[350]

This 'chain of associations between the apocalypse, trauma, and the sublime'[351] is also particularly evident in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* which draws together several postapocalyptic tropes in its many descriptions of a kind of vast devastated beauty that is always already a relevant aspect of human experience. The novel's several storylines jump back and forth between the periods before and after society's collapse, cleverly comparing the two periods and effectively evoking a sense of a disaster that is impending, pertinent, yet almost always out of view. The first chapter opens hours before the outbreak of a world-altering viral pandemic, the same night that Arthur, an aging Shakespearean actor, has a heart attack and impulsively resolves to pay off the student loans of a mistress barely half his age, jettisoning 'everything that could possibly be thrown overboard, this weight of money and possessions, and in the casting off he would be a lighter man'.[352] Shortly after this scene in discourse-time, the novel leaps forward to the post-disaster future in which a caravan of musicians and actors known as the Travelling Symphony dedicate themselves to performing Shakespeare and propagating the arts, 'because survival is insufficient'.[353] They are described as struggling with the same problems suffered by

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[346] Burnside, 64.

[347] Horton, 'Postapocalyptic Sublime', 80.

[348] Horton, 78; quoting Solnit, *Savage Dreams*, 47.

[349] Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven* (London: Picador, 2015), 88.

[350] Williams, *Combined and Uneven*, 160.

[351] Monica Germana and Aris Mousoutzanis, introduction to *Apocalyptic Discourse in Contemporary Culture: Post-Millennial Perspectives on the End of the World*, eds. Monica Germana and Aris Mousoutzanis, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 4.

[352] Mandel, *Station Eleven*, 323. Another character similarly considers how she might 'throw away almost everything […] and begin all over again' (Mandel, 89) and that 'it is sometimes necessary to break everything'. Mandel, 85.

[353] Mandel, 46-47.

'every group of people everywhere since before the collapse', namely, the 'collection of petty jealousies, neuroses, undiagnosed PTSD cases, and simmering resentments' of those who live together in 'permanent company, permanent tour'.[354] Whereas for Arthur, the allure of a personal fresh start maps onto that of a cultural reset, idealizing a future *tabula rasa* wherein 'time had been reset by catastrophe';[355] in the case of the Travelling Symphony who occupy a world in which this had indeed happened, the social conditions are more or less the same as before the collapse, indeed, as is explicitly mentioned, 'undoubtedly since well before the beginning of recorded history'.[356] Even if the post-disaster conditions of the world might make certain qualities more apparent, this suggests, something like PTSD has been part of the human social experience from time immemorial.

Repeatedly drawing comparisons between life within an apparently stable society and life conceived as 'permanent tour', the similarity between civilization and its breakdown is accentuated in the novel through a recurring metonym of life on the road. Represented as both a consequence of post-traumatic experience and a symbolic representation of it, displacement by disaster affects many of the characters of the novel, who are described, for instance, as 'deadened refugees walking on interstates'[357] and 'travellers walking with shell-shocked expressions'.[358] Additionally, like trauma sufferers, several of these characters 'have some problems with memory [... and] can't remember very much from before the collapse',[359] as one character relates, 'I can't remember the year we spent on the road'.[360]

The differences between the aimless and dangerous existence on the road and settled, civilized life are also recognized, for instance, in a section of the book structured like an interview with a character who was a child at the time of the collapse:

> Diallo: And so when you left, you just kept walking with no destination in mind?
> Raymonde: As far as I know. I actually don't remember that year at all.
> Diallo: None of it?

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[354] Mandel, 46-47.

[355] Mandel, 231.

[356] Mandel, 46-47.

[357] Mandel, 240.

[358] Mandel, 193-94.

[359] Mandel, 195. It is also notable that the chapter by chapter flashing backwards and forwards might echo at the level of narrative sequence the chronologically-fragmented quality of working through post-traumatic memories.

[360] Mandel, 113.

Raymonde: Absolutely nothing.

Diallo: Well, the shock would have been considerable.

Raymonde: Of course, but then we stopped in a town eventually, and I remember everything from that time onward. You can get used to anything. I think it was actually easier for the children.

Diallo: The children seemed awfully traumatized.

Raymonde: At the time, sure. Everyone was.[361]

When a character named Jeevan proposes in the plague's immediate aftermath that he and his wheelchair-bound brother Frank, wounded in an unnamed American armed conflict, should set out on the road, leaving his fortified flat and its dwindling supplies, Frank objects. He refers to the gunshots they have heard outside and Jeevan's lack of basic subsistence skills, and insists, 'After I was shot, when they told me I wouldn't walk again and I was lying in the hospital, I spent a lot of time thinking about civilization. What it means and what I value in it. I remember thinking that I never wanted to see a war zone again, as long as I live. I still don't'.[362] The implication is that life on the road, in Frank's view, is indistinguishable from a war zone, the antithesis of civilization; and yet, because the novel's continuous back and forth juxtapositions of the present and the future, pre-and post-apocalpyse, settled conditions and life on the road play with suggestions of identity and difference in a way that narrows the difference between these to something infinitesimal, civilization is all but identified with its opposite in the postapocalyptic conditions of society. This might be interpreted in a few, non-exclusive ways: civilization is a delicate and often unobserved web of relations that preserves social conditions antithetical that war; the postapocalypse reveals the war that is an perennial aspect of human experience, even if normally concealed by the insulated conditions of civilization; both war and civilization are aspects of the human experience and can subsist together, with the conspicuous exterior conditions of the one often concealing the presence of the other. In minimizing the difference between human life before and after a world-altering cataclysm, *Station Eleven* suggests that something like dislocation, existential if not literal, is also a part of the perennial human experience, and as such approaches if never quite crosses the line where the postapocalyptic near future blurs

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[361] Mandel, 113.
[362] Mandel, 183.

into an immanent or 'rolling apocalypse'[363] that totally collapses the distinction between 'normal' and postapocalyptic life.[364]

This depiction of civilization intertwined with its antithesis brings to the forefront a subtle but important part in the dramatic impact of many postapocalyptic fictions, a device whereby even amidst the apparent triumph of the most egregiously traumatized postapocalyptic ugliness, absence might still take on a kind of beauty by way of inference. In *Station Eleven* this is expressed most concretely through what might be called its several *litanies of disaster*. In one instance of this, Jeevan reflects after the collapse upon the precariousness of civilized existence and the many things he took for granted, surprised by 'how human everything is':[365]

> We bemoaned the impersonality of the modern world, but that was a lie, it seemed to him; it had never been impersonal at all. There had always been a massive delicate infrastructure of people, all of them working unnoticed around us, and when people stop going to work, the entire operation grinds to a halt. No one delivers fuel to the gas stations or the airports. Cars are stranded. Airplanes cannot fly. Trucks remain at their points of origin. Food never reaches the cities; grocery stores close. Businesses are locked and then looted. No one comes to work at the power plants or the substations, no one removes fallen trees from electrical lines.[366]

Counterintuitively, it is the malfunction of civilization that discloses the intricacy of its operations, and for Jeevan, the literal darkness of the post-electric world paradoxically illuminates what had until its disappearance gone unappreciated. Similar themes recur in a list of losses expressed in negative formulations that stretches more than a page:

> No more diving pools of chlorinated water lit green from below. No more ball games played out under floodlights. No more porch lights with moths fluttering on summer nights. No more trains running under the surface of cities on the dazzling power of the electric third rail. No more cities. No more films, except rarely, except with a generator drowning out half the dialogue, and only then for the first little while until the fuel for the generators ran out, because automobile gas goes stale after two or three years. Aviation gas lasts longer, but it was difficult to come by. No more screens shining

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[363] Rosalind Williams, *The Triumph of Human Empire: Verne, Morris and Stevenson at The End of The World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 346.

[364] The presence of zombies may narrow this completely, a possibility discussed in the next chapter.

[365] Mandel, *Station Eleven*, 178.

[366] Mandel, 178.

in the half-light as people raise their phones above the crowd to take photographs of concert stages. No more concert stages lit by candy-coloured halogens, no more electronica, punk, electric guitars. No more pharmaceuticals. No more certainty of surviving a scratch on one's hand, a cut on a finger while chopping vegetables for dinner, a dog bite.[367]

Like the epiphany of Job attuned to the melancholia of Poe, this litany of nevermores carries on to mention among the lost wonders flight, working governments, and space travel, concluding with a reference to the internet and social media: 'No more reading and commenting on the lives of others, and in so doing, feeling slightly less alone in the room. No more avatars'.[368] This final lament of manmade miracles evokes a human predicament stripped down by disaster to the helpless humility of immediate experience, and effectively implements a narrative device that might be called an inferential double negative. Offering in the first place a fresh glimpse of the wonder of familiar things as mediated through the fiction of their imagined loss, at a second level, the novel also implies the loss of even such media technologies as novels that facilitate precisely this kind of epiphany, and through such self-reflexive imagined absence, pushes the reader towards a more radical encounter with unmediated things. As a narrative device, therefore, such two-tiered anticipated ruin involves a mediated departure from immediate sensory experience and then a return to it through representational self-subversion, recommending that the reader look up from the page and gaze upon the present as 'incredible in retrospect, all of it'[369]—all in the service of asking with renewed conviction, like a character named Clark who watches with tears on his face what may be the last runway takeoff in his lifetime, 'Why in his life of frequent travel, had he never recognized the beauty of flight?'[370]

Whereas the mere magnitude of loss in these fictions might suffice to arouse a sense of epic grandeur approximate to traditional articulations of the sublime, the technique of drawing inferences from damaged beauty also hints at the perennial importance of discerning some perfection beyond the confines of the phenomenal world. On the one hand, this device is consistent with the interpretation of these fictions as constructive projects, in this case not (or at least not merely) speculatively exploring what will survive the

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[367] Mandel, 31.
[368] Mandel, 31-32.
[369] Mandel, 232-33.
[370] Mandel, 247.

end of civilization but rather prompting appreciation for what is valuable in it now. On the other hand, if the postapocalypse is also the present, inferring from disaster to 'normality' suggests an analogous movement from 'normal' to something even better. If civilization is always intertwined with its breakdown, not only does the fictional postapocalypse help us to appreciate the residual integrity of things at present, it also implies that the world we witness even in the pre-apocalyptic present is only the relatively broken down version of an empirically unrealized ideal. Disclosing reality in both its beauty and imperfection, *Station Eleven* demonstrates what may be a basic ambivalence in the postapocalyptic genre, whereby even those relatively optimistic texts that emphasize the beauty, residual integrity and potential for renewal in a traumatized world also recognize some lingering, perhaps ineliminable consequences of disaster.

The Paradox of 'Post-'

This flags a final consideration how the endings of postapocalyptic fictions bear upon their total representations of the human predicament. At the beginning of this Chapter it was asked whether the disaster intrinsic to the beginning of a postapocalyptic fiction need also persist through to its end, and in the opening example of *Lucifer's Hammer* it was suggested that the further these stories progress away from the emergency conditions of world-altering disaster, the more the concerns of the characters tend to shift from biological imperatives towards the imperatives for a meaningful human life. Here it might be observed more generally that the more 'post-' the postapocalypse becomes, the more its plot tends to transition into a different kind of story with other sets of challenges and concerns.

Relevant here is Machat's helpful distinction between what she calls the two basic subgroups of postapocalyptic fiction, 'first-generational survival' and 'ages-gone cataclysm'.[371] In the first-generational tale, which takes place in the transition period between the pre- and post-disaster worlds, 'questions of survival and transition from the

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[371] Sibylle Machat, *In the Ruins of Civilizations: Narrative Structures, World Constructions and Physical Realities in the Post-Apocalyptic Novel* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2013), 22. She cites a similar distinction in Paul Brians, *Nuclear Holocausts: Atomic War in Fiction, 1895-1984* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, [1987] 2007), 54; and Gary Westfahl, 'The Decline and Fall of the Human Empire', accessed 6 October 2017, http://www.irosf.com/q/zine/article/10496.

pre-catastrophe reality dominate'.[372] These stories 'frequently deal with the adjustments and economizations characters need to make as they become acquainted with their new reality, as well as fights over diminished food resources or useful material goods',[373] with a significant narrative role played by the memories that the survivors still carry from the time before the catastrophe. Additionally, since 'most first-generation survival stories also include […] an experience of the cataclysm itself',[374] there is often no exact moment when the sense of world-ending disaster rolls over into some different, more stable state. At the same time, as a rule of thumb, the further away from the disaster such the story proceeds, the weaker its survivalist tone, diminishing asymptotically towards a point of disappearance.

Somewhere on the near side of this point, however, 'ages-gone' postapocalyptic narratives are those in which signs of the disaster remain but characters generally do not exude the same awareness of immediate danger. Relatively speaking, it can be said that such fictions are 'absent of the trauma and despair that survivors of a global holocaust inevitably need to deal with', a difference that 'lends itself to the more 'upbeat' incarnation of post-apocalyptic tale'.[375] Rather than principally tales of tense survival, the primary pleasures of this kind of fiction include 'the discovery of the reasons and events that turned one society into the other', 'the differences between the two societies',[376] the unknown meanings of the remaining artifacts and the perhaps unexpected uses to which they have been put. Thus, as against the urgency of the survival tale, the ages-gone cataclysm story turns largely upon rediscovering the old world whose conditions are already known to the reader, as in *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, where selective cultural memory reinterprets the artifacts from the previous civilization, like architectural blueprints treated as sacred texts, and 'the familiar is defamiliarized again'.[377] In these texts, disaster thus operates principally as the prelude to readerly rediscovery, amusement and wonder. It is also critical to note that in those tales where the crisis or interest of the past has faded entirely, the generic boundaries of postapocalyptic fiction have been crossed and a new territory entered of

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[372] Machat, *In the Ruins*, 22-23.

[373] Machat, 23.

[374] Machat, 19.

[375] Machat, 190.

[376] Machat, 23.

[377] Gary K. Wolfe, *The Known and the Unknown: The Iconography of Science Fiction* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1979), 138.

stories simply about the future: postapocalypse, it would seem to follow, necessarily presupposes some relevant residue of disaster.

This brings us to what is probably the fundamental structural tension of the postapocalyptic genre, namely, that no matter how 'post-' it becomes it is also ineliminably apocalyptic, in the popular sense redolent of cataclysm.[378] As Neil Badmington observes, whatever is 'post-' will be 'forever tied up with what it is post-ing',[379] and in this case, 'The climate of the post-apocalypse can never leave behind the apocalyptic tone [...] The post is both after and continuous with the apocalypse'.[380] Whereas in those postapocalyptic narratives whose stories occur nearer the cataclysm the sense of crisis and imperative to survive supersede the more reflective imperative to discern what makes life worth living, and *vice versa* the farther a story occurs from the moment of disaster, every postapocalyptic text at a structural level, it would seem, include some degree of both.

By implication, paradoxically, in the postapocalypse crisis is part of 'normal'. Taking place in the period between the society-disintegrating disaster and its resolution into a new status quo, postapocalyptic society only exists in the midst of ongoing social breakdown, and any social stability only occurs in process alongside the unresolved consequences of the primordial disaster. This dialectic is most evident in those fictions whose postapocalyptic conditions are caused by zombies: the original disrupters of the social order, so long as the zombies persist as threats to humanity they also impede the foundation of a lastingly stable society and the apocalyptic crisis in some sense continues. So long as they exist, in brief, zombies perpetuate the apocalypse and cause society to occur amidst an a state of ongoing emergency.

Yet at the same time, as several examples in the Chapter have shown, the human survivors in these stories can and do typically resume some approximation of regular life even alongside its repeated interruptions by zombies. For postapocalyptic survivors, it would seem, normality and emergency coexist. Accordingly, it might be observed that where there is any kind of order and stability in a zombie-plagued postapocalyptic world, it will always be vulnerable to disruption and the consequent necessities of reassertion and

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[378] For a more detailed examination of the different significances of the term, see Chapter One, 18-25.

[379] Neil Badmington, 'Theorizing Posthumanism', *Cultural Critique* 53 (Winter 2003): 11.

[380] Teresa Heffernan, *Post-apocalyptic Culture: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Twentieth-century Novel* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 26.

(perhaps even radical) revision. Further, once one grants the inherent instability of postapocalyptic social conditions, paradoxically the disruptions to 'regular life' by zombies do not amount to departures from the norm but rather to reminders of one of normality's constitutive conditions. Thus, while it is possible to discern real differences of mood among various postapocalyptic texts—some marked more by an apocalyptic sense of crisis whereas others are more reflectively 'post-'[381]—every postapocalypse might also be classified as a mix of these distinguishable moods, some species of ongoing, immanent or 'rolling'[382] apocalypse.

It is significant, in this light, that *The Walking Dead* creator Robert Kirkman describes the series as 'the zombie movie that never ends'.[383] Stretched across multiple episodes and seasons, the narrative takes the form of 'an endless, ongoing chain of temporary respites […] under conditions of barely tolerable risk and danger',[384] and makes particularly apparent the fundamental structural tension whereby the backstory apocalyptic disaster persists amidst ongoing postapocalypse. Even when the focus shifts from 'the punctual point of the outbreak and catastrophic social collapse to an unfolding condition',[385] so long as the postapocalyptic world retains its zombies—that is, its symbolically human-shaped perpetuators of cataclysmic disruption—the apocalyptic struggle for human survival will continue in what Susan Sontag calls a condition of 'Apocalypse from Now On'.[386]

At the same time, while postapocalyptic fiction to remain what it is would seem to require some relevant residue of the aboriginal disaster, there is nothing to prevent any individual text within the genre from transcending this limitation. Even if disaster is where all such stories must begin, it is not, at least on the basis of purely literary principle, where a given story must end. Returning to the intrinsic instability of all things 'post-'—that is, of defining a thing in relation to something that it is ever more distanced and differentiated from—as the aboriginal cataclysm and its consequences recede into the forgotten or existentially irrelevant past, these stories approach the outer limit of what still qualifies as

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[381] The distinction might also map onto the difference between those stories where forces of disintegration appear to be in the ascendant versus others where the forces of reparation and regeneration prevail.

[382] Williams, *Triumph of Human Empire*, 346.

[383] Robert Kirkman, Preface to *The Walking Dead*, vol. 1: *Days Gone Bye* (Berkeley, 2012).

[384] Luckhurst, *Zombies*, 193.

[385] Luckhurst, 193.

[386] Luckhurst, 193.

the genre, and appoint of transition to what might be called the 'post-postapocalyptic'. If the postapocalyptic is also the post-cataclysmic and the post-traumatic—after it, but not over it, as it were[387]—then the disaster's diminishing impact upon the present also maps onto a given narrative's approach to a different era, a future 'new normal' that is also a rejuvenated present liberated from the traumatic tyranny of the past. Whereas trace elements of trauma may be intrinsic to postapocalypse, in other words, totally working these through brings the narrative not only to its natural end but also to the threshold of something completely new.[388]

The Postapocalyptic Human Predicament

On the basis of the preceding analysis, is there anything that can be consolidated into a single view? With duly acknowledged variations, if postapocalyptic fictions operate as 'zone[s] of possibility'[389] in which initial spectacles of disintegration frequently evolve towards visions of restored or reenvisioned social order, it might also be generalized that in the majority of these stories the ongoing consequences of the backstory disaster render this process fundamentally complex. Despite foregrounding tragedy from the start, these stories involve, 'often, but not always, a return to civilization',[390] and for this reason may be well described as 'metaphorically suited' not only to themes of isolation and survival but also to rebirth.[391] Indeed, as Machat observes, despite initial appearances, it can be said that these 'are not only fictions of doom and disaster—they are also stories of a restart and of redevelopment, of consolation [...] the fact that, even after such a calamity, somehow, life

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[387] Or after it in one sense yet in another sense still traumatically stuck at the earlier time.

[388] The tensions and paradoxes involved in such postapocalyptic working through—e.g. Can the survivors ever really get rid of zombies?—are treated in Chapter Five.

[389] Brooks Landon, *Science Fiction After 1900: From the Steam Man to the Stars* (New York: Routledge, 2002 [1995]), 17.

[390] Florian Mussgnug, 'Naturalizing Apocalypse: Last Men and Other Animals', *Comparative Critical Studies* 9.3 (2012): 334.

[391] Joan Gordon, 'Utopia, Genocide and the Other', in *Edging into the Future: Science Fiction and Contemporary Social Transformation*, eds. Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 208.

goes on'.[392] Yet, the 'not only' in this case is critical. As a genre whose stories are conspicuously marked by tragedy and yet seldom simply tragic in a classical or at least unambiguous sense, the majority of these texts offer a subtle vision of the human predicament marked by both disaster and redevelopment, forefronting tragedy as ineliminable from experience yet also envisioning possibilities of productive human life within these parameters. Coming out the other side of confronting the various *kosmoi* of annihilation, the climactic reappearance of an imperfect civilization still ongoingly upset by zombies, for example, softens the hard edge of tragic horror while also deferring any saccharine wish-fulfillment, offering instead a bittersweet recognition that a truly human life might be lived even while the tragic consequences of disaster remain an ongoing part of human experience. If, as Aristotle suggests, the first question to ask of any society concerns its common good, the next, perhaps, from a postapocalyptic perspective, is what to do about its permanent resident dissenters: if we cannot eliminate the embodiments of tragedy, imperfection, and strife, how do we live with them? Or expressed in more concrete terms, by contrast with the typical protagonist of apocalyptic tales who starts out accustomed to a peaceful society is forced by an impending disaster to learn survival skills or else perish, the *kosmic* postapocalyptic protagonist is already well acquainted with disaster and knows what it takes to survive, but for the sake of living a truly human life must undergo the reverse pedagogy and learn how to live with other people.

Consonant with the necessary tolerance for complexity this implies, the appearances of the postapocalyptic world reinforce an understanding of reality that is, phenomenologically-speaking, thoroughly ambiguous. Conspicuously damaged yet just as extensively, if often more subtly, retentive of some kind of integrity, the world as observed through the lens of the postapocalypse, depending upon how one looks at it, might be said to supply evidence for antithetical ontologies: the conspicuous disintegration of things pointing to an elementary principle of chaos, dissolution, and change—the basic claim that nothing persists—or the opposite, the quieter, residual integrity of the observable universe suggesting the underlying order, cohesion, and durability of something fundamentally consistent. A Maggie might look at a church and see merely four walls and a roof, whereas a

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[392] Machat, *In the Ruins*, 295. David Ketterer puts it more strongly, noting how such stories 'ultimately end in triumph'. David Ketterer, *New Worlds for Old: The Apocalyptic Imagination, Science Fiction, and American Literature* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1974), 7.

