

SYBILLE MACHAT, *In the Ruins of Civilization: Narrative Structures, World Constructions and Physical Realities in the Post-Apocalyptic Novel* (Trier: WVT, 2013), 330 pp.

Contemporary culture is awash with images and narratives anticipating its own demise or, as the case may be, documenting its on-going decay. Scenarios depicting the aftermath of civilizational collapse have been a staple of popular entertainment, from feature films to comics and video games, at least since the 1990s; with novels such as John Updike's *Toward the End of Time* (1997), Margaret Atwood's *Madaddam* trilogy (2003, 2009, 2013), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) or Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011), they have now become securely entrenched in the precincts of "serious" literary fiction. If this development reflects a growing anxiety about the future prospects of contemporary society, it is only too easy to generate a litany of concerns which are fueling it. Sybille Machat's study *In the Ruins of Civilizations* forgoes such a bid for topicality, suggesting instead that the current vogue for the post-apocalyptic be seen as a continuation of modernity's long-standing fascination with the material remnants of earlier civilizations—a fascination which, from the very outset, was accompanied by attempts to imagine how the material infrastructure of the present, having likewise fallen into ruin, might appear to an observer in the distant future. While this "ruin lust," as art historian Brian Dillon has called it,¹ reached an early peak already in the eighteenth century with the aesthetics of the picturesque and the gothic, the era since the end of the Soviet Union may qualify as something of a second flowering.

This is a compelling premise which sets *In the Ruins of Civilization* somewhat apart from much extant scholarship on post-apocalyptic fiction, which tends to frame the genre in terms of the historical traumata of the twentieth century and to employ approaches from psychoanalytic or neo-marxist criticism.² To

fully explore its implications would require a close engagement with theories of historical consciousness and of the *post-histoire*, and it would lead into the territory explored, for example, by Frederic Jameson in *Archaeologies of the Future*, where he praises Science Fiction (of which the post-apocalyptic constitutes a subset) for its ability to transform "our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come," thus "enact[ing] and enabl[ing] a structurally unique 'method' for apprehending the present as history."³ But Machat takes a different tack. Her chief complaint with regard to previous studies of the post-apocalyptic is that they have generally failed to take full account of the physical environments in which such stories are set, treating them merely as a passive back-drop against which the narratives in question unfold. With this, she takes a leaf from ecocriticism, which has frequently leveled similar critiques against the anthropocentric mainstream of literary fiction in order to champion other, marginal genres, from nature writing to experimental poetry, which, it is then argued, are more apt to foster the reader's sensibility to ecological realities.

The idea of bringing such an argument to bear on post-apocalyptic fiction has a certain immediate plausibility. After all, there is a growing awareness that humanity may already have breached the ecological boundary conditions which have thus far allowed it to flourish, and the proliferation of post-apocalyptic narratives over the past few years—not only, but especially in American culture—can be seen as a more or less coded expression of this. Among recent science fiction novels or films set on a near-future Earth, one will be hard-pressed to find one which does not at least allude to the adverse effects of global climate change. Yet clearly, the question whether the environmental conditions depicted in such stories are scientifically plausible, whether they present a realistic picture of humanity's ecological dependencies, is not especially germane if one wishes to explicate the cultural work they perform *as fictions*. Some post-apocalyptic narratives may put such concerns center-stage; others will indeed relegate them to the background, and censoring such choices is hardly a substitute for understanding why they were made in the first place.

¹ Brian Dillon, *Ruins* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2011), 12.

² See for example James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-apocalypse* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999), and Teresa Heffernan, *Post-apocalyptic Culture: Modernism, Postmodern, and the Twentieth Century Novel* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2008).

³ Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), 288.

Machat appears to be quite aware of this problem. Her proposed solution is both interesting and theoretically ambitious: a more fine-grained account of the physical settings of post-apocalyptic narratives is desirable, she argues, not because it would satisfy the imperatives of some sort of non-anthropocentric ethics, but rather because the nature of the changes wrought by the apocalyptic event also conditions the narrative possibilities available to the author. Conversely, the narrative strategies mobilized by the text determine what readers learn about these changes and how they are affectively engaged by them. In a story which tells of the total annihilation of the human race, the author will probably not wish to resort to a first person narrator; and it makes an important difference whether, in a narrative with internal focalization, the consequences of the catastrophic event are revealed only gradually, or whether, in a story told by an omniscient third-person narrator, the reader is privy to the full extent of the cataclysm.

The goal of *In the Ruins of Civilizations*, then, is to explore the relationship between narrative form and the depiction of physical environments in post-apocalyptic fiction. In the first three chapters of the book, Machat assembles the theoretical toolkit to accomplish this task: she provides an overview of earlier scholarship on the post-apocalyptic; a brief discussion of Franz Stanzel's and Gérard Genette's theories of narrative discourse, as well as Marie Laure-Ryan's conceptualization of space in narrative; and summaries of the tripartite distinction between landscape, wilderness, and ecosystem proposed by the German landscape ecologists Thomas Kirchhoff and Ludwig Trepl, as well as of Francesco Orlando's theory of "obsolete objects in literature" and earlier "ruin theories." This section of the book is clearly designed to satisfy the formal requirements of a German dissertation—it is the obligatory "Theorieteil" in which candidates have to put their theoretical chops on display. Unfortunately, while these discussions often serve to provide a concise introduction to the respective areas of study, as well as a very helpful overview of post-apocalyptic fiction, their utility for the larger argument of the book almost ends there: even though the critical terms introduced in this part, and especially the narratological vocabulary, do figure in the literary analyses that follow, they are not employed in anything like the systematic fashion that Machat's frequent em-

ployment of typological tables and diagrams would lead one to expect.

Nevertheless, the analyses themselves show Machat as a perceptive reader who does not allow herself to be tripped up by the conceptual clutter of the book's first section. With Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, she takes on what are arguably the most prominent recent representatives of post-apocalyptic narrative in serious literary fiction; she complements them with two lesser-known novels, *Julian Comstock: A Story of 22nd-Century America* by the US-Canadian author Robert Charles Wilson, and *Genesis* by the New Zealander Bernard Beckett. The first two novels serve her as representatives of what she designates as "narratives of first-generation survival," whereas the latter illustrate "narratives of ages-gone cataclysm." In all four of these texts, each of which gets a chapter, she highlights facets that have escaped the attention of earlier critics. Her discussions of McCarthy's unorthodox spelling in *The Road*, or of the intertextual references in *Oryx and Crake*, for example, must count as solid contributions to the already copious scholarship on these novels—although it remains somewhat unclear how they bear on the study's ostensible project (except insofar as they contribute to the novels' "world-building"—a portmanteau term that is never fully fleshed out). Likewise, it is a little mystifying why Machat deems it necessary to back up the insight, significant though it is, that *Julian Comstock* is a retelling of the story of Roman Emperor Julian Apostata, with a meticulous account of the latter that covers no less than eight pages. Nor is this the only occasion where the book is marred by a lack of proportion between means and interpretive ends. Early on, she remarks that McCarthy leaves the cause of the cataclysm in *The Road* deliberately vague. Yet this does not discourage her from devoting fully six pages to a detailed discussion of how the environmental circumstances depicted in the novel tally up against the potential real-world consequences of a meteoric impact or a nuclear war. These places would have called for much stricter editing, as would the rather numerous typographical errors. Despite these various short-comings, this book will be a profitable read for all Americanists with an interest in post-apocalyptic fiction.

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