

Book Review: Embracing the End: American Apocalypse in the Twenty-first Century

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Sibylle Machat, *In the Ruins of Civilizations: Narrative Structures, World Constructions, and Physical Realities in the Post-Apocalyptic Novel* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2013), 330pp.



Sibylle Machat's *In the Ruins of Civilizations* is an ambitious ecocritical exploration of American twenty-first century apocalyptic writing. The study is serious, well-conceived, analytical, and thorough in terms of scope, theoretical depth, and application. *Ruins of Civilizations* successfully investigates, amongst other issues, the "different levels of knowledge and forgetfulness" between different narrative levels of twenty-first century American fiction. As a result, Machat forces us to reconsider the ways in which we conceive of the twenty-first century American apocalyptic novel. This study is highly recommended for those with interests in ecocriticism and the apocalypse, and more specifically, in recent American aesthetic manifestations of doom.

The book is divided into several sections, including an historical and contextual review, theoretical discussion, and case studies of four American novels that deal primarily with apocalyptic narratives that were published after 2000. The first section is an extensive historical and contextual review. Important is that the background information is efficiently provided, and gradually builds an argument for the theoretical discussion that follows. One of the major questions of the study is: "How does the state of the physical world influence, determine, and limit" the scope of the post-apocalyptic society that develops in the selected narratives? Also important is that Machat attempts to understand better what she calls the different narrative levels of the texts in question. One of the strongest parts of the theoretical section, in my view, is a very helpful table Machat includes called "Nature and Mankind in the Post-apocalypse – a classification of some major examples" (53-54), which will no doubt work as a map for future ecocritical researchers when thinking about important distinctions between different apocalyptic scenarios. The bulk of *In the Ruins of Civilizations* is dedicated to case studies of four central texts: Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Bernard Beckett's *Genesis* (2009), and Robert Charles Wilson's *Julian Comstock: A Story of 22nd-Century America* (2009).

The first case study deals with Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, and starts by reflecting on narrative structure and world building in the novel. The author emphasizes the motif of "doubling" in the narrative, which in *Oryx and Crake* involves two temporal threads as well as different dystopian visions. Also discussed in this chapter is the importance of names to the characters in the narrative as well as the use of borrowed

quotations from Shakespeare, Coleridge, Babcock, Blake, and the nursery rhyme “Star Light, Star Bright.” Much of this chapter is devoted to the discussion of world construction by different characters in the narrative. It is suggested that the worlds constructed in *Oryx and Crake* happen on different levels, at the level of action in the future-past world, and at the level of quotation, which suggests that poetry remains a potent force in this place. Finally, this chapter puts forward that the importance of names in this world help characters and readers understand this alien environment.

The second case study turns to Cormac McCarthy’s well-known *The Road*. The chapter describes the importance of beats, in the form of action and description tags, quotation marks, speech, and speech tags, to the larger narrative. Machat then considers the use of contractions in *The Road*. What then follows is a detailed reflection on the possible cataclysmic origin of the ecological apocalypse in *The Road*. It is wondered whether an asteroid (146) or an atomic war (148) are the forces that have wreaked such widespread destruction in this world. The discussion of the characters’ allegiance to communities is particularly interesting, since such a development would seem to suggest that even in a destroyed world, forms of human society might still survive. If this is true, then the next thing to consider is whether forms of human hope can still exist. By extension, we might retain hope, even in our own time of ecological destruction. This chapter ends with a discussion of the importance of physical and cultural objects in the destroyed world of *The Road*. Both a wallet and a can of Coke are powerful reminders of desperate human isolation in a truly lost universe. Finally, this chapter discusses world construction by the characters of the narrative.

The third case study is on Bernard Beckett’s 2009 *Genesis*. The thematic concerns of the book are considered in the first part of the chapter. Machat then examines the setting of the narrative, which recalls images of Classical antiquity. A lengthy discussion of the significance of Greek and biblical names in the *Genesis* narrative follows. It is suggested that Bernard Beckett accomplishes world building in *Genesis* partially through the careful use of character names. This section transitions to a wider discussion of world construction in the novel by characters, the academy, and the implied author. This chapter further handles the physical world of *Genesis*, which includes ruins and objects as subjects of sentimental nostalgia. Interesting here is that Machat considers the actual covers of different editions of the *Genesis* narrative. She argues that the book covers help shape the reader’s expectations, and are therefore crucial to the wider reading experience.

The final content chapter of *In the Ruins of Civilizations* takes on Robert Charles Wilson’s 2009 *Julian Comstock: A Story of 22nd-Century America*. After an extensive discussion of the character named Julian in the story, the narrative perspective is considered. More interesting in this chapter is the discussion of the physical world in *Julian Comstock*. It is suggested that “survival concerns primarily code the mental positioning of the land,” which suggests that the human imagination remains a vital component of world construction in this place. Such a development has obvious implications for ecocriticism beyond this study. The chapter ends by arguing that the ruins and residue of the previous civilization not only shapes the world in which the

narrative takes place. Remaining cultural fragments provide crucial knowledge that, eventually, generates the major conflicts that take place in the narrative.

While overall the study is thorough, deliberate and calculated, there are some limits. The use of online dictionaries and encyclopedias devalues what is otherwise a mature and methodical scholarly study. Additionally, the choice of corpus is a little thin and rather conventional. Ecocritical conferences frequently include presentations on Margaret Atwood and Cormac McCarthy. One wonders if the corpus for this study could have included more experimental or unconventional texts, or texts from different periods. Why do a case study on McCarthy's *The Road* and not *Planet of the Apes*? The author was no doubt trying to limit the study to twenty-first century texts, but why was this limitation needed? Would not a study that includes a larger number of cultural texts be more diverse, and potentially even stronger in terms of vision? Thus, in her selection of texts, Machat seems to have been hampered by her desire to play it safe. It would indeed be very interesting to see what she can accomplish with unconventional, experimental, or even irreverent texts. Furthermore, the bibliography is a little thin in places. For example, the theoretical discussion of apocalypse rightfully includes discussion of Gary K. Wolfe's 1983 "The Remaking of Zero: Beginning at the End," but neglects to consider other theoretical approaches to apocalypse in literature, including James Berger's *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (1999), Frederick Buell's *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Environmental Crisis in the American Century* (2003), Richard Dellamora's *Postmodern Apocalypse: Theory and Cultural Practice at the End* (1995), and Stephen O'Leary's *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (1994). Why include discussion of Wolfe's paper from 1983 and not Berger's book from 1999? What insights does Wolfe's paper have the Berger's book lacks? Essentially, a better metacritical justification for the theoretical choices the author made would have been desirable. Finally, I find that stylistically, the writing could have been more dynamic. Run-on sentences and excessive paragraph length are problems throughout. Additionally, some typos and grammatical errors should have been eliminated during copyediting.

However, such stylistic complaints are rather minor, and should not detract from the merits of what is overall a comprehensive and convincing study. *In the Ruins of Civilizations* not only marks the arrival of a young scholar with much potential onto the European ecocritical scene, but also opens an ecocritical window into the early 21st century American apocalyptic mindset and how it plays out in the imaginative space we call literature.

Works Cited

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