Herschel can discern divine providence at work even inside a prison. With regards to judging the underlying status of things by their postapocalyptic appearances, therefore, the coincidental contrarieties of the damaged world would seem to go all the way down.

Additionally, because the human experience as represented from a postapocalyptic perspective takes place in stories, that is, in media that are not static but in motion, the ambiguity they depict might be said to be fundamentally dramatic. Human persons usually struggle from the first moments of these stories against forces of ongoing disaster at every level. They are constrained by circumstances to make hard-pressed, destiny-defining choices on matters like how to survive versus truly live, whether to trust other persons, and what to believe about the basic constitution of the universe, all of which bear upon their ability to preserve and cultivate their humanity. A Shane in *The Walking Dead* sacrifices his humanity to an absolute desire to survive, and occasionally a zombie like R in *Warm Bodies* recovers his humanity by prioritizing less pragmatic desires. Commonly, the literal de- and re-humanization of characters in these stories coincides with an education in civility, and in broader terms, the archetypical dramatic arc from the dissolution of a city to its refounding (however seminal in form), suggests a postapocalyptic view of reality in which genuine humanity is inseparable from community. However, even those texts that venture the most optimistic visions of personal, social, and natural renewal do so against backdrops where opposing tendencies are still in evidence—the bricks they lay upon ruined foundations seldom presuming to found a new paradise but rather a chastened, admittedly imperfect attempt to try again. While meaningful renovation is possible in the postapocalypse, typically it is with the recognition that whatever is renewed is probably also persistently, perhaps even irreparably, flawed.

Finally, the persistence of unresolved ambiguity at the conclusions of these stories keeps open the possibility that, in its essence, reality might be ultimately absurd. While seldom unqualifiedly nihilistic, the apparent permanence of imperfection and only provisional, reversible progress implies a basic existential aporia—typically the conflict persists, the zombie does not die, and the forces of antagonism cannot be completely crushed without arising again from the inside. As inconclusive in experience as equivocal in appearance, the postapocalypse ultimately leaves humanity in ignorance concerning the ontological status of their circumstances. At the same time, it can be observed that whatever the cataclysm at the beginning of the postapocalypse and the ambiguity of the

endings might suggest about the ultimate status of reality, the intervening periods often proceed like so many narrative quests for first principles, which, however various or unclear in their answers, would seem to be united around a common question: what, if anything in a world of such decay, endures?

In summary, a consolidated postapocalyptic view of the human predicament would seem to articulate this fundamental question on the basis of three principle insights. There is something deeply wrong with everything in the observable universe. There are things within it that are nonetheless good or at least worth preserving, even if only one's own life. And yet this is complicated by the fact that whatever is good is also deeply, perhaps inextricably, entangled with everything that is wrong, with the result that the universe and everything in it would seem to be always and everywhere embroiled in an inescapable struggle. This is what the appearances of the postapocalypse would seem to demonstrate, with whatever lies beyond them requiring some species of guesswork, speculation, inference, or faith.

Conclusion

To close the analytical portion of this thesis, a final tension might be observed between what postapocalyptic zombie stories show and the way they show it. Consistently diminishing the difference between before and after the world-altering disaster, survivors and zombies, the perceptible world and its underlying unseen condition, these stories often explicitly purport to disclose to their audiences what the world is really like. At the same time, when attending to the actual representations offered by these texts, the basic complexity of their visions would seem to indicate a world in which ambiguity extends as far as human vision. By presenting an integrated symbolism of disintegration at the individual, social, environmental levels alongside what is often an equal, opposite imagery of regeneration, the status of the absolute in these fictional worlds not only remains hidden from audience view, but frequently also a pertinent point of contention even amongst the characters. While struggling to live distinctively human lives against the background of worlds that are conspicuously falling apart, what they choose to believe concerning the universal character of the human condition bears directly upon his or her individual character, coalescing towards a destiny-defining decision about the true meaning of human

life. The struggle of the postapocalyptic survivor is also the struggle of the *kosmos* to uncover the basic structure of his cosmos, which in turn is inseparable from the agony of civilization which needs its citizens to remain human as much as they require it to remain human themselves. A threat to the integrity of the universe at one level is depicted as a threat to all, and part of the purpose of the genre, it would seem, is through its enforced trials by forces of disintegration to uncover the basic principles, should any exist, that holds them all together. If each story offers its own answer, explicit or implicit, to this question, in aggregate they would seem to be united by the insight that human persons can apprehend something more than they can observe, even when the exact identity of this something remains ambiguous, uncertain, and indefinitely unresolved. And even if at several junctures postapocalyptic zombie texts would seem foreclosed to constructive engagements with Christianity, it may be that in this closing inconclusiveness they are at their most open.

Chapter Four

'Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption'.[393]

Shifting now from close readings of these texts to theological reflections upon them, the aim in Chapter Four is to examine how postapocalyptic zombie stories might be understood differently in the light of Christian theology, and, in Chapter Five, *vice versa* how Christian theology might be understood differently in the light of these stories. More specifically, the aim of this chapter is to propose how Christian theology might confirm, contribute to, and qualify these stories' depictions of reality. After acknowledging several of the other leading interpretations of the present day appeal of these texts, the chapter argues how a Christian theological perspective might illuminate prominent features of these stories' portrayals, especially in light of the doctrine of original sin. The chapter then argues that the principal contribution theology might make to such depictions is an explanation for why the human predicament is this way, in this case, one that focuses upon the absurdity and mystery of the ontological condition of Jesus Christ during the historical period between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. The chapter concludes by briefly examining how the intrinsic limitations of postapocalyptic texts follows as an implication from the Christian doctrine of divine revelation. In sum, it is argued that while these stories' depictions of the fundamental human problem is more or less compatible with Christian theological descriptions, the latter also diverges from these representations through its offer of a unique solution.

Why is the Postapocalypse So Popular?

Given the downbeat tonality of much of the genre, its immense popularity might strike one as somewhat odd. Lev Grossman writes in *Time Magazine*, for instance, that 'It's not easy to put your finger on what's appealing about zombies […] They're hideous and mindless. They don't have superpowers. Their only assets are their infectiousness, single-minded

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[393] John Paul II, *Letter to Artists* (1999), Vatican website, accessed 2 September 2018, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists.html.

perseverance and virtual unkillability'.[394] Adding that these stories are frequently graphically violent, of questionable artistic merit and at first glance appear to promote a nihilistic vision of the world, it might be tempting to attribute their popularity to the baser appetites of humanity. Can 'our cultural love affair'[395] with the postapocalypse and zombies be likened to mere 'libidinal indulging in crisis and disaster',[396] 'empire elegy',[397] or 'pessimism porn',[398] or the articulation of any of a range of unhealthy mindsets from a 'dysphoric nostalgia of reveling in what can never be the same again',[399] to a 'world half empty' pessimistic outlook,[400] or a 'melancholic feedback loop'[401] of disgust and resignation within a seemingly hopeless world?

Without discounting any of these as possible explanations yet moving to what is perhaps a higher level of generality, it is useful to recall Chapter Two's observations of these texts' consistent multi-layered affinities with the theoretical discourse on trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder. Going so far as to describe trauma as 'the psychoanalytic form of apocalypse',[402] for example, Berger interprets the setting of these stories in the aftermath of world-altering disaster as 'a scene of universal trauma, a landscape of symptoms and ruins'[403] that affirms 'the sense that some overwhelming, inconceivable event has occurred, some definitive collapse of order and value'.[404] Combined with the evidence in Chapter One of these texts' often earnest claims to represent the human predicament as it truly is, this

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[394] He continues, 'Vampires you can understand. They're good-looking and sophisticated and well dressed. They're immortal. Some of them have castles. You can imagine wanting to be a vampire or at least wanting to sleep with one. Nobody wants to sleep with zombies'. Lev Grossman, 'Zombies Are the New Vampires', *Time Magazine*, Thursday, 9 April 2009.

[395] Mike Rugnetta, 'Why Do We Love Zombies?' YouTube video, 7:32, posted by The PBS Channel, 19 June 2013.

[396] Isabel Capeloa Gil and Christoph Wulf, eds., *Hazardous Future: Disaster, Representation and the Assessment of Risk* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 4.

[397] Eckart Voigts and Alessandra Boller, eds., *Dystopia, Science Fiction, Post-Apocalypse: Classics, New Tendencies, Model Interpretations* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2015), 5.

[398] Mary Manjikian, *Apocalypse and Post-Politics: The Romance of the End* (Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 2014); quoted in Voigts and Boller, *Dystopia*, 5.

[399] Evan Calder Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011), 160.

[400] Cf. 'Crapsack World', Tvtropes (website), accessed 24 June 2017, http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/CrapsackWorld

[401] Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 21.

[402] James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 20.

[403] Berger, 49.

[404] Berger, 56.

suggests that the extensive appeal of postapocalyptic fictions might be linked to a broad sense of the relevance of represented trauma as a tool for making sense of experience of many present day persons. That is, if postapocalyptic zombie stories are popular because 'people want to see the basic dramas of their lives enacted',[405] this might suggest that the 'pervasive post-apocalyptic sensibility in recent American culture'[406] might have something to do with a widely felt trauma of some kind. But what sort of trauma might this be?

Among the several theories advanced regarding the extensive appeal of these texts, the emphasis often falls upon current events and other relatively recent historical movements. The popularity of postapocalyptic fictions has been linked, for example, to the economic downturn in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis.[407] Thomas Frank points to places like Detroit with their 'fallout and debris, the burst bubbles and factories that won't de-rust and start humming again'[408] and the accompanying 'frustration of the working-class millions […] their blighted cities and their downward spiraling lives';[409] the zombie has been labelled the 'official monster of the recession';[410] and postapocalyptic dramas that focus upon the rudiments of survival have been related to 'the financial crisis call to 'get back to real things'.[411] The 'mainstreaming of the zombie in global pop culture around the year 2000'[412] has also been attributed to a post-9/11 'time of generalized crisis, when the discourse of calamity from economics to politics and social upheaval seems to be becoming the new master narrative'.[413] Richard Gray ties this into emerging anxieties about globalization and the vulnerability of a contemporary society too big for anyone to

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[405] Krista Tippett, 'Transcript for Diane Winston—Monsters We Love: TV's Pop Culture Theodicy', *On Being* (website), accessed 15 August 2018, https://onbeing.org/programs/diane-winston-monsters-we-love-tvs-pop-culture-theodicy/.

[406] Berger, *After the End*, xiii.

[407] Kirby Farrell describes society-wide sense of trauma in relation to studies of how young Americans today are the first generation since the Great Depression who can expect a lower standard of living than their parents, in the Introduction to *Post-traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1998). Similarly, Joel Kotkin writes, 'Millennials face the worst economic circumstances of any generation since the Depression', *The Daily Beast*, 19 February 2017.

[408] Williams, *Combined and Uneven*, 33.

[409] Thomas Frank, 'Millions of Ordinary Americans Support Donald Trump: Here's Why', *The Guardian*, 8 March 2016.

[410] Grossman, 'Zombies Are the New Vampires'.

[411] Williams, *Combined and Uneven*, 41.

[412] Victoria Nelson, *Gothicka* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 105.

[413] Gil and Wulf, *Hazardous Future*, 4.

understand or control,[414] and consonantly, a film like *World War Z* (2013) where the zombie pandemic is explicitly 'a product of the interconnectedness of the world',[415] such a sense of precariousness extends beyond what Jon Stratton calls the consciousness of a terrorist threat of Islamic origin[416] to reveal the wider 'shape of our networks and risky attachments, our sense of an incredibly fragile global ecology'.[417] Postapocalyptic conditions have also been described as allegories of what Judith Butler diagnoses as a precarious contemporary 'war-torn, supremely violent, uncertain and grief-stricken world'[418] or what Ulrich Beck calls the late modern *risk society*, wherein 'the state of emergency threatens to become the normal state'.[419] More broadly, the cultural rise of zombies has also been associated with post-1989 US superpower paranoia, in which fears once projected outward upon America's enemies 'resurface at the heart of the American Dream […] as demonic persecutions',[420] the postapocalypse on this view emblematizing 'decline coupled with denial: the zombie condition of the Western world unwilling to face itself after the peak of its power'.[421]

The prevalence of a postapocalyptic cultural mood has also been linked to wider historical movements and to postmodern sensibilities often associated with the aftermath of WWII.[422] 'What actually happened when I was twenty-one', Kurt Vonnegut writes, 'was that we dropped scientific truth on Hiroshima',[423] and according to Theodor Adorno, 'the

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[414] Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2011), especially 1-50.

[415] Roger Luckhurst, *Zombies: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), 170.

[416] Jon Stratton, 'The Trouble with Zombies: Bare Life, Musselmänner and Displaced People', *Somatechnics* 1.1 (2011): 192.

[417] Roger Luckhurst, *Zombies*, 183. Reciprocally, the postapocalyptic breakdown of global culture might implicitly endorse a 'small is beautiful' sensibility favoring more devolved social and political structures and resisting the infiltration of anonymous multi-national commercial cultures into local communities.

[418] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence* (London: 2006), 46.

[419] Ulrich Beck, *The Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. M. Ritter (London: 1992), 79. Accordingly, the 'mass presence of the zombie horde becomes [a symbol of] the new norm, the permanent emergency', with zombies doing the cultural work of 'translating precarious feelings about life, health, family, community, labour, migration and borders'. Luckhurst, *Zombies*, 135, 197.

[420] Luckhurst, *Zombies*, 128. Zombies here might be said to function like homegrown, insidious-if-ideology-absent pod people.

[421] Luckhurst, 9.

[422] 'Since the end of the Second World War, the popularity of apocalyptic motifs in areas as diverse as trauma literature, religious practices, and science fiction (SF) has reached new highs'. Monica Germana and Aris Mousoutzanis, Introduction to *Apocalyptic Discourse in Contemporary Culture: Post-Millennial Perspectives on the End of the World*, eds. Monica Germana and Aris Mousoutzanis (New York: Routledge, 2014), 1.

[423] Kurt Vonnegut, *Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloons* (London: Panther, [1974] 1979), 155-56.

Enlightenment ideal of Man […] die[d] in the death camps'.[424] In addition to a direct impact upon Western imaginations and common sense—the conclusion of the war marked the first time most people could realistically envision the large scale destruction of the world—the post-war evidence of what Arthur Cohen calls 'absolute negativity in plain sight' exerted a subtler influence, marking what many consider to be 'a new beginning for the human race that knew not of what it was capable'.[425] In the subsequent half century, 'large-scale industrialism, collectivism and mass culture, the failure of Marxism in the Soviet Union, the rise of Fascism in Europe'[426] intensified the breakdown of a broad modern confidence in the inherent benignity of human reason and technological progress, but also contributed to a postmodern skepticism toward totalizing political and ideological structures, among them the 'prominent and interconnected Enlightenment narratives' of peace, liberation, 'History, the Nation, and Man'.[427] If postmodern patterns of thought might be said to emerge out of the ashes of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, therefore, then so too might 'the rise of the classic dystopian imagination',[428] which, like postapocalyptic fiction, takes as its starting point not visions of anticipated paradise but of realized catastrophe. In light of such developments it starts to become clear why the postapocalyptic might appeal as an aesthetic not only to persons in whose sight 'the negative aspects of a post-holocaust world are the ones that most resemble the characteristics of [contemporary reality]',[429] but also to those convinced of the instability of contemporary institutions founded upon Enlightenment-Modern assumptions. For the latter, postapocalyptic narratives, 'with their fantasies of degeneration and destruction, their sceptical attitude towards science and technology, their criticism of a sovereign rational self, their toying with nihilism, their visions of dark urbanization and their

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[424] For Adorno, the Shoah 'demonstrated irrefutably that culture had failed'. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, [1966] 1992), 366.

[425] Arthur Cohen, *The Tremendum: A Theological Interpretation of the Holocaust* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 25; quoted in Berger, After the End, 60.

[426] Voigts and Boller, *Dystopia*, 2.

[427] In the course of the modern era, Heffernan observes, these have 'come to satisfy the desire for continuity, truth, transcendence, and a sense of purpose, longings traditionally satisfied by the Genesis to Revelation story'. Teresa Heffernan, *Post-apocalyptic Culture: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Twentieth-century Novel* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 4-5.

[428] Voigts and Boller, *Dystopia*, 2.

[429] M. Keith Booker, *Monsters, Mushroom Clouds and the Cold War: American Science Fiction and the Roots of Postmodernism, 1946-64* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 94.

sensibility of crisis',[430] might be seen to converge with attitudes underlying various postmodern projects of ideological deconstruction and radical social critique, for instance, of Derrida, Foucault, Jameson, Lyotard or Baudrillard,[431] with the literal ruins of modern edifices in these fictions coming to serve as the signs and symptoms of the untenable presuppositions upon which they are built. In summary and even more broadly, if as Elizabeth Rosen suggests, a mood of crisis and social disorder often attends any community whose sense of continuity has been disrupted,[432] the cultural movement whereby 'yesterday's utopias give way to today's dystopian sensibility'[433] might be contextualized 'on the other side of a variety of traumatic historical divides'.[434]

If this is the case, Christian theology might offer its own explanation and relate this state of affairs to another trauma, a disaster that happened at the dawn of human history it calls *original sin*. In the first instance a rupture in the relations between humanity and the divine, this basic breakdown is understood as the origin of the disruptions at every other level of human experience: it is the universal macro-trauma, as it were, of which the various traumas of natural disasters, wars, and civilizational collapse are the relatively 'micro' renewed reverberations. In relation to the other explanations of the postapocalyptic sensibility outlined above, on the one hand the Christian theological interpretation might be understood as merely one more possible hermeneutic amongst many; on the other hand, as a historical *and* metaphysical explanation, it needn't contradict but might complement many of these, situating their more local identifications of causality within a wider ontological frame. As the description of a universal condition underlying all historical circumstances, original sin might add a deeper dimension to the other kinds of traumas, and

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[430] Voigts and Boller, *Dystopia*, 2.

[431] In Baudrillard's view, significantly, 'prophesying catastrophe is incredibly banal. The more original move is to assume that it has already occurred'. Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories II*, trans. Chris Turner (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 68.

[432] She cites specific crises such as ancient and medieval teleology challenged by Darwinian evolution, the disruption of Newtonian physics by the discovery of quantum mechanics and information overload by rapidly expanding technological innovation, each of these contributes individually and cumulatively, she suggests, to the unsteadiness of our inherited interpretative structures. Elizabeth K. Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and the Postmodern Imagination* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), xviii-xix.

[433] Majid Yar, *Crime and the Imaginary of Disaster: Post-Apocalyptic Fictions and the Crisis of Social Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 18-19.

[434] Veronica Hollinger, 'Apocalypse Coma', in *Edging into the Future: Science Fiction and Contemporary Social Transformation*, eds. Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 173.

thereby tie the appeal of the stories they seek to explain into perennial human concerns that extend beyond the relatively narrow vogue of a cultural moment. What follows, therefore, aims to summarize and expand upon some of the key tenets of a Christian vision of reality in order to propose a theological explanation of why many people might experience the world as postapocalyptic.

The Aboriginal Metaphysical Breakdown

As a preliminary indication of the many ways in which a Christian vision of reality might be understood to confirm the view of the human predicament put forward by postapocalyptic zombie texts, a quick sketch might be made in strictly biblical terms of a world that is phenomenally ambiguous, fundamentally dramatic, and penultimately absurd. With regard to ambiguity, whereas on the one hand the Bible presents a picture of reality in which 'the heavens declare the glory of God'[435] and 'he did not leave himself without witness'[436] in the natural world, on the other hand even when God in the flesh rises from the dead the first Christians have trouble recognizing the fact.[437] The biblical witness also confirms that the human predicament in history is fundamentally dramatic in its constancy of antagonism, centrality of choice, and permanent possibility of substantial change. Humanity was tempted by a serpent at the beginning,[438] and has an 'adversary the devil [that] prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour'[439] until the dragon's final persecution in the last days.[440] Moses exhorts Israel to choose between life and death, blessings and curses;[441] Jesus can say to the penitent Zaccahaeus, 'today salvation has come to this house';[442] and between two thieves each on a cross, can promise the one who appeals to him, 'today you will be with me in paradise'.[443] The permanent possibility of

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[435] *Ps* 19:1 (NIV).
[436] *Acts* 14:17.
[437] Cf. *Jn* 20:25; Luke 24:16.
[438] *Gen* 3:1-6.
[439] *1 Pt* 5:8.
[440] *Rev* 20:7-9.
[441] *Dt* 30:19.
[442] *Lk* 19:9.
[443] *Lk* 23:43.

change is evident in the dramatic conversion of St. Paul,[444] who later writes, 'if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation'[445] yet even after serving as an apostolic pillar of the early Church admits that he has not yet achieved perfection.[446] Finally, in addition to the phenomenally ambiguous and fundamentally dramatic character of the human predicament, the Christian scriptures might also confirm that the experience of humanity under current conditions is penultimately absurd, subsisting in the midst of a created order 'subjected to futility'[447] whose end 'has not yet been made known'.[448] Each of these qualities of the human predicament that are adumbrated by the Christian scriptures has also been elucidated by subsequent theological reflection, and what follows attempts to outline how the postapocalyptic appearances of reality might be seen to result from the metaphysical-*cum*-historical premises of what is traditionally called original sin, a description of the human predicament which is in turn deeply interconnected with a Christian theological understanding of the person.

Christian theology traditionally recognizes three kinds of persons—human, angelic, and divine—which, despite considerable differences also share common properties that allow them to be considered under a single rubric. Like the divine persons of the Trinity who subsist in a communion of perichoretic self-donation and whose distinct identities reside 'solely in the relationships which relate them to one another',[449] so also it has been persuasively argued that a defining feature of all persons, regardless of kind, is that they fundamentally do not have but *are* relations.[450] How one is, becomes, and remains a person, in other words, is by entering into the same ceaseless exchange of giving and receiving that

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[444] Cf. *Acts* 9.

[445] *2 Cor* 5:17.

[446] *Phil* 3:14.

[447] *Rom* 8:20.

[448] 1 *Jn* 3:2 (NIV).

[449] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, revised edition (London: Burns and Oates, 1999), §255. NB 'In the relative names of the Persons the Father is related to the Son, the Son to the Father, and the Holy Spirit to both. While they are called three Persons in view of their relations, we believe in one nature or substance'. Council of Toledo XI, in Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum: Compendium of Creeds, Definitions and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals,* ed. Peter Hünermann, 43rd edition (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), §528.

[450] See, for example, Joseph Ratzinger, 'Concerning the Notion of Person', in *Anthropology and Culture*, eds. David L. Schindler and Nicholas J. Healy (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2013).

is intrinsic to the primordial community of divine persons. Apart from this process, in principle, persons cease to exist.

At the same time, if this continuity can be observed across persons of whatever kind, there are even greater discontinuities. Whereas the divine persons are increate, perfectly consistent, and sufficient unto themselves, for instance, human persons are dependent, complex, and endowed with a paradoxical freedom to choose. The human person's fundamental dependence derives from his or her status as a creature that cannot exist apart from the ongoing free gift of God, and is experienced subjectively as a lack in a certain sense that corresponds to the desire for personal communion: 'God calls us all to this intimate [mystical] union with him, even if the special graces or extraordinary signs of this mystical life are granted only to some for the sake of manifesting the gratuitous gift given to all'.[451] Made by nature to enjoy what exceeds the capacities of his nature, man is paradoxically always already made to be the recipient of the gratuitous gift of sharing in the divine life.

According to a traditional Christian theological view, human persons are also irreducibly complex. By nature the composites of both spiritual and physical substances, human persons at their most simple remain ontological compounds; nevertheless 'the unity of the soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the 'form' of the body: i.e., it is because of its spiritual soul that the body becomes a living, human body; spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature'.[452] Additionally, as created *persons*, humanity constitutes the nexus where the created universe relates to—i.e. gives and receives its substance from—the eternal perichoretic exchange between the divine persons, and, created in an 'original state of holiness and justice'[453] the first humans are believed to have enjoyed intact, well-functioning relationships with God and all the rest of creation—each other, the non-human created order, and their own selves.

Finally, from a Christian perspective human persons are also fundamentally free. Made with intelligence and will, human persons have the capacity to offer their own gifts of self in love, fundamentally unconstrained by any external forces. At the same time, this is not an absolute freedom in the sense of unlimited by intrinsic creaturely constraints: man

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[451] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §2014.

[452] *Catechism*, §365.

[453] *Catechism*, §375.

enjoys what might be called volitional if not ontological independence, in that he can choose what he does but not the sort of thing that he is. This final quality might be said to represent at the same time humanity's supreme dignity and creation's supreme vulnerability: for the universe and humanity as part of it to remain what they were made to be, it is imperative that humanity choose well.

The Genesis narratives express in mythic discourse the tradition that towards its origins humanity chose badly. Electing to act in defiance of the limits established by God, humanity chose a lesser (perhaps even a non-existent) good over the divine communion required for life, and this introduced a fundamental principle of disintegration into the created order. As the basic point of union between the physical universe and its spiritual principle of integrity, the human person, in defying God, experienced a disastrous disruption that in the first instance meant alienation from the divine life, 'the dimension of the Holy', or 'the dimension of ultimate reality',[454] and secondarily, when this was broken, a universal process of dissolution. Paul Tillich describes the components necessary to any genuinely Christian theological thinking—what he calls essential goodness, existential estrangement and a third something 'beyond essence and existence' capable of overcoming the fracture between them[455]—and in these terms, whereas God the creator bestows the power of being upon all things and therefore operates as the universal principle of unity and harmony, any separation from God causes disunity and disharmony, 'a final consequent loss of being (reality) and meaning (value)'.[456] The 'fall' into the latter predicament, a 'transition from essential nature to existential disruption',[457] is 'what the church calls original sin'.[458]

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[454] Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 59.

[455] Tillich, 119.

[456] Langdon Gilkey, 'Tillich: The Master of Mediation', in *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, second edition, ed. Charles W. Kegley (New York: Pilgrim Press, [1952] 1982), 32.

[457] David H. Kelsey, 'Paul Tillich', in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, second edition, ed. David F. Ford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 68. This might be reformulated in more personal terms as the basic disruption of the relationship between the created order and God its creator and sustainer.

[458] Paul Tillich, 'Art and Society', in *On Art and Architecture*, eds. by John and Jane Dillenberger, trans. by Robert P. Scharlemann (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 33.

As distinguishable from all subsequent personal sins,[459] this original sin fundamentally altered the conditions of the human predicament:[460] it brought about the 'universal, tragic [...] separation, estrangement from one's essential being'[461] for all of humanity and the entire visible created order, with the implication that every person born in its wake is a 'participant in a society of persons who are already estranged'.[462] Like the various postapocalyptic catastrophes in which 'intense loss has been endured, not just by the individual but by the entire human race',[463] Christianity affirms that this cataclysm at the beginnings of human history introduced the consequences of disaster, decay, and the prospect of annihilation into the world at the cosmic scale. Comparable to a kind of trauma at the ontological level, the original sin instigated subsequent patterns of compulsive repetitions of this earlier event, which may be an instructive way to understand what in Christian theology are called personal sins.

Personal sins are also deeply interrelated with what theologians sometimes address under general rubrics of the problems of evil and suffering. The meaning of evil has been theorized in several divergent ways,[464] but the most useful for making sense of what is depicted in postapocalyptic fictions is probably the deprivation theory. On this model evil does not exist as a positive reality, but only describes the diminishment or breakdown of things that are intrinsically good. Insofar as a thing can be genuine said to *be*, in other words, it is good; 'evil' is a way of describing its asymptotic descent into incoherence and non-existence. So, when Christian theology speaks of fallen or sinful humanity, what it means is something like diminished persons: to the extent that they bear the consequences

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[459] N.B. 'Although it is proper to each individual, original sin does not have the character of a personal fault in any of Adam's descendants. It is a deprivation of original holiness and justice, but human nature has not been totally corrupted'. *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* §405.

[460] 'By yielding to the tempter, Adam and Eve committed a personal sin, but this sin affected the human nature that they would then transmit in a fallen state. [...] that is why original sin is called 'sin' only in an analogical sense: it is a sin 'contracted' and not 'committed' - a state and not an act'. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §404.

[461] Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 123.

[462] Kelsey, 'Paul Tillich', 68.

[463] Ruth Elizabeth Hartle, 'Our Lives Apart and Carrying the Fire: Myth, Memory and Distance in the Post-Apocalyptic Novels of Jeanette Winterson and Cormac McCarthy', Doctoral Thesis, (Queen's University Belfast, 2010), 230.

[464] For a succinct treatment of the different theories, see Todd Calder, 'The Concept of Evil', in Edward N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/concept-evil/.

of original sin and as a result repeat it, they continue to embody a deprivation of the true meaning of humanity. This results in the paradox, or perhaps more accurately the absurdity, of the human person afflicted by the disaster of original sin, who, like the zombie, is both human and less than human, no longer fully what he or she is, simultaneously the bearer of a residual humanity and its absence.

Also particularly apposite in connection to postapocalyptic fictions is the kind of dehumanizing and apparently purposely suffering Simone Weil calls *affliction*, which 'stamps the soul to its very depths with the scorn, the disgust, and even the self-hatred and sense of guilt and defilement that according to conventional morality should have stricken the perpetrators of violence but torment instead their innocent victims', and 'which demoralizes its victims by stripping them of personality and imposes on them a state of dire helplessness'.[465] It is an 'overriding mystery of human existence', she continues, that such affliction

> operates through a 'blind mechanism' that turns people into 'things'. Thus, it does not produce martyrs but 'quasi-damned souls' in whom the 'vital instinct', torn from all other bonds and commitments, 'blindly fastens itself' to the objective of survival, even when life has become 'in no way preferable' to death.[466]

This genus of suffering which Christianity maintains has been suffered to some degree by every person since humanity's self-abasement at Eden can be readily compared to the devastation suffered by postapocalyptic survivors and the zombie, blindly attempting to survive or, each in their specific ways blindly attempting to survive and, having lost many characteristics of persons, supplying vivid images of humanity succumbed to a 'fate of living death' that approaches having been 'reduced to the mere "state of matter"'.[467]

A disaster with worldwide consequences, therefore, the Fall is like the backstory catastrophe in postapocalyptic fictions in many respects. As several critics have observed, postapocalyptic fictions 'start from the fundamental deadness of world' in a way that

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[465] Peter Y. Paik, *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe* (Minneapolis: Minneapolis, 2010), 175; quoting Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper, 2001), 69-70.

[466] Paik, 175-76; quoting Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London: Routledge, [1952] 1995), 25.

[467] Paik, 175; quoting Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 74.

'grasp[s] at a structural condition',[468] and that in them, symbolically-speaking, 'the end of the world is a consequence of our Original Sin'.[469] Estranging the entirety of creation from the source of its coherence and integrity, this disaster fundamentally alters the contours of the human predicament and reduces human persons to a semblance of their true selves. Additionally, 'This first alienation engendered a multitude of others. […] By deviating from the moral law man violates his own freedom, becomes imprisoned within himself, disrupts neighbourly fellowship, and rebels against divine truth'.[470] In other words, as kind of traumatic disruption at the most basic level, this aboriginal metaphysical breakdown also unleashed ubiquitous forces of disintegration whose knock-on effects can be traced at the levels of three additional relationships: humanity's relationship to the natural world, to other persons, and to an individual's his or her own self. While on the one hand this description of the total inherited consequences of the world's backstory catastrophe might be deemed to summarize the general contours of what Christian theologians call the 'fallen human condition', it also broadly correlates with the conflicts vividly depicted by postapocalyptic fictions at each of these levels, that is, the decomposition of the physical world, of civil society, and of the interior integrity of disaster-traumatized human beings.

The Fallen Human Predicament

If *shalom* describes 'the human being dwelling at peace in all his or her relationships: with God, with self, with fellows, with nature',[471] then 'the fallen human predicament' indicates the opposite. If humanity's fall had consequences for the entire created order, the place where this is most conspicuous, perhaps, as in postapocalpytic zombie fictions, is in the evidence of decomposition and death across the physical universe. As the complex creature whose ensouled body unites the spiritual and physical worlds, man's fall out of harmonious

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[468] Williams, *Combined and Uneven*, 147, 148.

[469] Eric S. Rabkin, 'Why Destroy the World?', introduction to *The End of the World*, eds. Eric S. Rabkin, Martin H. Greenberg and Joseph D. Olander, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), vii. Maria Manuel Lisboa describes the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden in similar terms, 'Eve's curiosity lost humanity paradise, thereby triggering the first apocalypse in the Judaeo-Christian imagination'. Maria Manuel Lisboa, *The End of the World: Apocalypse and its Aftermath in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2011), 14.

[470] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §§1739, 1740.

[471] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), 69.

relationship with his divine principle of integrity also resulted in a natural universe described in biblical language as under a 'curse'[472] and 'in bondage to decay'.[473] Offering a possible explanation for so-called 'natural evils' like geological and meteorological disasters, diseases, and their associated violent deaths, the Fall of Man also disfigures the world from a paradise, that is, an 'our world' of belonging, safety, and order, into a place where humanity struggles to feel at home, an outer, 'other world' experienced as a 'mere amorphous extent'[474] of profane space. Mircea Eliade identifies the distinction between these two categories as a fundamental perception of what he calls *homo religiosus*, a description of humanity as intrinsically religious and motivated by a fundamental desire to inhabit a coherent, stable, and meaningful world. Eliade calls the objective correlative to this desire 'the sacred', that which is 'saturated with being [...] pre-eminently the real, at once power, efficacity, the source of life and fecundity'[475] and as a result establishes the subjective experience of a world with a center. The borders of such a world represent the frontier with 'absolute nonbeing',[476] and if by some evil chance *homo religiosus* strays into such uncosmicized (because unconsecreated) territory, he will feel 'emptied of his ontic substance, as if he were dissolving in Chaos, and he finally dies'.[477] Eliade thus stresses the role of what he calls *hierophanies*, literally 'disclosures of the sacred', in preserving the world from degrading into a place like the zombie postapocalypse, that is, 'a foreign, chaotic space, peopled by ghosts, demons, [and] 'foreigners' (who are assimilated to demons and the souls of the dead)'.[478] Yet with the doctrine of the Fall, Christian theology describes this

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[472] Cf. *Eph* 2:2; *Gen* 3:16-19.

[473] *Rom* 8:21.

[474] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, [1957] 1987), 64.

[475] Eliade, 12-13, 28.

[476] Eliade, 64.

[477] Eliade, 64. Eliade tells of a tribe of nomadic aboriginal Australians, for example, who carry a sacred object throughout all their travels known as the sky pole, which they believe to be in contact with transcendent reality and therefore to establish a metaphysically fixed point at the center of their common lives. When on one occasion the pole was broken, a group of onlooking anthropologists watched the entire clan sink into a depression, wander about 'aimlessly for a time, and finally lay down on the ground together and waited for death to overtake them'. Eliade, 33.

[478] Eliade, 29. Baudrillard offers a comparable account in different idiom in his descriptions of an ontologically exhausted post-industrial world where reproduction has replaced production and the original disappears amidst overwhelming simulacra, e.g. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).

as precisely the state of the physical universe, that is, a place alienated from its principle of power, efficacy, life, and fecundity.

Original sin offers a metaphysical-*cum*-historical explanation not only for the decaying bodies, cities, and wider physical landscapes graphically represented by postapocalyptic fictions, but also for the existential human predicament often expressed through the trope of 'life' on the road. Estranged from the aboriginal community of divine persons yet still fundamentally desiring spiritual communion, humanity experiences the fallen world as a place of homelessness, inconstancy, and Heraclitian flux where 'the ashes of the old world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again'.[479] The symbolic opposite of stability, domesticity, and civilization, the road as a master metaphor for human experience connotes a journey endlessly approaching an unreachable destination, which in postapocalyptic fictions is also often associated with the wilderness, vulnerability to chance, and obligatory scavenging whose exigencies often compel human persons to act in ways that are more animal than human, and at the extreme, more dead than alive. In Christian theology as in postapocalyptic fictions, then, a primordial break in the deep integrity of the world disfigures the universe into a decomposing, alien land, an additional consequence of which is that persons become strange and threatening to one another, trapped on the outside of shared, meaningfully human lives.

Another repercussion of fallen human persons having become estranged from the power of being is witnessed at the level of interpersonal relationships. As Tillich argues, ontologically damaged humanity is unable consistently to hold in proper balance the tension between 'individualization and participation, dynamics and form, destiny and freedom', with the result that 'our transactions with others break down' into lives progressively more disintegrated and chaotic.[480] The Hebrew and Christian sacred scriptures articulate this aboriginally lost spirit of solidarity in the story of intrafamilial discord between Cain and Abel immediately following the universal fall, and represent its ongoing consequences in the further divisions of the originally one, harmonious family of humanity into myriad factions and warring tribes. Theologians recognize this same basic breakdown in the horrific

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[479] Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (London: Macmillan, 2010), 10, pt 12.
[480] Kelsey, 'Paul Tillich', 68.

misdeeds of subsequent history, where 'the decimation of aboriginal peoples, slavery, wars, colonialism', for instance, might be understood ultimately to proceed from the 'exclusion of the fellow who is different than me', an attitude that results from a damaged sense of natural interpersonal sympathy and, in turn, 'both produces and rationalizes catastrophic events'.[481] In the more fantastical spectacles of postapocalyptic fiction, the debasing treatment enacted by survivor on survivor and even moreso the unrestrained violence inflicted by survivors upon zombies renders the failure to recognize personality in difference more or less as literal objectification, whereby entities once recognized as persons are dehumanized and, at the extreme, treated like mere inert matter. Christian theologians might speak of the social consequences of original sin whereas postapocalpytic fictions portray internecine fighting amongst disaster survivors, yet in both cases as a result of the world's aboriginal disaster, 'what were once vital communities became groups of lonely competitive individuals, of 'hollow men' (to use Eliot's famous phrase), whose lives had largely lost meaning for themselves and for others'.[482]

In addition to indicating the disruption of humanity's relationship to God, the natural world, and to other human persons, the fallen human predicament according to Christian belief also encompasses the consequences of disaster in every man's relation to his or her own self. As human persons, that is to say (on a Christian account), creatures ontologically constituted by their relations with the community of divine persons, damage to this fundamental relationship also entails an injury to human nature itself. Augustine speaks of God as one who is closer to me than I am to myself,[483] and in such terms alinetation from God entails not only interruption from the source of creaturely life and integrity, but paradoxically, estrangement from the Otherness that is a *sine qua non* of human personhood. Like zombies that suffer from 'the absence of some metaphysical quality of their essential selves',[484] humanity in the wake of original sin suffers from 'a hollow in the

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[481] Teresa Heffernan, *Post-apocalyptic Culture: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Twentieth-century Novel* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 12; qting D.H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse* (New York: Penguin, 1976).

[482] Theodore M. Greene, 'Paul Tillich and Our Secular Culture', in *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, second edition, ed. Charles W. Kegley (New York: Pilgrim Press, [1952] 1982), 87.

[483] Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin Classics, 2015), III, 6, 11.

[484] Kevin Boon, 'And the Dead Shall Rise', in Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro, eds., *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 7. R.D. Laing offers a

self', 'what Lacan, following Freud, has called 'the Thing' [... and] what we can call the 'dark inside', which renders us always Other to ourselves'.[485] In biblical language, this disrupted spiritual communion is principally described as a kind of death which, curiously, can accompany prolonged physical vitality. For example, in the Genesis account the parents of humanity are told of the forbidden fruit, 'In the day that you eat of it you shall die', [486] and in his letter to the Romans St. Paul writes that 'the wages of sin is death'.[487] A version of living death is also referenced by the father in the parable of the prodigal son, 'My son was dead but now is alive',[488] a clear indication of a kind of deadness that is compatible with continuing to exist and characterized here principally as an interruption in the relationship between father and child. In these terms a fallen human might be accurately described as 'a corpse that is no longer an I',[489] the victim of a disfiguration that in traditional theological language is sometimes formulated as the loss of divine likeness by those who neverthless by nature continue to bear the *imago dei*. Reduced to a broken semblance of human life, in other words, humanity after the Fall resembles a zombie whose horridly vestigial humanity has lost much of its former humanity even as it has not been wiped out entirely. On the one hand, then, Christianity maintains that a disaster that befell humanity at the beginning of history is something akin to what befalls the zombie, the horror of which involves 'the loss of identity of the living person, the fact that the *I* will become something alien, something *other*, but only in an entirely negative sense [...] an 'otherness' sundered from any affective relation'.[490] On the other hand, Christian belief in the ineradicable relationality of human

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comparable account of what he calls *ontological insecurity* in *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960).

[485] Jen Webb and Sam Byranand, 'Some Kind of Virus: The Zombie as Body and as Trope', *Body & Society* 14.2 (2008): 88. However, whereas self-estrangement on a Freudian or post-structuralist account is purely somatic or a consequence of entering into language, on a Christian there is a more basic rupture that might encompass each of these: broken personal integrity at a fundamental spiritual level results in consequences at the levels of both body and mind.

[486] *Gen* 2:17.

[487] *Rom* 6:23.

[488] *Lk* 15:24.

[489] Marc Leverette, 'The Funk of Forty Thousand Years; Or, How the (Un)Dead Get Their Groove On', in *Zombie Culture: Autopsies of the Living Dead*, eds. Marc Leverette and Shawn McIntosh, (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 187.

[490] Michael Richardson, *Otherness in Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 133.

persons entails that so long as human beings exist they will continue to desire this basic unity with other persons.[491]

Eliade identifies a similar desire in a different vocabulary when he speaks of *ontological thirst* as religious man's intrinsic attraction to the sacred, that is, whatever is most real and by implication constitutes the center of the subjectively experienced world. If as Tillich writes 'love is the urge for the reunion of the separated',[492] and from a Christian perspective at a basic level 'only in God will [man] find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for',[493] it might be added that such love in the absence of its divine object compares favorably to what contemporary psychoanalytic discourse calls *drive*, which is 'neither need nor desire, but is the unthinking response of the subject to […] the Thing'.[494] Like Eliade's ontological thirst of *homo religiosus* in a world devoid of the sacred, such drive proceeds from a hollow in the self that renders us Other to ourselves and as such has the permanent potential to degrade into the kind of destructive relationality that moral theology calls *concupiscence*, a desire for what is good in itself but that becomes damaging when directed towards incommensurate ends. For a concrete image of this, the horrific, violating, cannibalistic activities of the zombie in postapocalyptic fictions might also be understood, perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, as images of failed attempts at consummated spiritual love: when the fundamental desire for Being is constrained to the satisfactions available in an ontologically-diminished universe, love easily takes the form of an invasive and destructive zombie-like hunger for intimacy. Charles Taylor writes in a similar vein that the 'perennial human susceptibility to be fascinated by death and violence is at base a manifestation of our nature as *homo religiosus*', with the damaged bodies these leave behind serving like material traces of our aspiration to partake in the beyond 'when it fails to take us there'.[495] Zombie-inflicted gore might thus be considered a concrete

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[491] N.B. 'Your desire shall be for your husband'. *Gen* 3:16; 'You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You'. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1.1; 'The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself'. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §27.

[492] Tillich, 'Art and Society', 17.

[493] *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* §27.

[494] Webb and Byranand, 'Some Kind of Virus: The Zombie as Body and as Trope', *Body & Society* 14.2 (2008): 88.

[495] Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 180.

correlate of the spiritual consequences of sins, in this case translating into visual terms the often unseen consequences of what biblical tradition calls idolatry, or elevating 'a thing to the status of the Thing'[496] that necessarily involves the violence of attempting to commune with a thing beyond the capacities of its nature.

At the same time, because fallen humanity retains some degree of residual integrity, on a traditional Christian view such concupiscent desire also necessarily involves a kind of inner conflict. St. Paul speaks, for example, of 'another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me',[497] and elsewhere describes fallen persons as composed of two men, an outward man that is decaying and an inner man 'renewed day by day'.[498] Augustine goes so far as to say 'man and sinner are, so to speak, two realities: when you hear 'man' – this is what God has made; when you hear 'sinner' – this is what man himself has made'.[499] Like the postapocalyptic survivor whose external struggle against zombies is coincidentally a projection of his interior struggle to preserve his besieged humanity, so according to Christian proclamation fallen 'man is split within himself. As a result, all of human life, whether individual or collective, shows itself to be a dramatic struggle between good and evil, between light and darkness'.[500] Rendered something like the survivor-zombie-complex by the cataclysm of original sin, humanity after the Fall is almost schizophrenically torn between the promptings of conscience and the drives of various destructive desires, with the personal sins of any individual playing out like the choice not to act in conformity with what remains intact of his or her humanity but with the zombie-like desires of a sin-damaged human nature.

All of human history since the Fall might be said to be marked by the contest between these two forces. On the one side there is the fraying of the universal fabric of things that are ontologically wounded and therefore declining ever deeper through self-division and incoherence towards non-existence. On the other side is the residual integrity

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[496] Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 74.

[497] *Rom* 7:23.

[498] *2 Cor* 2:16 (KJV).

[499] Quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1458.

[500] Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 13§2, Vatican website, accessed 28 August 2018, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

of all things that ultimately proceeds from the degree of linkage they retain with the ongoing gift of generative divine love. It is not only the universal decomposition entailed by what theologians call original sin that makes this a fitting description of the contemporary human experience on display in postapocalyptic fictions, therefore, but also what it implies about the opposite. No matter how far down the path of sinful self-destruction an individual might tread, like a zombie that however far decomposed is still recognizable as genealogically human—as opposed to a mound of tissues or pile of dirt—so, too, even the most damaged, distrusting, and death-dealing persons in a hellishly fallen world are believed on the Christian view to preserve some measure of humanity's original divine image. In Christian theology as in postapocalyptic fictions, even when death would appear to be regnant in every domain of human experience, devastation still presupposes some vestige of integrity. If humanity in a sense slit its own throat at Eden, dealing itself the mortal wound of separation from the divine source of life, the race has nevertheless maintained down to this day a kind of preternatural, oxymoronic existence that is simultaneously living and dying, both dead and alive. Perennially bleeding across history while held together by love, it is into precisely this predicament that in the fullness of time God enters as a man to raise a banner on behalf of true humanity.

To summarize: Christian theology can confirm many aspects of the human predicament as it is depicted by postapocalyptic zombie fictions. With the doctrine of original sin, it maintains that the entire universe has experienced a cataclysm whose consequences continue down to the present at every level of human experience. Manifest at the cosmic scale as the absurdity of a natural world subject to futility, disintegration, and death, the impact of the Fall is also evident in the drama of destructive relations between human persons and the ambivalent contest of desires inside every individual. If also, like many postapocalyptic stories, the doctrine of original sin would seem to foreground those aspects of the human predicament in thrall to a basic principle of degeneration, in its terms, too, residual integrity and regeneration is everywhere, if sometimes subtly, part of the picture. A Christian theological perspective upon the human predicament is not limited to merely confirming what these stories represent, however, but might also offer its own particular contributions and critiques. These are perhaps expressed nowhere more succinctly than in the unique name Christianity assigns to the mystery that holds the

universe together in the midst of its conspicuous disintegration, which designates not only the metaphysical principle of the entire created order but also a particular Jewish man.

The Paschal Mystery

According to Christian proclamation, the conditions of the fallen human predicament take a decisive turn with Jesus of Nazareth, in whose person both pristine humanity and the fullness of Being conspicuously reenter the drama of history. If 'In its various forms—material deprivation, unjust oppression, physical and psychological illnesses, and finally death—human misery is the obvious sign of the natural condition of weakness in which man finds himself since original sin and the sign of his need for salvation', then, Christians believe, this misery 'compassion of Christ the Saviour to take it upon himself and to be identified with the least of his brethren'.[501] The Incarnation does not represent an eternal superhuman exception, so to speak, the mere appearance of humanity, or the temporary advent some unreachable heavenly ideal, but the reoccurrence in concrete experience of what man was always meant to be; equally, however, Christ's humanity is exceptional insofar as it stands apart from the diminished, de-natured humanity damaged by the Fall. Like the one untraumatized man in a land of survivor-zombies, Christ's humanity stands as both an image of pre-disaster humanity and the hope for its post-post-disaster destiny: a man living in harmonious, creative union with God, the natural world, his neighbors, and himself.

Whereas his teachings instruct about the ways to live a truly human life and his miraculous ministry anticipates a new creation cleansed from the consequences of sin, it might be said that in his suffering and Crucifixion Christ demonstrates the full the horror of what, on the Christian view, man did to man at Eden. As the culminating expression of the consequences of the Fall,

> It is precisely in the Passion, when the mercy of Christ is about to vanquish it, that sin most clearly manifests its violence and its many forms: unbelief, murderous hatred, shunning and mockery by the

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[501] Congregation for Doctrine of the Faith, *Libertatis conscientia*, 68, Vatican website, accessed 28 August 2018, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19860322_freedom -liberation_en.html.

leaders and the people, Pilate's cowardice and the cruelty of the soldiers, Judas' betrayal – so bitter

to Jesus, Peter's denial and the disciples' flight.[502]

If the bloody and gasping face of Christ on the cross offers a vision of the true spiritual condition that every sin-affected person, had we but the unruined sight to see it, would glimpse in the mirror, the most rigorous realization of the Christian meaning of salvation in postapocalyptic terms might be witnessed in the cry of dereliction and its echo chamber of the tomb. As the divine response to the original human-wrought catastrophe of which all personal sins are the renewed reverberations, the Crucifixion provides an image of divinity incorporating not only humanity but the effects of humanity's existential disruption at every level: estrangement from God, breakdown of human nature in the dismemberment of body and soul, social abjection, and even perhaps, as some have argued, a version of psychological breakdown.[503] Established in solidarity with sinners, 'for our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin',[504] 'to the point that he could say in our name from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"'.[505] In so doing, the second person of the Godhead, the one in whom 'all things hold together',[506] becomes simultaneously an image of total human disintegration. God in Christ enters so deeply into the human experience of estrangement and self-division as to represent a living contradiction, that is, a thing abandoned by itself, and, entering the realm whose defining quality is his absence, becomes a reason-defying personal instantiation of divinity in hell.[507]

It might be the supreme paradox of the Christian Good News of salvation that at the nadir of the divine descent into the fallen human predicament, God-become-man is coincidentally a corpse and the source of life. By the light of the Resurrection, the one who

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[502] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1851.

[503] Balthasar writes, for instance, 'Since the sin of the world is 'laid' upon him, Jesus no longer distinguishes himself and his fate from those of sinners […] and thus in that way he experiences the anxiety and horror which they by rights should have known for themselves', and that 'The Incarnate One who knows experientially every dimension of the world's being down to the abyss of Hell'. More controversially, he carries on to suggest, 'the Son of God took human nature in its fallen condition, and with it, therefore, the worm in its entrails—mortality, fallenness, self-estrangement, death—which sin introduced into the world'. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, trans. Aidan Nichols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 104, 14, 22.

[504] *2 Cor* 5:21.

[505] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §603; quoting *Mk* 15:34, *Ps* 22.2.

[506] *Col* 1.17.

[507] Cf. Apostles' Creed, in Denzinger, §30.

in his humanity suffered a real natural death is understood in his divinity to have been simultaneously unquenchably alive. As a human body shorn of a spiritual soul and simultaneously the spiritual ground of all creation, bereft of human being while never ceasing to be Being, the Christ of Holy Saturday is strictly un-image-in-able in the sense that the mysterious unity he retains as a personal subject whilst bodily buried in the tomb transcends (at least fallen) human perception and so cannot be adequately expressed by any image. Nevertheless, it is possible to describe something of his condition during this period: as both fully God and fully man, 'the divine person of the Son of God necessarily continued to possess his human soul and body, separated from each other by death'.[508] This description, notably, is a unique contribution that Christian theology might make to the depictions of postapocalyptic zombie fictions it affirms: namely, that the imperceptible divinity of Christ's person persists in holding together the genuinely severed elements of his humanity and thereby preserves an unqualified supernatural vitality coincidental to an unqualified natural mortality. In other words, Christ mysteriously retains the absolute integrity of his divine life even amidst the total breakdown of his human death, and in thus becoming absurdly if nonetheless truly both dead and alive, might without mincing words be said to have become the first among the living dead. The Incarnate God of Good Friday and even more so of Holy Saturday, therefore, represents not only a metaphysical and historical fact on the Christian view, but also in symbolic terms the anthropomorphic *kosmos* of a created order broken from its all-sustaining Creator, and pushes to their absurd extreme the consequences of the aboriginal ontological wound whose unremedied end is the living-corpse-like predicament of spiritual death. Crucially, however, the unpicturable metaphysical status of Christ in the tomb takes the postapocalyptic appearances of a fallen world to the limit without conceding the ontological ground to absolute negativity.

Indeed, despite the apparent triumph of disaster, disintegration, and death, according to Christian proclamation on the third day such appearances prove to be secondary to the principle of creative divine love reasserted in the Resurrection. What theologians call *redemption* describes the extension this definitive reversal of the forces of disintegration that have plagued the physical universe since the Fall of Man, gathering the broken and dispersed goods of creation back around their original organizing center, the

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[508] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §626.

community of divine life. The resurrected humanity of Jesus Christ thus signifies the beginning of a new creation reconciled to its Creator, a physical location where the original holiness and justice of humanity have been re-established and the generative forces of creation are replete and overflowing for the reparation of all things. Revealed as the absolute source of regeneration amidst every sort of decay, the Incarnation thus endows the postapocalyptic human predicament with fresh possibilities, declaring that the phenomenal ambiguity of the world is ultimately just that, an appearance, and that underlying all things is the reality of unconquerable recreative divine power.

The Church Age

If the Easter Sunday good news of the Resurrection proclaims that the integrity of Jesus Christ's divinity persists despite the Good Friday disintegration of his humanity, at the same time, however odd it might sound, there is a sense in which after his Ascension the world returns to Holy Saturday. Whereas the Resurrection reasserts the in-itself-imperceptible reconciliation between man and God back into the world of natural perception, the Ascension in a sense represents both a climax and an anticlimax. As the integration of rejuvenated human nature into communion with the divine, the Ascension sets the stage for Pentecost, where what was accomplished in Christ's individual person expands to incorporate a multiplicity of human persons, and prefigures Eternal Paradise as the culmination of God's unceasing work in history to integrate the traumatized creation into the primordial community of divine life. At the same time, Christ's Ascension also marks the disappearance of any incontrovertible of evidence this. On the one hand, in the wake of the Resurrection,

> Reconciliation with God leads, as it were, to other reconciliations which repair the breaches caused by sin. The forgiven penitent is reconciled with himself in his inmost being, where he regains his own true identity. He is reconciled with his brethren whom he has in some way attacked and wounded. He is reconciled with the church. He is reconciled with all creation.[509]

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[509] John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 31.V, Vatican website, accessed 29 August 2018, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia.html.

On the other hand, with the risen Christ no longer visible in the flesh, the fact that this reconciliation has and continues to happen becomes an object of faith, i.e. believing without perceiving. The human predicament in the wake of the Ascension in significant respects appears to be the same as before the Resurrection, then, even if there are also important differences.

For instance, even after Christ rises from the dead, Christian theology acknowledges that the phenomenal world remains ambiguous. Conspicuous disintegration continues to stand alongside the residues of creation's post-Fall integrity, and even while 'the forgiveness of sin and restoration of communion with God entail the remission of the eternal punishment of sin [... the] temporal punishment of sin remains'.[510] In this 'time of patience and expectation during which 'it does not yet appear what we shall be',[511] humanity is still 'subject to suffering, illness and death';[512] nevertheless, the Church has also received 'the keys of the Kingdom of heaven so that, in her [...] the soul dead through sin comes back to life'.[513] In the celebration of the sacraments, 'the work of our redemption is carried on' and we 'break the one bread that provides the medicine of immortality, the antidote for death and the food that makes us live for ever in Jesus Christ',[514] even as the reality of this 'cannot be apprehended by the senses [...] but only by faith'.[515] The Church herself is perhaps the foremost sign of the ambiguity of the post-Ascension human predicament, 'at the same time holy and always in need of being purified', and, still touched by the effects of original sin and yet in contact with the restorative life of God, 'always follows the way of penance and renewal'.[516] Thus, even if the reality of the Resurrection life remains ordinarily hidden from the senses, it also supplies reason for the eyes of faith to discern its operation even amidst ruins, and a kind of mystical light that can transfigure these from mere material traces of a more basic principle of dissolution to something like the opposite, luminous examples of the in-itself-imperceptible activity of God preserving and renewing the world.

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[510] *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* §1473.

[511] *Catechism*, §2772.

[512] *Catechism,* §1420.

[513] St Augustine, *Sermo* 214; quoted by *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* §981.

[514] *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* §1405, quoting *Lumen Gentium* 3; St Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad. Eph.*

[515] St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, 71, I; quoted by *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* §1381.

[516] Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, 1.8, in Denzinger, *Enchiridon*, 867.

The post-Ascension human predicament also remains fundamentally dramatic. 'God created us without us: but he did not will to save us without us',[517] as Augustine writes. The continual work of the people of God in the Church Age is therefore not only one of 'patiently bearing sufferings and trials of all kinds and, when the day comes, serenely facing death', but also 'by prayer and the various practices of penance, to put off completely the "old man" and to put on the "new man"'.[518] This Christian work of individual, corporate, and environmental renewal is aided by the sacramental economy which in various ways provides 'an increase of spiritual strength for the Christian battle',[519] and yet it nevertheless often remains difficult 'to discern the often narrow path between the cowardice which gives in to evil and the violence which, under the illusion of fighting evil, only makes it worse'.[520] On the Christian view, God may have already redeemed the world in principle, but realizing the totality of the implications remains a struggle.

Finally, in the post-Ascension world the appearances of absurdity are arguably not eliminated but recontextualized. Futility, interior conflict, and incoherence continue and the created order still suffers from the consequences of its aboriginal metaphysical breakdown. Buildings and bodies still deteriorate; relationships and whole societies still buckle under crises and wither away; individuals still battle within themselves, make terrible decisions, and die. And yet in the light of the Resurrection, this 'still' also implies 'not forever'. Jesus Christ might have died and the incontrovertible evidence of his Resurrection might have disappeared into heaven, but he will come again, Christians believe, and when he does he will implement the complete renewal of the earth. 'This consummation will be the final realization of the unity of the human race',[521] and like the plots of most postapocalyptic fictions that move towards the discovery or refounding of a post-disaster community, in Christian eschatology the culmination of history is symbolized as an eternal holy city, the New Jerusalem, 'the Bride, the wife of the Lamb'[522] which 'will not be wounded any longer

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[517] Augustine, *Sermo* 169, 11, 13; quoted by *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* §1847.

[518] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1473.

[519] *Catechism,* §1496.

[520] John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 25, Vatican website, accessed 28 August 2018, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html.

[521] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1045.

[522] *Rev* 21:9.

by sin, stains, self-love, that destroy or wound the earthly community', but at whose center God himself 'will be the ever-flowing well-spring of happiness, peace, and mutual communion'.[523] In the meantime, however, humanity and the rest of creation continue to suffer from the implications of estrangement from Being at every level, as 'the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God' when it 'will be set free from its bondage to decay'.[524]

In summary, it has been argued that in addition to confirming many aspects of postapocalyptic depictions of the human predicament, Christian theology might also contribute a unique description of why the world is this way. Already implicit in the Incarnation of God in the historical person of Jesus Christ, the oxymoronic metaphysical status of fallen humanity can be discerned most conspicuously on Good Friday, starkly on Holy Saturday, and climactically on Easter Sunday. If the Crucifixion primarily represents the death of man in his estrangement from God and the Resurrection his return to life through a more powerful reassertion of God's creative love, then the period in between, like a postapocalyptic world, can be understood as characterized by both death and life, still unravelling in the wake of disaster yet continuing to preserve some vestige of integrity. Without contradicting the apparent ambiguity, drama, and absurdity of the human predicament as portrayed by many postapocalyptic zombie fictions, therefore, Christianity also adds to this symbolism of mixed disintegration a reason to believe in the ontological primacy and eventual triumph of regeneration. Indeed, if postapocalyptic zombie fictions depict humanity as walking contradictions, that is, as trauma survivors somehow mysteriously holding together, Christian theology also describes humanity as walking contradictions, as fallen persons held together by grace. Christianity thus affirms the complexity of the human predicament in a world subject to decay while also bestowing upon the mysterious power of integrity a personal name, the name of a victim whose unquenchable life is the remedy to every trauma and whose appearance in the world represents the only instance in the ages since the aboriginal metaphysical breakdown of a truly human face.

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[523] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1045.
[524] *Rom* 8:19, 21.

As a final reflection upon how postapocalyptic zombie stories might be understood differently in light of Christian theology, this chapter will conclude by briefly examining how the unique character of the Christian contribution to these fictions also implies a critique. Whereas the first section of this chapter observes how according to the biblical witness the first Christian disciples struggled to recognize Jesus even in the presence of his bodily resurrection, and the second section suggests how the Holy Saturday quality of the post-Ascension human predicament entails that the evidence of this occurrence remains ordinarily imperceptible to the senses, this final section proposes that there is a comparable kind of limit upon what postapocalyptic texts are able to portray about the ultimate nature of reality that follows as an implication of the Christian notion of divine revelation. Consistent with the doctrine of the Fall, this aboriginal disaster damages not only nature but human nature and therefore even the ability to apprehend the full impact of this damage. For this reason, if fallen human persons are to understand the complete extent of their predicament as it truly is, on the Christian view there must be special divine intervention.

Fiction and Revelation

In addition to explaining why the human predicament is the way postapocalyptic fictions represent it, Christian theology might also from the same principles account for why it often does not look this way. Whereas Chapter One analyzes how postapocalyptic fictions frequently purport to disclose an ordinarily unperceived dimension of human experience and in Chapters Two and Three it is argued how within these fictions the absolute status of reality is often represented in mixed, ambiguous, or indeterminate terms, here it might be added that the interrelated doctrines of original sin, divine revelation, and the beatific vision provide a metaphysical explanation why humanity might apprehend a world beyond empirical appearances, yet do so in an unreliable or inconclusive fashion. Equally maintaining that 'man shall not see me and live'[525] and 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God',[526] it is a paradoxical Christian claim that human persons are made by nature to do what exceeds their nature, namely, to 'see the divine essence with an intuitive

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[525] *Ex* 33:20.
[526] *Mt* 5:8.

vision, and even face to face, without the mediation of any creature'.[527] Yet the Fall introduces an additional impediment to humanity's enjoyment of the beatific vision, and for this reason requires the re-entry of God into the phenomenal realm in the person of Jesus Christ, coincidentally disclosing the absolute status of reality and healing the post-lapsarian human blindness to it. It follows that on a Christian view, supreme among the disclosures of divine revelation is the person of Jesus Christ himself, in whom 'the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily',[528] and accordingly, 'the doctrine of original sin is, so to speak, the "reverse side" of the Good News that Jesus is the Saviour of all men':[529] human persons come to 'see' the extent of their wounded vision by the same divine light that heals it.

So, it might be said that one of the core presuppositions of the Christian notion of revelation is—like one of the basic insights of many postapocalyptic fictions as discussed in Chapter One—that there is a dimension of reality that exists even though it may not appear so to most persons most of the time. However it is also implicit in this doctrine that any natural human perceptions of this dimension of reality will be necessarily imperfect. Christians maintain that it is only as they are united in the human and divine person of Jesus Christ that humanity can encounter the true meanings of both God and the human person— for the first time, so to speak, since their estrangement (and the consequent beginning of human blindness) at the aboriginal breaking of the world.[530] It is an implication of Christian proclamation, therefore, that in the wake of Christ's Ascension there are some 'truths of faith'[531] that will only be made manifest at his second coming. Hence, a basic aporia characterizes the human predicament in the period between the Fall and the Parousia,

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[527] Benedict XII, *Benedictus Deus*, in Denzinger, §1000. Irenaeus writes similarly about how 'the father cannot be grasped. But because of God's love and goodness toward us, and because he can do all things, he goes so far as to grant those who love him the privilege of seeing him … For 'what is impossible for men is possible for God'", quoted by *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* §1722.

[528] *Col* 2:9. In John's Gospel this is also expressed by Jesus himself, who is recorded as saying, 'He who has seen me has seen the Father' (*Jn* 14:9), and in the words of subsequent tradition, 'Jesus perfected revelation by fulfilling it through his whole work of making Himself present and manifesting Himself'. Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum*, 4, Vatican website, accessed 28 August 2018 http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html_.

[529] *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* §389.

[530] Jesus Christ embodies both the recollection of the pristine creation and an anticipation of its eschatological renewal, in other words, fulfilling the whole past history and prefiguring the future of humanity by embodying an eternal present the paradoxes of which will be discussed in the next chapter.

[531] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* §316

whereby the fullness of the truth about God and man that is in principle as picturable as a human face remains hidden to natural human sight for the duration of pre-paradisal human history.

The result is a perceptival and epistemic condition that is irreducibly complex. If on the one hand traditional Christian teaching maintains that fallen human nature although damaged has not been totally corrupted and thereby retains some degree of the natural powers proper to it,[532] on the other hand human persons are partially blinded due to the ongoing consequences of sin. Essentially capable of the gratuitous gift of the beatific vision, man is existentially incapable of enjoying the full capacities of his nature. Hence, even if man's spiritual insight is stereoscopic like his natural sight,[533] nevertheless, as it were, 'one eye is weeping / From a twig's having lashed across it open',[534] and as a result the distorted half-seeing might just as equally be described as a kind of vision as a kind of blindness. Christianity's positive expectation of the beatific vision in the eschaton therefore also offers an explanation for why human persons might in the meantime perceive the absence of God or other spiritual realities, even the absolute negativity referenced by many postapocalyptic texts. Blindness is, as it were, subjectively indistinguishable from the positive perception of nothing.

Paradoxically, therefore, what Christians believe about divine revelation might be said to affirm both the content of its own proclamation and an apparent contradiction. Fallen human persons can only know what they cannot know with the aid of supernatural intervention, and yet there remains a sense in which their inability to know it continues. This is expressed most poignantly in Christ's cry of dereliction from the Cross, when God himself acknowledges the apparent absence of God, and the supreme personal embodiment of Christian revelation articulates the supreme subversion of its own proclamation—or would do were this the final word. Yet it is the essential complexity of the Christian Good News as spoken in the context of the fallen human predicament that this confirmation of the subjective experience of divine absence is entirely true, simply not the

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[532] Cf. Vatican Council I, *Dei Filius*, 2, in Denzinger, *Enchiridion*, 3004. Also cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §36: 'Without this capacity, man would not be able to welcome God's revelation'.

[533] Cf. the extended discussion of hermeneutical stereoscopy in Chapter One.

[534] Robert Frost, 'Birches', Poetry Foundation website, accessed 28 August 2018, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44260/birches.

entirety of the truth. Rather, in the light of the Resurrection, additional words are spoken after the arch-contradiction of the death of Life itself, words that claim to be the source of eternal life and whose significance have been apprehended already and not yet. The uniqueness of Christian belief is inseparable from the paradox of proclaiming a reality that humanity has already 'heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands',[535] and yet for the present only discerns as 'through a glass, darkly'.[536] The same theological description of the human predicament that confirms the postapocalyptic condition of the world might also explain why so many persons do not perceive it, this confirmation being inseparable from its critique of the intrinsic limitations of these texts.

Conclusion

Overall this chapter has argued that once it is accepted that postapocalyptic stories show how the world truly is, then Christianity might explain why. Rather than interpreting the popularity of these texts merely in the terms of any relatively recent historical events or ideological trends, Christian theology might add a metaphysical outer frame that contextualizes many of these as local inflammations, as it were, of a more chronic human problem. Maintaining that a post-disaster predicament is a perennial aspect of the human situation, the doctrine of original sin signifies a fundamental malady underlying all other ills, an alienation from Being itself whose consequences of decay can be witnessed at every level of experience. By implication, it has been argued, even though the depictions of postapocalyptic fictions might *prima facie* seem to contradict a Christian theological view (as outlined in Chapter One), there is in fact significant overlap: Christianity can confirm, for example, not only that the world has experienced a cataclysm and degeneration is a pervasive part of the human predicament, but that human nature in such a world is both complex and interiorly conflicted; ambiguity, drama, and absurdity continue to characterize the human experience of phenomenal world; there is an ordinarily imperceptible dimension to reality; and that there is an ongoing cohesion and beauty even to oxymoronic entities. On

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[535] *1 Jn* 1:1.

[536] *1 Cor* 13:12 (KJV).

these grounds the argument might be made that postapocalyptic zombie stories appeal so widely because they offer representations of the human predicament as it actually is and with which Christian theology might agree without conceding that they represent the totality of all that is. Whereas postapocalyptic fictions depict a world often inexplicably holding together even while crumbling, Christianity calls this mysterious integrity by a personal name, and in so doing also offers an implicit critique of all other explanations.[537] Through its unique metaphysical-*cum*-historical explanation of the human predicament, Christian theology confirms, complements, and qualifies these fictions' representations of the world: it provides a conceptual vocabulary that can translate their dramatic images into philosophically intelligible terms, and situates them within a broader explanatory framework that not only diagnoses a comparable problem but also invites us to consider their possible limitations. If the Christians doctrines of original sin and divine revelation each entail that some truths about the fallen human predicament cannot be pictured, yet, as we shall see in the next chapter, the same beliefs also presuppose how to some degree human perception remains operative and intact, according to the paradox that the supernatural disclosure of something new shows us, in addition and as if for the first time, how much we already knew.

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[537] It does so, as suggested above, without necessarily contradicting them.

Chapter Five

Inner conflicts are difficult to photograph.[538]

Following upon the discussion in Chapter Four of how Christianity can confirm many of the insights put forward postapocalyptic texts, this chapter considers how these stories might help to visualize some aspects of the drama of human experience that Christian theology describes but does not depict. Through its symbolic vocabulary of suggestive dramatic images, in the first instance, these texts might offer a way to imagine the real if ordinarily imperceptible drama that characterizes the perennial human predicament in the period following the Fall yet before the final consummation of redemption. If in many respects the phenomenal world in the wake of the Resurrection has not changed, the chapter examines the extent to which genuine aspects of this time of ongoing ambiguity, irresolution, and apparent absurdity might be only adequately represented through drama. In addition to illustrating the meanings of Christian theological propositions, then, the chapter also considers how postapocalyptic dramatic images might enlarge upon them, importing fresh nuances, connotations, and implications for the enrichment and refinement of their metaphysical-*cum*-historical descriptions, in particular those claims in the subdomain of eschatology. The chapter concludes by reflecting upon how these stories might also prompt inferences to something beyond even what they depict, and what this might suggest about the finite capacities of all creaturely mediations. Overall, the chapter proposes that postapocalyptic zombie stories might contribute to constructive theology not only through their suggestive dramatic representations, but perhaps just as importantly, by what they *cannot* represent of the tensions involved in the Christian expectations for eternity.

The Present and Future Tension

As a subdomain of theological reflection, Christian eschatology focuses upon 'the last things' to happen at end of time, and has been traditionally divided between four main concerns: death, judgement, heaven, and hell. Other eschatological topics include the structure of

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[538] Howard Suber, *The Power of Film* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wise Productions, 2006), 94.

final upheavals of history, Christ's Second Coming, the triumphant victory of God over the forces of evil, the renewal of creation, and the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. In existential terms, the Christian expectation for the end of time also corresponds to the fulfillment of the desire 'written in the human heart'[539] by 'the fact that he is called to communion with God',[540] a longing that will be satisfied when the blessed amongst humanity will enjoy the beatific vision of beholding God 'face to face'.[541] In one sense, the subject matter of Christian eschatology looks forward to things which have yet to happen.

Paradoxically, however, there is another sense in which Christians believe the last days have already begun. If, as Chapter Four discusses, humanity lost the capacity for communion with God through the consequences of original sin, according to the Christian Good News this possibility is reintroduced through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. As the union of God and man in his own person, he not only opens the door of heaven to fallen humanity, so to speak, he himself *is* heaven: to be in the presence of Christ is to be in the presence of God and therefore, in a certain sense, already in paradise. On this view *heaven* 'does not indicate a place above the stars but something far more daring and sublime: it indicates Christ himself, the divine Person who welcomes humanity fully and for ever, the One in whom God and man are inseparably united for ever'.[542] From a Christian theological perspective, then, in Jesus Christ the fulfillment or end of history enters into the middle of history, and, in instituting his ongoing presence through the person and work of the Holy Spirit, renders eternity, in a real sense, accessible in time.

Since Christ's Ascension, Christian eschatological expectation can be said to subsist in a tension of already and not yet.[543] While Jesus Christ has reintroduced the presence of God amongst humanity, yet, having ascended, his physical presence cannot be ordinarily perceived and so the fullness of what Christians expect at the eschaton has yet to be

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[539] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, revised edition (London: Burns and Oates, 1999), §27

[540] Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 19§1, Vatican website, accessed 28 August 2018, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

[541] 1 *Cor* 13:12.

[542] Benedict XVI, Homily delivered at Cassino, Piazza Miranda (24 May 2009), Vatican Website, accessed 29 August 2018 https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20090524_cassino.html.

[543] This tension is discussed, for instance, in Eduardo Echeverria, *Berkouwer and Catholicism: Disputed Questions* (Boston: Brill, 2013), 466.

realized. This tension is expressed every time Christians pray the Lord's Prayer, for example, 'thy kingdom come' signifying something believed to have already been established—'the kingdom of God is in the midst of you'[544]—and at the same time not yet completed—'I go and prepare a place for you'.[545] The implications of this paradox extend to many of the central tenets of Christianity, not only the meaning of the kingdom of God, but also of salvation, the reconciliation of God to his people, the renewal of creation, the institution of paradise, et al. All of these are believed to have been decisively, eternally inaugurated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but not yet consummated in history.[546] The central mystery of Christian eschatology might thus be said to involve a basic *both-and*, which, considered from the point of view of eternity can be understood as a single act of divine creation and redemption, and yet, from a perspective within history is also experienced as an ongoing process that has yet to be finished.

Imagining Already and Not Yet

The most straightforward way in which postapocalyptic zombie stories might contribute to Christian theology is through images of a comparable kind of complex situation. As discussed in Chapter One, many postapocalyptic fictions in one way or another claim to portray two chronologies at the same time (*figure 1)*. In one respect they purport to depict a world-altering disaster that has yet to happen, and in another respect they claim to make manifest a situation that is already true now. Representing human persons with one foot in the present moment and the other already standing in the future, as it were, such complex images might offer visualizations of a complex ontological circumstance that follows from being a human person who nature intrinsically relates to realties both in and outside of time.[547] In addition to illustrating something like what Christians believe about human beings proleptically participating in a future that has come already and not yet, the

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[544] *Lk* 17:21. Similarly, *Lk* 4:21.

[545] *Jn* 14:3.

[546] There are a range of opinions regarding the balance of power, so to speak, between the poles of this paradox—e.g. what exactly has already happened versus how much has yet to come—each with consequences for pneumatology, ecclesiology, and sacramentality, et al. For a summary of some of the most prominent contemporary alternatives, see Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 19-66.

[547] For a treatment of the intrinsic complexity of human nature, cf. 140-41.

apparently unreconcilable contrast between various sets of images in these fictions—the postapocalypse is before a disaster and after it; human persons are survivors and zombies; the everyday world is 'normal' and in a state of emergency, et al.—might offer depictions of how the complexity natural to human nature has broken down. The true contours of the human predicament, this would seem to suggest, cannot be captured by a single unified image, but only by the union of seemingly incompatible ones. The double visions of many postapocalyptic texts, then, might be understood to offer images of a human existential situation that is utterly dual, caught up in living contradictions comparable to the what Christians believe about a world deeply disarrayed by the absurdity of original sin.

If in the first instance, it might be suggested that these texts present visual representations of a Christian perspective on the human experience as it will be until the final reconciliation of phenomenal contrarieties in paradise, secondarily they might also, in a certain respect, supply evidence for a natural capacity to apprehend aspects of the human supernatural predicament. If, as discussed in Chapter Four, it is a basic tenet of Christianity that fallen human persons are *ipso facto* limited in their perceptual faculties, and particularly so with regards to anything supernatural, at the same time Christian tradition also maintains that human persons have not lost all natural capacity to come to a knowledge of God.[548] Indeed, if in his 'openness to truth and beauty, his sense of moral goodness, his freedom and the voice of his conscience, with his longings for the infinite and for happiness, man [...] discerns signs of his spiritual soul',[549] something similar might be said about the person who apprehends the ordinary world of the physical senses as somehow inadequate to his sense of the totality of reality. For such a person, the insufficiency of the phenomenal world to capture the fullness of his experience, and the imperative to seek out means of supplementing this, like the imaginative visions of postapocalyptic fictions, might suggest, albeit inconclusively, the existence of an additional relevant factor to this experience such as what Christians have traditionally called 'the soul'. If, as Christians believe, human perception is shaped by desire and the referent for this

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[548] For the magisterial teaching on this subject, see Vatican Council I, *Dei Filius*, 2, in Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum: Compendium of Creeds, Definitions and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals,* ed. Peter Hünermann, 43rd edition (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), §3004.
[549] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §33.

desire extends beyond what is readily accessible to the senses, then the deep structural presupposition of these texts that human persons apprehend more than they perceive might provide a possible (albeit ambiguous) clue that there is more to reality than physicality. Of course, such 'evidence' is necessarily inconclusive: the apprehension of an extra-perceptual dimension of reality could be merely a consequence of the intentionality of human consciousness, for instance, or the fragmenting psychic effects of traumatic experience.[550] Nevertheless, understood as attempts to translate apprehensions of in-themselves-indemonstrable aspects of the human predicament into forms perceivable by the senses, postapocalyptic zombie stories might offer indirect and insufficient yet not for these reasons inconsiderable evidence for a Christian theological first principle like the existence of a soul or spiritual reality more generally that of its nature cannot be demonstrated.[551] If these are some of the ways postapocalyptic imagery might inform the tensions involved in Christian eschatology, the next section considers what they might offer as *dramatic* images.

Complexity in Process

It has been suggested so far that, as represented by these fictions, the disastrous future is a reality in which humanity participates already and not yet; if, additionally, the entities straddling this duality are not stationary but subsist in and across time, then it might be said that the human predicament from a postapocalyptic perspective is both complex and, moreover, inherently dramatic. By comparison, when considered formally, traditional

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[550] The sufficiency of the latter explanation would seem to be queried at least implicitly by many of these texts by the fact that the postapocalypse-like consequences of traumatic experience are depicted as universal, that is, pertinent even for persons who have not, stereoscopically-speaking, been discernibly traumatized. In other words, an important question to ask of many of these texts is what it signifies when traumatized humanity and postapocalyptic circumstances are represented as 'normal', i.e. when there is something deeply wrong even when there does not appear to be anything out of the ordinary.

[551] For a general argument for the indemonstrability of first principles, see Marc Gasser-Wingate, 'Aristotle on Induction and First Principles', *Philosophers' Imprint* 16.4 (2016), https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/p/pod/dod-idx/aristotle-on-induction-and-first-principles.pdf?c=phimp;idno=3521354.0016.004;format=pdf. It can also be noted how the notion of naturally apprehending anything beyond the empirical raises questions in the in-house Christian debate over the possibility and scope of general revelation, for an entry into which, see David W. Diehl, 'Evangelicalism and General Revelation: An Unfinished Agenda', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30.4 (1987), 441-455, https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/30/30-4/30-4-pp441-455-JETS.pdf

theological formulations like sin, damnation, state of grace, beatitude, etc., however reliable they may be as metaphysical descriptions might also be argued to be limited by the constraints of concepts and propositions to represent their objects in ways that tend to be static and abstract. If the human experience of reality is in any way truly dramatic, however, diachronic art forms like stories might be able to complement traditional Christian theology in ways that are unique.

In the specific case of postapocalyptic dramatic imagery, the microcosmic struggle of the survivor-zombie might be said to signify a universe that is thoroughly complex and in process. As the *kosmos* of a universal conflict between the processes of dissolution and regeneration at every level of human experience, the unresolved incoherence-in-motion it indicates cannot be adequately appreciated synchronically but only diachronically. Relating this to Christian eschatology, the complexity-in-process of the survivor-zombie might offer a fitting symbol of both fallen and redeemed humanity still caught in the middle of the unfinished drama of redemption. Whereas the doctrine of original sin as discussed in Chapter Four might supply a static, punctual metaphysical-*cum*-historical explanation for why humanity undergoes conflict at every level of experience, the dramatic imagery of postapocalyptic fictions might illustrate a similar state of affairs not by looking back at humanity through the clarifying filter of a settled explanation, as it were, but looking forward to a yet-to-be-realized resolution that as seen from the midst of incoherence in motion.

More specifically, the disaster-traumatized characters in these texts offer more and less subtle dramatizations of the in-itself-unperceivable self-conflict intrisinc to the pre-paradisal human predicament. Like the human survivor in these stories who is often torn between the desire to preserve some vestige of recognizable humanity and the instinct to survive at all costs, what Christian theology calls a *sinner* is a person whose might similarly be understood as a creature whose original interior harmony has been disrupted and whose natural desire for relationships has become vulnerable to degradation into a toxic pursuit of 'relationships' whose only focus is the preservation of self. The zombie provides a particularly graphic image of a kind of damage like that wrought by original sin, showing the way in which persons wounded by a worldwide disaster are to the same extent denatured, subject to the outward decay of physical death, and reduced to the existential absurdity of a

living death of '"otherness" sundered from any affective relation'.[552] The postapocalyptic motif that this thesis has called the survivor-zombie complex offers a complex image of how a person in a fallen state is both residually human and monstrously damaged by sin, a basic conjunction of antitheses locked in a contest that left to itself becomes ever more destructive but never completely destroys. Such a predicament extended *ad infinitum* might offer a dramatic correlate to the traditional Christian notion of damnation, what Augustine calls a state of being 'in death', an indefinitely extended experience of decline without ceasing to exist, 'never living, never dead, but dying for all eternity'.[553]

But the outward appearances of this same predicament might take on a fundamentally different aspect in the light of the Resurrection. According to Christian belief God does not redeem fallen creation from a distance but enters into the midst of its brokenness and transforms it from within. For this reason, once it is granted that postapocalyptic fictions depict the human predicament as it truly is, to the same degree that the survivor-zombie complex might dramatically represent the self-divided human predicament after the Fall yet before its final eschatological reconciliation, it might also be understood to offer a symbol of the condition God reconciles to himself out of the self-emptying love for humanity. The kenotic movement of divinity into the fallen world might be instructively compared, for instance, to the symbolic trajectory of many postapocalyptic zombie stories, in particular as these conform to a pattern Northrop Frye labels as the literary archetypes of descent. On this schema, at the first level of descent stories emphasize characteristics of the non-personal natural and animal order, and human beings of this symbolic type, like the zombie, 'are often mute or inarticulate'.[554] At a lower level,

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[552] Michael Richardson, *Otherness in Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 133.

[553] Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003 [1972]), XIII.24. Augustine explains such a predicament in traditional theological terms: 'The soul, it is true, may be spoken of as dead because of sin, in that it loses one kind of life, namely the Spirit of God, which would have enabled it to live in wisdom and felicity. Still, it does not cease to live with a kind of life of its own, however wretched, since it is created immortal. The same holds good of the apostate angels; they have, in a fashion, died by sinning, because they forsook the fountain of life which is God [...] However, they could not die in the sense of ceasing altogether to live and feel, since they were created immortal'. (Augustine, *City of God*, XIII.24). A version of living death is also mentioned by the father in the parable of the prodigal son, 'My son was dead but now is alive', (Luke 15.24) that is, 'dead' whilst continuing to exist, with a kind of deadness conceived not in biological but in relational terms. Charles Williams' novel *Descent into Hell* offers a compelling fictionalization of this kind of condition.

[554] Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study in the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 115. Conceiving the descent in terms of confronting the uncomfortable or the horrible,

like the complexity of the survivor-zombie, a 'Narcissus or twin image darkens into a sinister doppelganger figure, the hero's shadow and the portent of his own death or isolation'.[555] Sinking lower still, through 'a world where everything is an object, including ourselves',[556] at the lowest point of the symbolic descent Frye locates 'the cannibal feast, the serving up of a child or lover as food'.[557] Often culminating in this kind of negative epiphany of obscene violence,[558] the degeneration of post-disaster humanity into cannibalistic monstrosities in postapocalyptic zombie stories offers various dramatic images not only of the dehumanization of sin-wounded persons but also of self-emptying divine love. Moving from incorporating into his person a physical human nature, God-as-man is later silenced,[559] beaten down, turned into a corpse, and subsequently remains physically present to humanity only under the form of a flesh-eating feast. At the extreme of the divine descent into the fallen human condition, the Christian God becomes thus outwardly indistinguishable from an object, un-*thou*-ing himself,[560] as it were, to be handled and treated like food for humanity in the Eucharist. Not only might the archetypes of descent in postapocalyptic fictions show us what humanity becomes when alienated from God, then, they might also disclose what Christians believe God became and continues to become so long as any part of creation remains broken away.

Understood in this way, the survivor-zombie might also help to illuminate the complex symbolism of the Christian liturgy. Both the survivor-zombie and the Eucharist, for instance, might be described as the conjunction of a living personal subject and dead physical object in a single entity. Alongside this continuity there is also an almost total discontinuity, however. On the one hand, the human side of the survivor-zombie remains

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Sophie Gee similarly suggests that the disgust aroused by the abject has to do with the 'discomfort people feel over the fact of having an animal body'. Sophie Gee, *Making Waste: Leftovers and the Eighteenth-Century Imagination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 10.

[555] Frye, *Secular Scripture*, 117.

[556] Frye, 117. At this same level of descent, Frye notes, 'The reflection of one's personality may take the form of a container where the hero's soul or life is kept, and of such objects the closest to the central Narcissus theme is the portrait, as we have it in Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*', which bears an intriguing similarity to the Haitian *bokor* who catches the folk zombie's soul in a jar, as discussed in Chapter Two, 71-72.

[557] Frye, 118.

[558] For a discussion of negative epiphany, see 68-69.

[559] Cf. *Acts* 8:32.

[560] The formulation of *thou*-ing as a verb is indebted to Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1970).

evident and on the zombie side, it retains the accidents of a human subject whilst adopting the substance of an object. On the other hand, the humanity of the divine subject in the Eucharist is totally obscure and retains complete personhood while adopting the accidents of an object. While the survivor-zombie and the 'sacrament of sacraments' might be described in the same terms, [561] what the words signify in each case are approximately opposites. From one angle, this is an instructive example of how the Christian Good News might paradoxically both confirm and transfigure the significance of postapocalyptic imagery: in Christ, God stoops down to incorporate the image of objectified humanity only to take it up again turned inside out, as it were. From another angle, the comparison with the survivor-zombie also underscores the complexity of Eucharist as both a concrete testament to the love of God as well as to the ongoing degradation involved in the fallen human condition. As a celebration of both death *and* resurrection, it simultaneously witnesses to the consequences of the world's aboriginal trauma and to the power of an all-reconciling love. The Eucharist might thus be understood to reflect the complex form that spiritual communion takes in an ontologically-damaged world: objectifying a person as well as facilitating genuine spiritual communion, the arch-personal exchange of inward substance takes the outward form of an arch-monstrous act, a ritual murder and a ritual meal.

An attendant comparison might be made between the motif of zombie hunger in these fictions and what Christian theology calls concupiscence. If Christianity maintains that every human person is fundamentally motivated by the desire for spiritual communion, and in a fallen world this often takes the form of the destructive desire, by the light of the Gospel this desire might be reevaluated as something intrinsically good. With its divine object made physically accessible in the Incarnation, the 'new hunger' that 'craves closeness' might be satisfied in a such way that its destructive dimension is absorbed and disarmed by the regenerating love of God. [562] By implication, perhaps surprisingly, the same characteristically zombie-like motivation that produces spectacles of heinous violence, dismemberment, and the consumption of living human victims, might be understood to be not condemned by Christ but satisfied. Consistent with the scholastic maxim that grace does

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[561] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1211.
[562] Isaac Marion, *Warm Bodies* (London: Vintage Books, 2013), 9.

not destroy nature but perfects it,[563] it might be said that in Christianity the ontological

hunger of *homo religious* to immerse oneself in, even interiorize whatever is most alive,

powerful, and real only becomes destructive when gratified apart from the literal

cannibalism of the unbloody sacrifice in the Mass. This perspective implies a deep continuity

between the sinner and the person being saved: the act by which the zombie destroys

humanity and degrades the world into its closest resemblance of hell is also the one

Christians are commanded to do 'in remembrance of me'.[564] Identifying communicants as

both the victims and perpetuators of the brokenness of creation, the Eucharist involves both

a renunciation of innocence as well as a restitution of holiness, convicting as criminals and

coronating as royal children, as it were, in a single act. The critical distinction between

concupiscence and love in these terms, is not the degenerating and recovering survivor-

zombie—that is, between the sin-damaged person on a trajectory of becoming more

monstrous and the one who is becoming more humane—thus becomes not the indulgence

or self-denial of this zombie-like desire, but rather the way in which and in whom a person

goes about satisfying it.[565]

As a dramatic image of humanity not only propagating the appearances of hell but

also foretasting the heavenly banquet, this desire for communion might also be said to

correspond symbolically to the desire for paradise. Created to 'share in the life of the

Blessed Trinity',[566] human persons, according to Christian expectation, can look forward to

the end (terminus) of history as also the consummate reunion with the end (telos) already

sacramentally present in time. Reimagining this belief through postapocalyptic symbolism

suggests several things. For example, the zombie's desire for personal interpenetration that

is satisfied in a cannibal meal, might be understood as a mirror of the postapocalyptic

survivors' desire for participation in the ideal community.

Each in one sense desiring something distinct, when considered in conjunction the

complex desire of the survivor-zombie merges the symbolism of the Eucharist and the New

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[563] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologae*, 1.1.8, New Advent (website), accessed 18 August 2018, http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1001.htm.

[564] *Lk* 22:19.

[565] In more traditional theological language, this might be called the destructive desire of concupiscence which is fundamentally a disorder of love, that is, the form that the natural human desire for supernatural communion takes in a world that is apparently devoid of God.

[566] *Catechism of the Catholic Church,* §265.

Jerusalem in a way comparable to the theological understanding of the sacramental economy. However, this apparently incompatible conjunction of violently consuming other persons *and* enjoying communal relations with them might also illustrate the fundamental incoherence of humanity's current existential circumstances: in the time before their eschatological resolution, one aspect of this complex desire cannot be satisfied (other than supernaturally) without undermining the other. Concupiscence, by extension, might be understood as a kind of premature indulgence in paradise, the desire for which, from a Christian point of view, can only be satisfied in a way that is not destructive when done so after a fashion commensurate to the already-not-yet of eschatological expectation.

Postapocalyptic zombie fictions do not merely depict persons trapped in an aporia of desire for genuine humanity that can neither be realized nor abandoned without degrading them into monsters, however; as discussed through various examples in Chapter Three, they also frequently envision some kind of remedy to this problem. Three types of such 'solutions' might be distinguished, which correlate roughly to the ways that the mutually destructive struggle between the survivors and zombies in these stories is variously 'resolved'. Survivors might eliminate the zombies, zombies might eliminate the survivors, or the struggle in some sense or other might carry on. These three alternatives might help to clarify the Christian theological understanding of what it means to live constructively in a tension of the already and not yet, albeit in the majority of cases through negative examples of what happens when the tension between the poles of this paradox fail to be preserved but falls off one or other vicious extreme.

Paradise Now

In those postapocalyptic stories by whose end the survivors successfully suppress or destroy the zombies, a fundamental ambiguity might be observed. When interpreted in the complex way outlined by the analysis of this Chapter, zombies in these fictions represent almost opposite things at the same time: conspicuous threats to humanity and the hunger for the ideal community. While from the first angle the eradication of the zombies would appear to implement a society totally expunged of monstrosity, from the second angle it could also suggest the triumph a purely pragmatic survivalism. As discussed in Chapter Two, the shift into the latter consistently signals the *de facto* degeneration of human survivors into

characters whose interior bankruptcy renders them substantially indistinguishable from zombies; by implication, survivors here exterminate the visible zombies only to invisibly turn into them. This type of conclusion is the more or less explicit subtext of *The Night of the Living Dead*, for example, where the lone character to survive the night in a zombie-beleaguered farm house is also the only character of African descent, who, upon emerging from the house in the morning is shot dead by a posse of shotgun-wielding survivors (*figures 23 & 24*). While at one level he is presumably mistaken for a zombie, the lynch mob connotations of the scene evoke a more general theme, wherein the repression of 'the nonhuman Other' readily 'lends itself to issues of racism and genocide'.[567] Violence against social and moral aberrancy is also a prominent subtext of the survivor-zombie conflict in *In the Flesh*, where the campaign to preserve what is 'properly and legitimately human'[568] might be said to take the form of militancy against the ostracized 'outlaw[s] of humanity'.[569] An irony of such efforts, however, especially in those postapocalyptic fictions that minimize the difference between the living and the undead, is that the kind of scapegoating that 'generates binary oppositions by localizing alterity' all too easily slips into projecting onto an identifiable other the very 'things one resists recognizing in oneself'.[570] Like the transhumanists who would expunge whatever is weak, diseased and vulnerable from human nature, for instance, the wholesale rejection of any threatening or destabilizing otherness:

> opens up the resort to apocalyptic measures, whether it takes the form of the impetus to eliminate the experience of the real as that which resists human designs or the arrogation of the judgment to expend the many in order to preserve security and abundance for the elect.[571]

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[567] Joan Gordon, 'Utopia, Genocide and the Other', in *Edging into the Future: Science Fiction and Contemporary Social Transformation*, eds. by Veronica Hollinger and Joan Gordon (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 208.

[568] Peter Y. Paik, *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe* (Minneapolis: Minneapolis, 2010), 81.

[569] Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 79.

[570] LaCapra, *Writing History*, 47n5.

[571] LaCapra, 47n5.

Lisboa identifies this kind of 'final solution' as a temptation that often follows in the wake of periods of 'acute uncertainty, threat or upheaval',[572] when the citizens of a society often deem it expedient to surrender civil liberties 'in exchange for guaranteed stability'.[573] In such cases of crisis that is 'a central feature of modern zombie movies',[574] the 'move from individual exclusion to death, thence to genocide and from the latter to global annihilation as the ultimate purge, arguably, involves steps which are too small […] for comfort'.[575] Paik comments similarly that the establishment of fictional utopian societies tends to have this in common with historical oppressive political regimes, that 'the apparent humanitarianism of the Utopians prefigures the rigidly moral—and murderous—universe of modern totalitarianism'.[576] From this, it might be generally observed that the more postapocalyptic fictions advance towards eliminating the abject zombie, the more they both illustrate the reinstitution of pre-apocaplytic social conditions, and converge upon the literary conventions of dystopia. This convergence is vividly illustrated in the postapocalyptic-*cum*-dystopian film *Equals* (2016), where in the wake of a devastating future war emotions are officially pathologized as sources of potential political subversion.[577] Aesthetically similar to *Equilibrium* (2002), a film in which the arts are outlawed because of their evocations of emotion, *Equals* provides an atmospheric picture not only of a tightly ordered futuristic society,[578] but also one whose citizens, in silencing all desire, live lives of quiet urban desperation, drained of color and rampant with suicide. To summarize, if at one level in those postapocalyptic fictions where the human survivors succeed in subduing or even eliminating the zombies witness to the reassertion of 'normal' humanity and the pre-apocalyptic status quo, there is also a dark side to this 'solution', not only because 'the

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[572] 'It is in light of the possibility or reality of social disintegration that certainty, even at the price of ruling totalitarianism, becomes the accepted rule'. Maria Manuel Lisboa, *The End of the World: Apocalypse and Its Aftermath in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2011), 162.

[573] Lisboa, 155.

[574] Isak Winkel Holm, 'Zombies and Citizens: The Ontopolitics of Disaster in Francis Lawrence's I am Legend', in *Hazardous Future: Disaster, Representation and the Assessment of Risk*, eds. Isabel Capeloa Gil and Christoph Wulf (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 206.

[575] Lisboa, *The End of the World*, 155.

[576] Paik, *From Utopia*, 5.

[577] In the film, intimate friendships and 'coupling' are deemed illegal, and S.O.S. (Switched-On-Syndrome) gets diagnosed in four stages like cancer.

[578] The citizens dress in near-identical immaculate whites and inhabit buildings of concrete and glass stripped of all but minimalist essentials and geometric gardens of manicured bamboo.

construction of utopia always comes at a price [… and] involves a lot of clearing up of old detritus prior to the inauguration of paradise',[579] but also because, as John Carey writes, it would seem that 'the aim of all utopias [...] is to eliminate real people'.[580]This type of postapocalpytic narrative conclusion might be understood to offer a dramatic image of the desire for paradise now uninformed by the Christian eschatological *not yet*.

Reciprocally, those fictions where the zombies eliminate the survivors might be understood to envision a totalizing drive towards an unrealized ideal that has lost sight of any residual good in the humanity and institutions of the present day. Yet the results in this case are equally self-undermining. Considered as monsters, the triumph of the zombies transforms the world into a nightmarish landscape devoid of recognizable humanity, and yet, understood as embodying human desires, they also transform the world into a kind of post-human paradise. What from one perspective amounts to the nihilistic victory of 'the id forces of the libidinous, irrational, violent, dangerous',[581] might when viewed from another perspective represent the conquest of the socially disenfranchised, abject, or terrorist advocate of radically revolutionary reform.[582] As a joint symbol of both monster and humanity, the triumph of the living dead might not merely signify the destruction of the established order or 'a generalized revolt'[583] against received norms, but kind of vague unassuageable dissatisfaction with any foreseeable sociopolitical order Williams describes as the 'diffuse energy lurking in the notion of the punk'.[584]

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[579] Lisboa, *The End of the World*, 154. She goes on to comment, similarly, 'if all else fails, war always remains as a shortcut to the implementation of utopia'. Lisboa, *The End of the World*, 158.

[580] John Carey, *The Faber Book of Utopias* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), xii. Joan Gordon concurs with the assessment, writing that today 'it difficult to write a utopian novel because it forces us to confront the human cost of setting up the utopian community'. Gordon, 'Utopia, Genocide and the Other', 209.

[581] Edna Aizenberg, '"I Walked with a Zombie": The Pleasures and Perils of Postcolonial Hybridity', *World Literature Today* 73.3 (1999): 462.

[582] As an iteration of the biological gothic, the zombie also draws upon what Scott McCraken calls the genre's wider relationship to the unconventional and the macabre, which makes it 'a natural ally of counter-cultural and sub-cultural movements'. Scott McCracken, 'The Half-lives of Literary Fictions: Genre Fictions in the Late Twentieth Century', in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth Century Literature*, eds. Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 624. Daniel Yezbick similarly describes the horror comics in second half of the twentieth century as 'designed to debase, disturb, or destroy all manner of conventional, orthodox, or conformist perspectives' in a 'sour deconstruction of the American dream'. Daniel F. Yezbick, 'Horror', in *Comics Through Time: A History of Icons, Idols and ideas*, vol. 1, ed. M. Keith Booker (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2014), 187, 194.

[583] Michael Richardson, *Otherness in Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 131.

[584] Williams, *Combined and Uneven*, 136.

This kind of positive perpetual intransigence to social organization still residually if minimally recognizable is perhaps reinforced by the fact that it is only the rare text like Zack Snyder's remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) where literally all remaining human survivors would seem to have been eradicated. More commonly, stories of this type conclude just at the cusp of such a world. Matheson's novel *I Am Legend* and *The Girl with All the Gifts*, for instance, each conclude with a single human survivor poised at the brink of a post-human but not post-personal world: something intelligent persists, just not humanity as we know it.[585] Arguably the more radical a given story's critique of the status quo, the more nearly it will conclude precisely here. There may be formal reasons for this: a totally zombified future conceived as the victory of 'the irrational—or that which is rational but counter to the available definitions of what discontent would look like'[586] would seem to conform to the Lacanian meaning of 'the Real' as 'that which exceeds/escapes the symbolic',[587] and, as such, be strictly unrepresentable in recogizable terms. If conquest by the totally other necessarily extends beyond the reach of the known, postapocalyptic fictions approach this limit only finally to cross over into the domain of unimaginable utopia. To the extent that a postapocalyptic stories conclude not with the pure nihilism of absolute otherness or non-existence but with the prolonged existence of something partially, even if only mininimally recognizable, the symbolic significance of such an ending is not necessarily limited to a negative vision but might also suggest one that is positive and aspirational, even if blindly so, that is, a 'vision' that is moved by a complex, seemingly unsatisfiable impulse that might be as readily characterizable as political nihilism as a kind of idealism unachievable by any foreseeable means.

It is notable that the social situations that result from either the unilateral conquest of survivor or zombie in these fictions are inverse images of one another. Something like a photographic negative, each foregrounds what is implicit in the other, the appearance of a zombie-free paradise with an unseen dystopian substance or the manifest nightmare of a realized revolutionary ideal. Translated into theological terms, these conclusions might suggest that Christian eschatological expectation falls off one side into a vicious extreme

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[585] This evokes the post-humanist dilemma of discerning the point at which evolution and improvement crosses over into replacement and eradication.

[586] Williams, *Combined and Uneven*, 136.

[587] Williams, 28.

when it loses sight of the *not yet*, prematurely collapsing the anticipations of eternity into demands upon the population of still-fallen history. Such unchecked excess of desire for paradise now results in what might be called attempts to eradicate of the demonic incarnate, practically manifest in those witch hunts and totalitarian politics that distort the vision of Christian eschatological expectation into ones of this-worldly dystopia. Inversely, the tension also falls off the other extreme when it abandons the *already*. Reducing the world to one in which there is no objective correlative to the desire for paradise now either in or in continuity with the world as presently experienced, such a view Imprisons humanity in a depthless spiritual landscape that is comprehensively profane and beyond recovery. A deficiency of the desire for paradise now thus degrades the intrinsically incarnational Christian expectation into a neo-Gnostic vision of history that is divorced from eternity and, consequently, of this-worldly despair. Both the excess and deficiency of the desire for paradise now might be understood as forms of impatience with an only partially satisfiable desire, whether trying to eliminate dissatisfaction by destroying the desire and its representatives, or of permitting the same dissatisfaction to become totalizing and destructive of everything that is familiar.

What postapocalyptic zombie fictions might offer to the development of Christian theology is not limited to the negative task of illustrating errors, however, but might also provide positive (if necessarily imperfect) illustrations of what it looks like to live productively in this tension. In addition to dystopian and post-human utopian endings, there is a third alternative for how the struggle between survivors and zombies might in postapocalyptic stories conclude, that is, in an ongoing, unresolved conflict. This third 'solution' can be divided into two subtypes. The first subtype arguably does not represent a solution to the basic conflict at all, essentially prolonging the same initial in-fighting quo under only superficially dissimilar concluding circumstances. This kind of conclusion can be seen in films like the aptly-named *Survival of the Dead* (2009) or *Land of the Dead* (2005), where the ongoing struggle between characters at the films' end suggests some version of the conflict might carry on indefinitely.[588] A more figurative representation of the same kind

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[588] Between these films there is also a notable difference in tonality, however, the dogged persistence of conflict in *Survival* contrasting with the more nuanced sense in *Land* of resignation to the ongoing danger of zombies alongside evidence of change and possible renewal within human relationships which amalgamates into an uncertain sense of possible peaceful coexistence.

of conclusion might be seen in *The Leftovers*, for example, with the implacably revolutionary Guilty Remnant on one side and the relatively conservative regular citizens of Mapleton on the other.[589] Of the several ways to consider the symbolic significance of such unresolved endings, one option is to view the opposing parties as caught 'in the reactive pursuit of scapegoats',[590] aporetically entangled in a situation whereby the survivors/conservatives and zombies/revolutionaries are each reactionary victims, in different ways, of the same social disruption. In a world thoroughly wracked by catastrophe in which every survivor is also figuratively a zombie, then one character's violent defense of 'normal' human order is the equal opposite to another character's revolt against the oppressions of a dehumanizing regime. The cover illustration of *The Zombie Survival Guide* offers an image of such ambivalent in-fighting, featuring an individual buffered by the technology of a collapsed socio-economic order attempting to fight off a ring of shadowy, grasping hands. Depending upon one's locus of sympathy—that is, whether the reader identifies more with the lone human survivor besieged by monsters or the abject masses revolting against their privileged oppressor—either character might be justifiably considered the hero or the villain. If, as this image suggests, in a traumatized universe genocide and revolution are two sides of the same coin (*figure 25*),[591] then the unresolved conflict at the end of some postapocalyptic zombie stories might be understood to dramatize a kind of materialist dialectic in which, 'faced with the choice between unhappiness, war, hunger and social unrest on the one hand, or assenting, obedient contentment on the other [...] the comfortable living-deaths of the placid members of the herd [...] one may experience justifiable perplexity'.[592]

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[589] Other examples of this type of conclusions include the probably only temporary respites of class conflict depicted in *Wool* (2001) and *Snowpiercer* (2013).

[590] Paik, *From Utopia*, 67.

[591] The dilemma is not merely theoretical. Paik discusses such deep 'ambiguities of revolutionary change' in connection with historical implementation of the ideologies of Marx and his successors, which, he argues, inadequately account for the practical considerations on the other side of political upheaval and the 'process of corruption that would inevitably take hold' (Paik, *From Utopia*, 25). As a consequence, twentieth-century communist regimes find themselves in 'an attenuated and interminable process of founding', he writes, caught in the cycle of an 'ongoing repression of foundational violence' (Paik, 4). The task of an authentically political imagination in such a scenario, he concludes, is to 'conceive of the transformation of the social order without recourse to an eschatological fantasy that denies and conceals the fundamental and ineradicable conflicts that constitute the realm of politics' (Paik, 25).

[592] Lisboa, *The End of the World*, 161. Claire Curtis observes similarly that 'postapocalyptic fiction is often a debate between the satisfaction of retribution and the difficult day to day work of starting over'. Claire P.

The alternative subtype of concluding irresolution is one in which outwardly similar conflict persists amidst substantial change. In such texts, neither the humans nor zombies are fully overcome, but the hostilities between them are at least partially mitigated by some species of transformation. The comedy *Zombieland* (2009), for instance, concludes with several characters, who, having started out justifiably wary of postapocalyptic human attachments, discover across the course of the narrative a workable way to live in the company of disaster-damaged persons with zombies still at large. Comparably, in the film *Warm Bodies*, after it is discovered that the zombies can recover their literal humanity, the narrative closes with images of survivors figuratively recovering theirs, providing medical care to apparent monsters who instruct them in what it means to love.[593] At the same time, it can be observed that this situation remains imperfect: the several attempts it takes for the zombie to succeed in catching a baseball is metonymic of the wider work-in-progress status of the survivor-zombie civilization. This dramatic image would seem to suggest that zombies both literal and figural may be ineliminable features of the postapocalyptic world, but the drawbacks of this condition might be counterbalanced by the benefits of proactive cooperation in an atmosphere suffused with hope. Even if in many respects the persistence of imperfection at a postapocalyptic story's end might suggest that fundamentally nothing has changed, in these cases, outward continuity does not preclude meaningful, even substantial change. Rather, in a conclusion of this subtype ongoing tensions subsist under the aegis of a possibility for constructive rather than merely destructive relations between damaged persons,[594] which might imply the possibility *sub specie aeternitatis* of ongoing antagonism without ultimate enmity.

Curtis, *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract: 'We'll Not Go Home Again'* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), 12.

[593] Whereas *Warm Bodies* implicitly recommends the saving efficacy of human choice, perhaps in conjunction with a near-miraculous *eros* and the undead-transfiguring-generosity of a community of relatively-less-damaged human persons—e.g. 'We will exhume ourselves. We will fight the curse and break it. We will cry and bleed and lust and love, and we will cure death. [...] Because we want it', and, 'We smile, because this is how we save the world' (Marion, *Warm Bodies,* 239)—Christianity insists that the post-disaster deficit in humanity is fundamentally made up for by God in his own persons. Without excluding romantic love and communitarian generosity as possible means, a Christian theological vision differs from what is proposed by the novel in this respect, that the principal engine for redemptive transformation is not raw human choice (though this too is involved), but the saving activity of God.

[594] Across the course of a narrative, for example, perspectives can change, conversion is possible, and enemies can transfigure into friends.

If in both of these subtypes drama persists in an unfinished process, the trajectory of the dialectic in each case suggests antithetical futures. In one, the anticipated endlessness of internecine conflict might be said to conform to a dramatization of damnation. In the other, successful cooperation suggests a perpetually improving though probably always imperfect society, which might be a fallen world's closest approximation of paradise. Across all three species of conclusion, it might be generally observed that in every case, the resulting situation is a complex one. On the one hand, the outward realizations of both the utopian human city and nightmarish zombie hellscape each conceals the substance of its opposite, whereas on the other hand the outwardly similar appearances of unresolved conflict are able to conceal dialectical movements ultimately antithetical ends. The complexity of such 'resolutions' might be understood to follow from the basic complexity of the survivor-zombie, which, as a single self-conflicted entity, cannot eliminate one dimension of itself without destroying the other.

Further, when the zombie's hunger is interpreted as a mirror image of the survivors' desire for the ideal community, this trio of possible endings offers dramatic images of various reactions to the fundamental human desire for paradise in a recalcitrantly imperfect world. Humanity might try to stomp out this desire, let it run rampant in a carnival of destruction, or seek to integrate it into perpetually reforming yet persistently imperfect social arrangements. In each case, however, perfect resolution is impeded by the ongoing imperfection of human persons. In a postapocalyptic world, it would seem, 'utopia, like the Kingdom of Heaven, is closed to purely human effort'.[595] According to each of these visions, paradise becomes impossible to fully realize in practical experience, just as 'normal', i.e. zombie-free, existence, paradoxically, would only ever seem to correspond to the memory of an irretrievable past or to the ideal of a ceaselessly receding future. The conclusions of postapocalyptic zombie narratives might thus be understood to presuppose an endlessly-deferred 'end of history' with its promises of consummate resolution, and to diagnose the inescapable requirement for humanity to live in the midst of imperfection. The motif of normality as an eschatological ideal will be returned to in this chapter's final section. First, however, it will be observed how such moving pictures of the human predicament as conflicted and ineradicably unresolved might be instructive for Christian theology not only

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[595] Paik, *From Utopia*, 6.

as illustrations of humanity as fallen, but also in the middle of an unfinished process of being saved.

Survivor-Zombies and Christians

If according to Christian eschatological expectation the kingdom of God has been already inaugurated in the person of Jesus Christ but not yet completed, there is a sense in which the condition of redeemed creation is both discontinuous and continuous with the world as disrupted by original sin. It follows that if the survivor-zombie complex offers a fitting symbol for the sinner, it does so, too, for the redeemed. Implicated in the wider process of God's gradual healing of the sin-wounded universe, the individual Christian might be compared to those recovering survivor-zombies in these fictions who are still to some degree damaged by the consequences of the original disaster. 'Afflicted in every way, but not crushed',[596] the Christian in such a world still bears an ontologically wounded nature and as such has not yet reached perfection,[597] and therefore struggles to do the good he wants to do[598] as his 'outer nature is wasting away'.[599] At the same time, what distinguishes the practicing Christian from his or her unbelieving counterpart is his overriding resolve to consciously cooperate with the personal source of all creaturely life, healing, and happiness he identifies as Jesus Christ. In the wake of the Resurrection, sinners and saints-in-the-making, it might be said, are both still survivor-zombies, and quite possibly share a common predicament in most respects except for a basic metaphysical difference ultimately hidden from all but the eyes of God.

The same self-conflicted microcosm of a being-saved macrocosm might also offer a fitting visual expression of the mesocosm of the Church. Holy in herself yet sinful in her members,[600] the community of the Christian faithful might be imagined in the first instance as a corporate survivor-zombie, basically personal because constituted by the person of the Holy Spirit yet still subject to disease, disintegration, and depravity amongst the sin-

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[596] 2 *Cor* 4:8.
[597] Cf. *Phil* 3:12.
[598] *Rom* 7:19 (NIV).
[599] 2 *Cor* 4:16.
[600] N.B. The Church is 'at the same time holy and always in need of being purified', Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, 1.8, in Denzinger, *Enchiridon*, 867.

damaged and in-fighting faithful. As both the visible sign of God's reunion with humanity and the meso-*kosmos* of creation in the midst of a process of redemption, the church is where Christians believe the civil war of the fallen creation is being slowly, often invisibly won. In Chapter Three it is argued that in significant respects the hero of postapocalyptic fictions is civilization itself considered to be embattled against universal forces of disintegration, and that the protagonist's quest to establish or discover a stable, nurturing community is a metonym of this wider conflict. Here it might be added that this story arc also correlates to the history of salvation in Christianity understood as what might be called the national epic of the people of God. Described by Augustine as the 'city of God' and represented teleologically in scriptural imagery as the New Jerusalem, this everlasting, non-pathological civilization is believed to grow up in the midst of a still-damaged world, and struggles along a path that is frequently 'arduous, fraught with perils, because it is, in fact, a rite of passage from the profane to the sacred, from the ephemeral and illusory to reality and eternity, from death to life, from man to the divinity'.[601] Like the struggle of the postapocalyptic reformed community to promote the principle of universal integrity against all manifestations of ontological decomposition, in Christianity this might be said to extend even to attempted-reconciliation with apparent monsters, that is, to involve the saintly imperative to live charitably and in the hope of conversion even of one's enemies.[602]

Building upon this, it might be suggested that the ambiguity, potential absurdity, and fundamental drama of the human predicament as represented by postapocalyptic texts also provides a fresh semantic context for appreciating the significance of the theological virtues. For instance, like the zombie protagonist R in *Warm Bodies* whose character-defining involves the choice to believe not in a final nothingness but rather in the ultimate reality of love, vitality, and renewal, the question presupposed by Christian faith and hope presuppose a similar question about *which* of these will ultimately prove to be true and triumphant, even when the evidence is mixed and the future unsure. At the extreme, pure faith might be described in survivor-zombie-complex-like terms as an obscure yet hopeful

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[601] Mircea Eliade, *Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 18.

[602] This might be said to pertain even if that enemy, like the conflicted survivor-zombie, also happens to be oneself.

participation in the communal life of the divine persons which is truly life 'to the full',[603] yet which *in extremis* might be subjectively indistinguishable from an Agamben-like *bare life* bereft of all signs and benefits of this communion. Like the protagonist in a postapocaltypic world, the existential predicament of the Christian might well involve living 'on the edge of being overwhelmed by meaninglessness, guilt, and death', yet at the same time of 'continually resisting this threat'.[604] At its most rigorously faithful and hopeful, that is, participating in Christ's divine life might also involve a share in his human dereliction, following the path of his self-emptying love through both figural and literal deaths to the bottom pits of hell while also remaining otherwise inexplicably, supernaturally alive.[605]

If faith and hope are the forms Christian belief takes in an ambiguous and possibly absurd world, charity might be described as the form it takes in the middle of the unresolved conflicts of the drama of redemption. In postapocatlypic terms, this kind of love does not stand at a distance of walled-in self-protection but descends into the distastefulness, discomforts, and dangers of human drama, and lives patiently with the internally-conflicted conjunctions of life and death that are other persons. Like Nausicaa, who consistently works to understand and accommodate 'the perspective and motives of others […] without succumbing to the impulse to condemn',[606] and those characters in *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* that strive to locate a common personhood even in alien, threatening others, so the love that characterizes Christian saints might be said to be 'heightened rather than diminished by their awareness of the irreducible ambiguities inherent to the conflicts and struggles they confront'.[607] Christian charity might be

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[603] *Jn* 10.10 (NIV).

[604] David H. Kelsey, 'Paul Tillich', in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, second edition, ed. David F. Ford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 65. Such a condition might be compared to the 'dark night of the soul' that Saint Teresa of Calcutta, perhaps the most recognizable and celebrated saint of the last century, describes as afflicting most of her adult life. In the biography based upon her personal correspondence, this darkness is described in terms of a 'profound interior suffering, lack of sensible consolation, spiritual dryness, an apparent absence of God from her life, and, at the same time, a painful longing for Him'. Mother Teresa, *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the 'Saint of Calcutta'*, ed. Brian Kolodiejchuck (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 21-22.

[605] In a similar vein, Weil describes of the necessity of accepting and enduring a 'moral void' as the precondition of disinterested love, a 'terrible scourging in which love, becoming severed from attachment, that is to say, from the illusory operation of filling the void in oneself with "things," takes on an impersonal and gratuitous character'. Paik, *From Utopia*, 180; quoting Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 11.

[606] Paik, *From Utopia*, 94.

[607] Paik, 94.

instructively compared and contrasted with negative capability, then: while it does presuppose tolerating human incoherence and irresolution, it also does more, actively engaging other persons with a fore-giving love that gives in advance of merit. In terms of the fundamental human desire for paradise, this kind of love might be said to hold in tension two prerogatives Kaja Silverman calls accepting the *good enough* and *the active gift of love*. In the first place it acknowledges that 'no one can ever *become* the ideal', yet nevertheless generously bestows a 'provisional conferral of ideality upon socially devalued bodies'.[608] To preserve the desire for paradise from becoming non-pathological in a world of survivor-zombies, it would seem that persons must balance maintaining the ideal with some form of acceptance of human imperfection, for if, as Silverman suggests, 'identification normally operates cannibalistically to annihilate the otherness of the other, sublimation or the active gift of love works to inhibit any such incorporation by maintaining the object at an uncrossable distance'.[609] In this way, godly love preserves a unity between damaged, ontologically-hungering people in a way that is 'excorporative',[610] that is, that does not collapse into the destructive relationships which treat others like objects yet also recognizes their fundamental relationship to the soul-satisfying ideal Thing. Subsisting in the tension between the already and the not yet, Christian charity is a recollection, extension, and anticipation of the divine reconciliation of humanity accomplished in the person of Jesus Christ, which not only seeks to accommodate ongoing opposition but also to indefinitely defer indulgence in any premature paradise that would exclude the still monstrous among us.

Up to this point this thesis has focused almost exclusively upon those insights into the human predicament that might be gained by considering the survivors and zombies as two sides of a single internally-conflicted humanity. However truly this may reflect the universe as it is in an unfinished process of being saved, Christianity also looks forward to a Final Judgement in which God will execute such clear-cut delineations. The more melodramatic iterations (or naïve interpretations) of the postapocalyptic conflict between survivors and zombies thus might also be understood to represent a true diagnosis of the human predicament, albeit when viewed apocalyptically, so to speak, not as it is presently

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[608] Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 225, 4.
[609] Silverman, 76-77.
[610] Silverman, 77.

experienced but as anticipated to be beyond the termination of history. In other words, it is precisely when survivors and zombies are depicted and interpreted as clearly demarcated, non-overlapping categories that the struggle between them takes on the symbolic contours of a war for humanity's eternal destiny. In the meantime, however, from a Christian perspective, the resolution of the drama of history is not simply a matter of human shepherds corralling sheep and goats, humans and zombies, saints and sinners into different ontological pens, because 'in the middest'[611] of the unfinished course of the drama of redemption the dividing line between them runs through the center of every individual.[612]

It has been argued so far that the symbolic vocabulary of postapocalyptic zombie texts might offer visible representations of an ordinarily invisible aspect of the human predicament, and that this aspect is less adequately represented by any static image than it is by the living tension between sets of apparently unreconcilable moving ones—of the past and future, survivor and zombie, everyday life and emergency conditions, et al. In the final section, it is added that these tensions also imply the existence of what might be called a third term beyond or between these pairs of images, that is, an unknown that remains unpictured yet which these two pictures together suggestively approximate.

Returning To 'Normal'

Through a device that might be called *prompting inferences from exaggerated depravity*, many postapocalyptic fictions project the human predicament into conspicuously less-than-ideal circumstances. These, in turn, are contrasted *and* identified with the world as presently known. If there is one sense in which the ordinary world of the viewers is better than the postapocalypse, there is in another sense in which these fictions claim it *is* the postapocalypse and, by implication, suggests another 'normal' even better than itself. More concretely, if the dramatic struggle between survivor-zombies in these stories often is not a

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[611] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8.

[612] If the basic structure of human experience is a drama that involves conflict, choice, and the permanent possibility of transformation, a degenerating survivor-zombie *en route* to hell today might convert into a recovering survivor-zombie saint-in-the-making tomorrow and *vice versa*. On this model, pristine humanity and complete monstrosity in these stories are either fictions in the sense of constructs with no real-world referents or categories that can only be confirmed retrospectively, that is, by the final character-defining choices of individuals at a story's end that necessarily cannot be known in advance.

matter of humans versus non-humans but of one version of disaster-traumatized humanity versus another, then the human drama under such constraints might be said to take place within a horizon of the less-than-fully-human. Within this territory, denatured humanity is the norm, and, consequently, 'normal humanity' signifies both what is displayed and an undepicted ideal. If the survivor is also a zombie, then the difference between the survivor and the zombie suggests an analogous difference between the survivor and the untramatized pre- or post-postapcalyptic person. Likewise, if ordinary life both is and is not the postapocalypse, 'ordinary' here suggests an inference to another, better ordinary that may well be paradise by comparison. In a phrase, these fictions might explicitly depict disaster, but in doing so they also imply an ideal.

A comparable tension is found in Christian theology as a result of setting up the God-man, Jesus Christ, as the human norm. According to Christian proclamation, he is both the perfect and the definitive human being. Introducing pristine humanity back within the horizon of the traumatized world, and then ascending into heaven whence he promised to return in glory, Jesus Christ signifies at once the ordinary condition of man as intended from creation and the yet-to-be-realized eschatological ideal. Put another way, if as Ernst Bloch writes, 'utopia represents an "all-surpassing summum bonum," the happiness and freedom for which all people yearn in the innermost depths of their being',[613] in Christianity this is expressed by God becoming a man. Within a Christian frame a reference, in other words, utopia corresponds, perhaps surprisingly, to simply becoming human. For Christians, the epic struggle after the death and resurrection of Christ, for the human race as for every individual, is not to become heroic in the sense of superhuman or godlike in a way that supersedes or exterminates humanity; rather, as in postapocalyptic fiction, a Christian eternal frame of reference understands the heroic human struggle to have been cast backwards, as it were, into a history of less-than-fully- and incoherently-self-divided-human-beings whose highest end is to attain the simplicity of the primordial normal. 'Normal' humanity, in Christian terms, is thus as strictly unimaginable as its true home, paradise. If, accordingly, normal humanity is a humanity like Jesus Christ's, Christians can expect the Second Coming to be as deeply reassuring as it is astonishing.

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[613] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope, Volume One*, trans. Neville Plaice et al (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 305.

In addition to helping illustrate the tensions involved in Christian eschatological expectation, this suggestive aspect of postapocalyptic dramatic images might also aid in appreciating the limits of all theology. Like the way these sets of contrasting images are not sufficient in themselves to represent their object but prompt extrapolations to a positive unknown, so too Joseph Ratzinger describes theology as a 'series of contradictions held together by grace'.[614] He characterizes the doctrine of the Trinity, for instance, as 'a demonstration of the hopelessness of all other approaches', 'a discouraging gesture pointing over to uncharitable territory', and 'a sort of cipher for the insolubility of the mystery of God'.[615] Because the reality it aims to represent evades the observational, deductive, and intuitive capacities of fallen humanity, all theology is necessarily imperfect, arguably, either 'resolving' into apophaticism or relying upon inference from an ever expanding arsenal of of kataphatic self-contradictions—God is like a rock, a fire, and a wind;[616] the Church is the body of Christ and his bride; creation has been redeemed already and not yet, et al. The existential limits of sin are not the only limits upon the capabilities of theologians, however; also relevant are their essential limits as finite creatures. In this respect, postapocalyptic zombie stories by suggesting that there is an un-image-in-able excess of a reality that exceeds their representational capacities, might also offer an indirect attestation to what theologians mean by *mystery*, that is, a thing that is believed to exist yet 'of its very nature lies above the finite intelligence'.[617] If in an ontologically damaged world knowledge can only be imperfect, there is a sense in which Christians might expect something analogous to this epistemic situation to be true for all eternity. Created to participate ever more fully in the mysteriously communal life of God that exceeds any conclusive comprehension, the human person in the presence of God will be forever confronted by a reality that defies his understanding. On this basis, it might be possible to draw the remotest of analogies between learning to live with the ongoing consequences of original sin and learning to live in paradise, albeit with a fundamental difference. On the one hand, the walking contradictions of fallen humanity, like the divine persons, endlessly resists

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[614] Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 173.

[615] Ratzinger, 171.

[616] Cf. *Ps* 18:2; *Heb* 12:129; *Jn* 3:8.

[617] John McHugh, 'Mystery', *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, volume 10 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911), New Advent (website), accessed 29 August 2018, http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10662a.htm.

the tidy reconciliations of rational capture. On the other hand, whereas the endless perplexity of engaging with fallen creatures derives from intrinsically unintelligible absurdity, in the case of the Creator, it results from a reality whose fractal simplicity only expands the more thoroughly it is understood.

Conclusion

By way of summary, this chapter has proposed that postapocalyptic zombie stories might offer graphic dramatizations not only of what Christians believe about the fundamental struggle of humanity in the wake of the original sin, but also of how this same predicament, as viewed through the eyes of faith, might transfigure into a mystery of ongoing redemption. As an eternal event taking place in time, salvation through Christ is something that believed to have already happened and yet still to be happening; it follows that even if the Resurrection has changed something fundamental about the human predicament, it has left the perceptible world in many respects unchanged. In the first place, the various sets complex images in these stories might be understood to provide a fairly straightforward translation into a language of dramatic symbols what this already and not yet means. Understood as visualizations of the two-at-once-ness that characterizes the world as humanity knows it between Eden and eternity, it has been suggested how even if, from one point of view, these represent the tragic self-division of a broken creation, at the same time, if 'heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even […] agony into a glory',[618] then the appearance of humanity's eternal end in Jesus Christ might reorient these into the preconditions and anticipations of hope. In the second place, it has also been discussed how postapocalyptic fictions might enrich and refine Christian understandings of what it means to live in the tension of the eschatological already and not yet, offering instructive dramatizations, both positive and negative, of the *via media* between forcefully implementing dystopian 'paradise' or resigning from the imperfect world in despair. Finally, it has been considered how alongside offering ways to visualize the unfinished, unseen drama of the human predicament, the basic complexities-in-process of these stories might also prompt inferences to something beyond what they depict. By speculating backwards

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[618] C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce: A Dream* (San Francisco: Harper, [1946] 2001), 69.

into an even more disintegrated human predicament, by analogy these fictions might offer an intimation of an 'eternal normal' that is as superior to the normal world of today as this is to the postapocalypse. In this sense, it might be said that what these stories offer Christian theology ultimately are not illustrations of what redemption, perfection, or paradise look like, but what they *mean*. By walking their viewers a long way down a path of destruction and turning back, they indicate a fresh trajectory, as it were, which may in the end not reveal the still hidden face of God, but might at least leave ours looking in the right direction.

Conclusion

It might be said that the fundamental challenge of communicating the significance of Christianity is somehow adequately to represent a reality that exceeds all representation. If the history of theology is understood as a series of attempts at this, then it implies a long, unfinished, and necessarily imperfect human labor of relating the things of creation to the source of their reconciliation to the divine, Jesus Christ. The work of this thesis has been an attempt to contribute to this process by analyzing a set of symbols that are already meaningful in the culture of the present day and assessing their suitability to communicate some aspect of the Christian mysteries. This closing section aims to evaluate whether, all told, the world might be truly considered postapocalyptic from a Christian perspective, and proposes an answer that is both yes and no: the visions of the human predicament advanced by these texts can be said to be both deeply like and unlike the conditions of reality as described by Christian theology, not only because of the relatively straightforward similarities and differences of their respective points of view, but also because any answer to this particular question is necessarily entangled in a tripartite indeterminacy.

Chapter One, it will be recalled, discusses some of the most striking of the similarities and differences. Whereas the explicit discourse and sacrilegious treatment of traditional religious symbols in many of these stories point to a world absent of the Christian divinity, nevertheless, the argument can also be made that the deep structure of these texts replicate a function of supernatural revelation, disclosing an ordinarily imperceptible aspect of human experience. Yet in doing so, it might here be added that these texts themselves acknowledge that there is a sense in which the human predicament they represent both is and is not postapocalyptic. Whether the necessity of disclosing a hidden dimension of the world is attributed to a disjunction between perception and apprehension, accidents and substance, or the human involvement in the natural and supernatural realms, the disconnect in these fictions between dually-acknowledged aspects of reality amounts to something like a positive affirmation of two opposing pictures of the world. In the first instance, then, there is an unavoidable complexity to affirming or denying that the world is postapocalyptic from a Christian perspective when these fictions might be described as articulating their own refutations.

Secondly, there is an additional challenge, as discussed in Chapters Two and Three, represented by the fact that not only the form but also the content of these fictions is deeply self-conflicted. In addition to outrageously flouting the ordinary appearances of things and overtly antagonizing Christian beliefs, for example, the negative epiphanies of an ultimate nothingness in many of these texts, when considered in isolation, might seem to wrap up the argument against the value of these visions for constructive Christian theology. However, as Chapter Three observes, there is a significant subset of these fictions whose primary purpose would seem to be educating their viewers in precisely the opposite. Whether through the imagery of budding plants or post-disaster reformed 'families,' Mad Max's education in the value of community or R's literal human regeneration, the constructive engagement with otherness in *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* or the inferences to the basic goodness through the revised sublime in *Station Eleven*, postapocalyptic fictions often, in fact, offer more complex of the universe than mere total disintegration, focusing instead upon human attempts to build meaningful lives in spite of such circumstances. Whereas these texts might be deeply infiltrated by a sense of absurdity and futility that approaches the borderlands of despair, they nevertheless consistently emphasize a kind of core of residual and unquenchable human vitality, a will to live and push back against the all-but-overwhelming forces of death, destruction and universal dissolution, and to carve out little pockets of integrity, tenderness and beauty, where human life in all its fullness can still happen. The world in these fictions might be truly falling apart, but it is not *simply* falling apart. Rather, it is caught up in a deeply dramatic struggle between fundamental forces of integrity and disintegration that often in these stories has yet to be fully resolved.

In this connection, these fictions might be instructively compared with the artistic style Paul Tillich calls *negative expressionism*, which he identifies as 'obviously […] the style of our period',[619] the key without which 'contemporary culture is a closed door'.[620] Observable across a range of the twentieth century's 'great works of the visual arts, of music, of poetry, of literature, of architecture, of dance, of philosophy',[621] he writes, this

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[619] Paul Tillich, 'Art and Society', in *On Art and Architecture*, ed. John and Jane Dillenberger, trans. Robert P. Scharlemann (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 31.
[620] Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 47.
[621] Tillich, 47.

style of art undercuts 'the natural forms in the ordinary encounter with reality',[622] 'shows the demonic, disruptive elements in [its] depths',[623] and is premised upon a widespread 'rediscovery' of 'a state of estrangement from ourselves, others, and the power of being'.[624] If postapocalyptic zombie fictions might be interpreted as popular representatives of this style, it is significant that they not only engage with disaster, disintegration, and death, but, like other works of negative expressionism, would seem to be characterized equally by 'the encounter with non-being, and the strength which can stand this encounter and shape it creatively'.[625] Most relevant for present purposes is the *both-and* of this formulation: the metaphysical tensions these texts depict testifies to a dual sense of ultimate nothingness as well as the impulse to resist it. The second reason that the Christian theologian might both endorse and reject a postapocalyptic view of the human predicament, this suggests, is the deep ambiguity concerning what such views entail about the ultimate status of things.

A final challenge for evaluating the vision of postapocalyptic zombie fictions from a Christian point of view is a two-sidedness native not to these stories, but to Christianity. As discussed in Chapter Four, Christianity both acknowledges and speaks into a human circumstance it diagnoses as fundamentally absurd, proclaiming the existence of a divinity who in Jesus Christ assumes to himself the ontologically-estranged conditions of a fallen creation. As a result, Christian proclamation is inherently complex: Jesus Christ announces the immanent realization of the presence of God, declaring, 'I and the Father are one',[626] and then from the Cross bewails God's seeming utter disappearance. In more general terms, it might be said that Christianity confirms the appearances that what might at first glance seem to disprove it. A demonstration of the absence of God does not amount to the refutation of Christian proclamation, but rather points to what it presumes to be obvious: if the Mystery could be seen, there would be no need to proclaim it. As a system, paradoxically, Christian belief would seem to have incorporated its own antagonism, which, as a result, does not amount to its antithesis.

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[622] Tillich, 'Art and Society', 31.

[623] Tillich, 31.

[624] David Kelsey, 'Paul Tillich', in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, second edition, ed. David F. Ford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 68.

[625] Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 47.

[626] *Jn* 10:30.

Contextualized in this way, Christian proclamation might be understood not as a denial of the pervasive disaster, deep existential uncertainty, and seeming supernatural vacuity of the human experience as presented by postapocalyptic fictions, but rather as an affirmation of these things plus an addition. Yes, the Good News would seem to say, the world is ambiguous, dramatic, and from what can be perceived at present quite possibly absurd, yet take heart because Jesus Christ has overcome the world.[627] As the religion of the Crucifixion *and* the Resurrection, in Christianity the proclamation of eternal life accompanies, even presupposes, the apparent death of God. An unequivocal Christian endorsement or rejection of the postapocalypse is also made difficult, it might be summarized, because at the center of Christianity there is an apparent absurdity that advances seemingly contrary descriptions of reality.

Yet by the light of divine revelation humanity is invited to discern behind the appearances of this incoherence, the otherwise hidden character of an incomprehensible supernatural mystery. Since the paradoxical beginning of the end of time in the historical person of Jesus Christ, according to Christian proclamation, everything in creation can be viewed both-at-once through the unaligned vision of a still-broken human nature, as well as in eternal retrospect, as it were, proleptically transfigured by the fullness of divine reconciliation. Because eternity has entered into history, Christians believe, something can be true at the present moment, even if it is not the fullness of the truth of the eternal now.[628] Creation is still damaged by sin and yet redeemed; Christ is waiting to return and yet physically present; the Kingdom of God is in our midst already and not yet.

By extension, from a Christian perspective, the world might be considered truly postapocalyptic now even if this does not represent the entire truth *sub specie aeternitatis*. If the world is postapocalyptic in the sense of still suffering from the worldwide disaster of original sin, it is also no longer completely postapocalyptic due to the eschatological *already* in which this disaster has been definitively overturned by Jesus Christ. At the same time, there will never be a moment before the Final Judgement that is completely post-postapocalyptic, that is, free from the consequences of sin, even if the world remains perennially pre-postapocalyptic, in the sense of never suffering the kind of total

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[627] Cf. *Jn* 16:33.

[628] For treatments of this paradox from several angles, see Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now* (London: SCM, 2002).

disintegrating demise envisioned by the bleakest of these fictions. This equivocation does not result from a Christian belief in two ultimately incompatible truths, importantly, but from its recognition that apprehending the one truth becomes complicated in the midst of the as yet unresolved inconsistencies of history. Under the circumstances, a Christian vision would seem to suggest, a contradiction might be the simplest expression of the true character of the real. Alongside the relatively straightforward similarities and differences between a postapocalyptic and Christian vision of the world, therefore, this tripartite indeterminacy of stereoscopic vision, phenomenal ambiguity, and supernaturally-embraced incoherence make it difficult to resolve the question of the compatibility between these points of view into a simple yes or no.

But perhaps this is a strength. If the Church in her members might, indeed, be represented allegorically as a survivor-zombie complex, at once ongoingly exiled from Being and yet returning home to life, then the historical condition under which she persists might be compared to a long Holy Saturday, in which Christ's more-than-individual corporate body exists, in Žižek's phrase, 'between two deaths'.[629] As 'an area simultaneously following and preceding an apocalypse',[630] that is, between two ends of the world as we know it, the Church Age might be likened to 'the realm of the living dead',[631] a time of phenomenological ambiguity in which life and death, reconciliation and disintegration, beauties and horrors occur side by side in self-conflicted entities, and the possibilities of paradise and perdition intermingle inseparably. As in the shorter ending of Mark's Gospel, where the disciples are told that Christ has been raised and gone ahead, so too the inhabitants of still-fallen history might be understood as standing with one foot still in the tomb, as it were, as the other points forward to an eternal Galilee. If Christian salvation means membership, even now, in the eternal community of God, then its gradual expansion amongst imperfect persons does not exclude the kind of unperceiving participation in which the exact circumstances of a historical moment are less than clear or the dark night folds into the everyday dealings of faith, hope, and charity. And yet, even in this sabbatarian grey time whose resolution, between eternal darkness or everlasting light, has yet to be revealed, it might yet, perhaps,

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[629] Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 22.
[630] Berger, *After the End*, 43.
[631] Berger, 43.

be possible to discern in the arts like postapocalyptic zombie fictions, or more generally, in 'the poem and the music, which tell of pain and of hope, of the flesh which is said to taste of ash and of the spirit which is said to have the savour of fire',[632] the rose glow of a submerged sunrise and the ambiguous, imperfect illuminations of the twilight in which we wait. Between theology and the arts, we might discover complementary representational modes which appeal to different aspects of our fragmented humanity, neither of which can represent the entirety of the Mystery, but whose amalgamated strengths and imperfections more nearly approach the natural limit of communicating the simple ungraspable truth.

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[632] George Steiner, *Real Presences* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 232.

Figures

Figure 1 A single image indicates both the present and the future in *Doomsday*, directed by Neil Marshall (2008; Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, 2008) DVD. Screenshot by author.
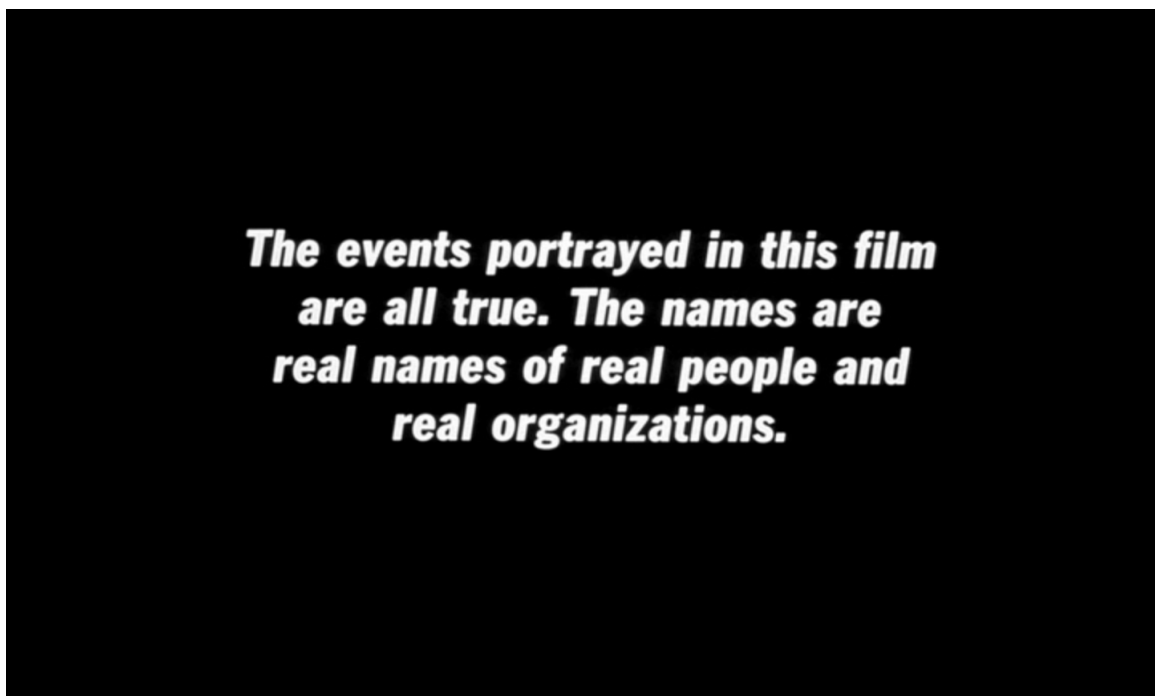

Figure 2 A fiction involving virtually unkillable zombies ironically claims documentary-like status in *Return of the Living Dead*, directed by Dan O'Bannon, (1985; Century City, CA: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2002), DVD. Screenshot by author.

Figure 3 Postapocalypse-like conditions are not limited to fiction. 'Syria Crisis: "Barrel Bomb Strikes Kill 72" in Aleppo Province', BBC News website, 30 May 2015, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32942090.

Figure 4 Packard Automotive Plant, Detroit, Michigan. Dave Jordano, *Collapsed Roof, Packard Automotive Plant, Eastside, Detroit 2012*, photograph, Dave Jordano (blog), accessed 29 August 2018, https://davejordano.com/detroit-unbroken-down/detroit-unbroken-down-4-2012-.

Figures 5 & 6 Real world ruins serve as backdrops in some present day postapocalyptic fictions, for example, a derelict tank factory, as described in Jim Mickle, Adam Folk, Ryan Samul, Graham Reznick, Peter Phok and Jeff Grace, 'Commentary #2', *Stakeland*, directed by Jim Mickle (2010; Orlando Park, IL: Dark Sky Films, 2011), DVD. Screenshot by author.

Figure 7 Contemporary urban decline offers a concrete image of thematic melancholia of *Only Lovers Left Alive,* directed by Jim Jarmusch, streaming video, accessed 2 September 2018, https://www.amazon.com/Only-Lovers-Left-Alive-John/dp/B00LDSQEVC/. Screenshot by author.

Figure 8 The phenomenal ambiguity of a Todorovian *fantastic* postapocalypse is carried to the tipping point in *Stalker*, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky (1979; New York: Criterion Collection, 2017), Blu-Ray Disc. Screenshot by author.
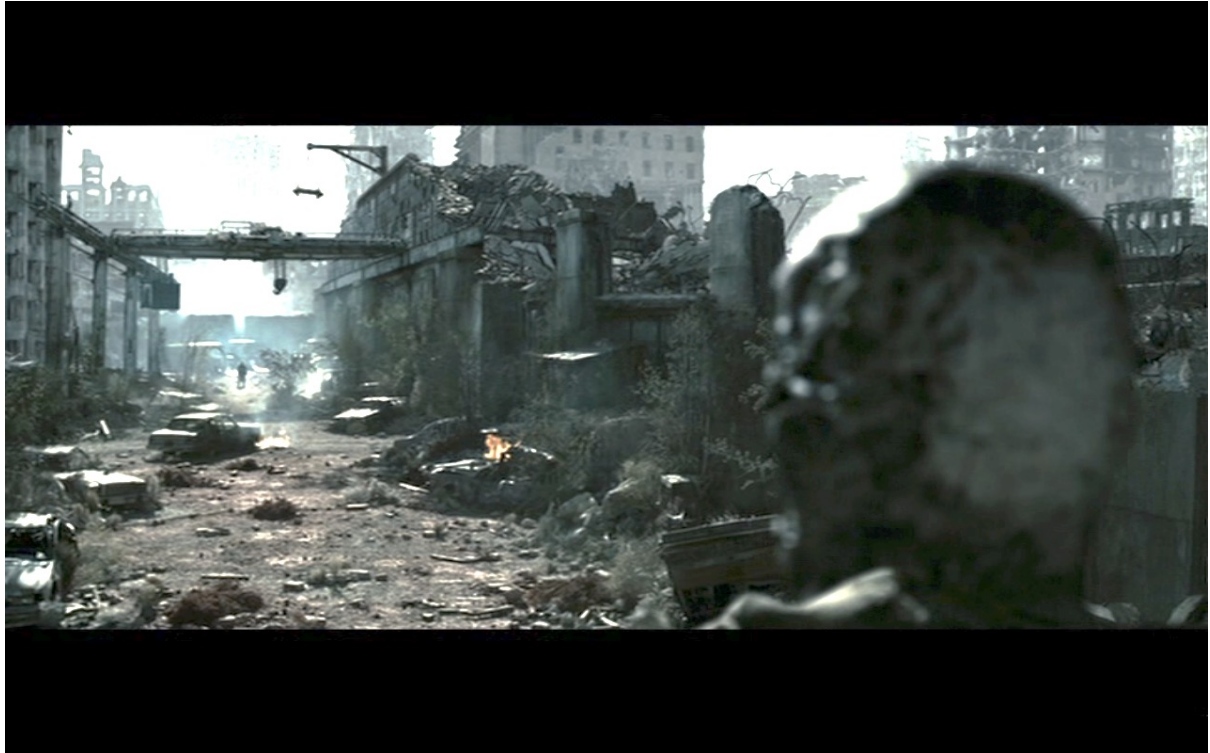
Figures 9 & 10 Ruinscapes make post-disaster disintegration conspicuous in *Terminator: Salvation*, directed by McG (2009; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2010), DVD; and in *Terminator: Genysis*, directed by Alan Taylor (2015; Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures Home Entertainment, 2015), DVD. Screenshots by author.

Figure 11 Ruinous backdrops 'tilt' the moral landscape, as it were, implicitly querying whether characters will follow a similar trajectory of decline. Screen shot of the *Third Man*, directed by Carol Reed (1949) provided by Drew Johnson, 'The Ephemeral Real, Part V', Los Angeles Review of Books website, accessed 2 September 2018, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/ephemeral-real-part-v/#!

Figure 12 The perils of getting close enough to touch in a traumatized world are explored in *The Survivalist*, directed by Stephen Fingleton (2015; Brighton: Bulldog Film Distribution, 2015), DVD. Screenshot by author.

Figures 13 & 14 While the above ground lies in the ruins of WWIII, scientific experimentation upon human beings takes place underground, the physical ruins representing both a consequence and an objective correlative of ruinous human destructive behavior in *La Jetée*, directed by Chris Marker, (1962; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2000), DVD. Screenshots by author.

Figure 15 As the *kosmos* of a postapocalyptic *paysage moralisé*, zombies can be understood to represent ruin personified. 'India's Taj Mahal Overrun by the Walking Dead', digital image, News.com.au (website), accessed 29 August 2018, https://www.news.com.au/national/nsw-act/sydneys-walking-wead-would-you-survive-a-zombie-apocalypse/news-story/bfeb0ef6944aa2c6fe05cc665b56f1a8.

Figure 16 Rick's dehydrated group drag themselves along the road, visual echoes of the bedraggled zombies following them in *The Walking Dead*, season 5, episode 10, 'Them', directed by Julius Ramsay, writetn by Heather Bellson, aired 15 February 2015, on AMC, https://www.amazon.com/Them/dp/B00NI1VFYI/. Screenshot by author.

Figure 17 Outward symbols of decay accompany staring into the void in *El Desierto*, directed by Christoph Behl (2013; Sherman Oaks, CA: Cinedigm Home Entertainment, 2014), DVD. Screenshot by author.

Figure 18 The 'first generation' folk zombie represents a kind of Caribbean slave's nightmare in *I Walked with a Zombie,* directed by Jacques Tourneur (1943). Screenshot provided by SJHoneywell, 'Dead Man (and Woman) Walking', 1001plus (blog), accessed 2 September 2018, 1001plus.blogspot.com/2010/05/dead-man-and-woman-walking.html.

Figure 19 For many persons today, *zombie* probably signifies a version of the 'pop zombie' introduced by *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), directed by George A. Romero, (1968; Troy, MI: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2002), DVD. Screenshot by author.

Figure 20 Many critics identify a 'third generation' of zombies starting with *28 Days Later,* directed by Danny Boyle (2002; Century City, CA: Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2003), DVD. Screenshot by author.

Figure 21 Nonpathological personhood requires engaging otherness in *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes* (2014), directed by Matt Reeves (2014; Century City, CA: 20th Century Fox, 2014), DVD. Screenshot by author.
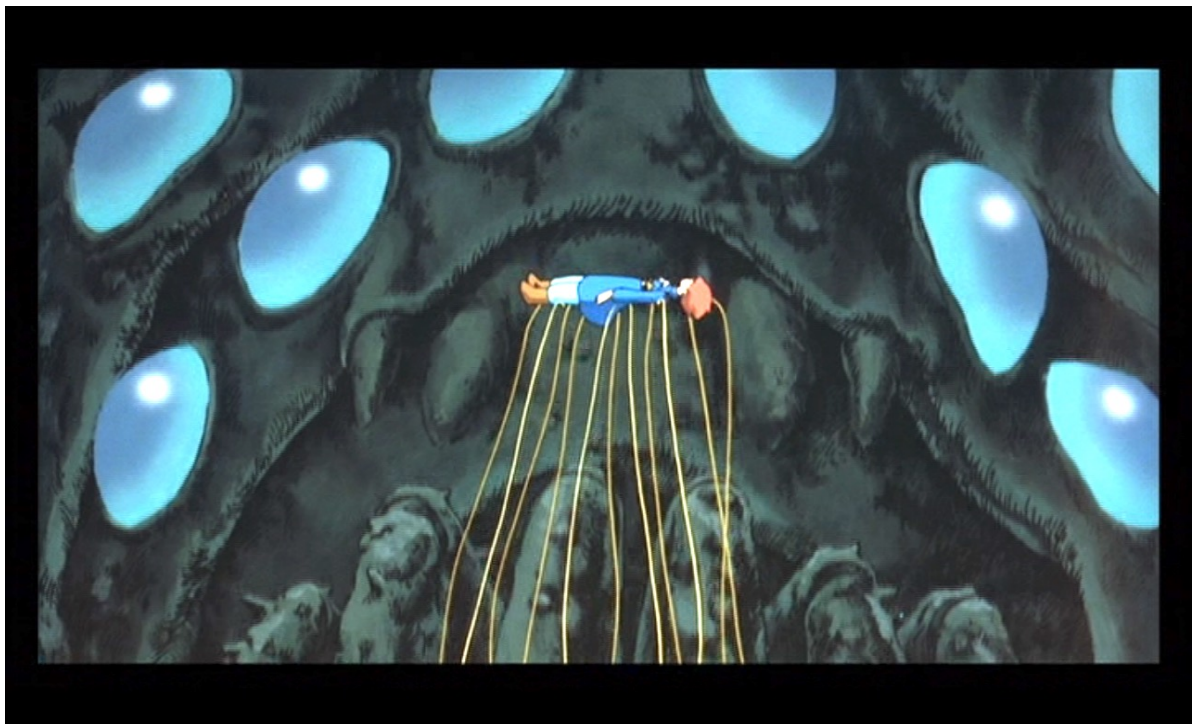

Figure 22 Sacrificial self-gift reconciles humanity and the 'other' in *Nausicaa: Valley of the Wind*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki (1984; Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2004), DVD. Screenshot by author.

Figures 23 & 24 Zombie-hunting speaks to racial tensions in *Night of the Living Dead*, directed by George A. Romero, (1968; Troy, MI: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2002), DVD. Screenshots by author.
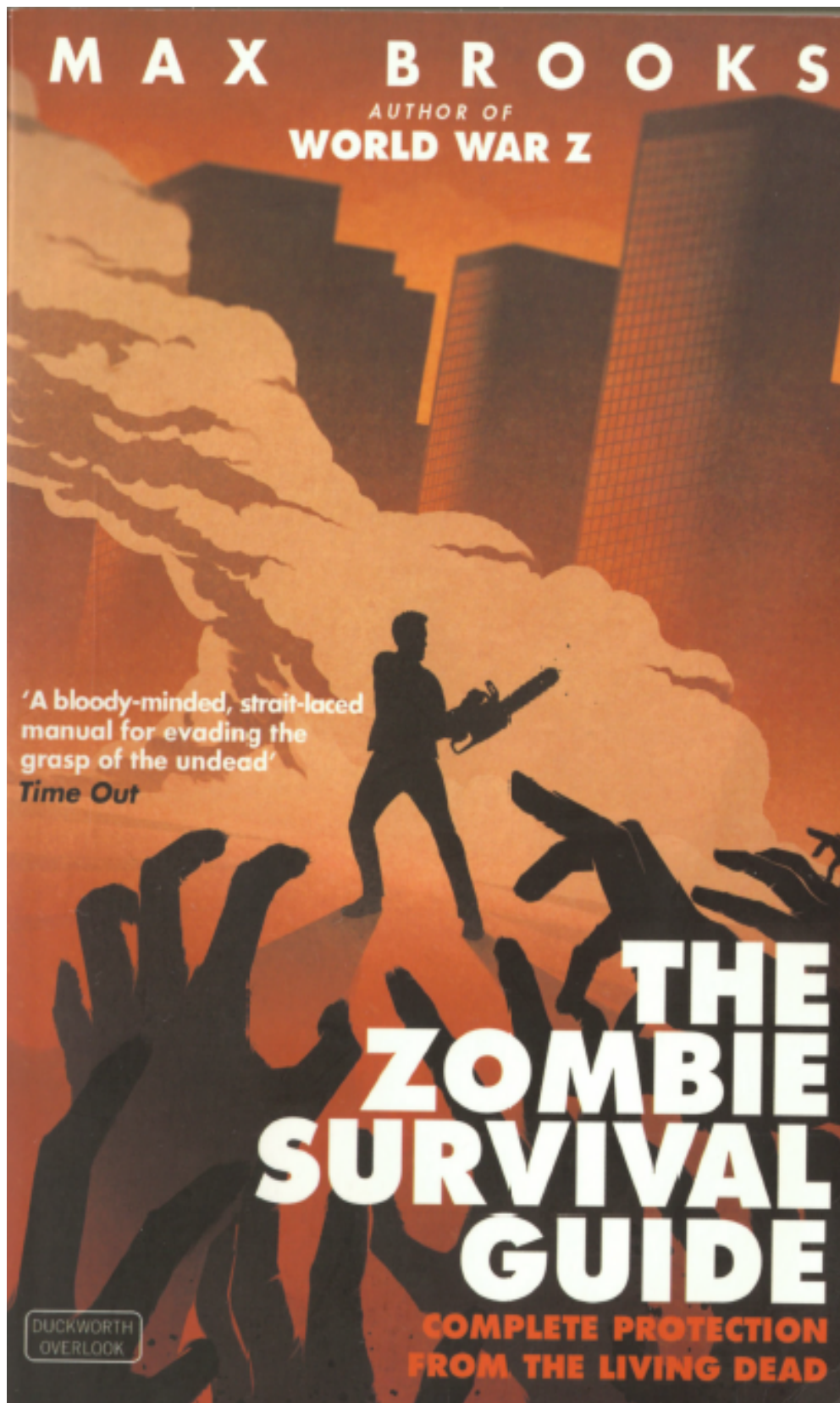
Figure 25 In a traumatized universe, genocide and revolution are two sides of the same coin. Max Brooks, *The Zombie Survival Guide* (London: Duckworth Overlook, 2004). Cover, designed by Matt Ferguson. Photo by author.

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