

Science Fiction (HI308) – Dave Reason

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List 3 – Essay question no.54:

Write an essay on some other science fiction theme for which you gained prior approval from your seminar leader

POST-APOCALYPSE

“Clearly the introduction of the other, the outré, whether in terms of supernatural manifestations or creatures from outer space, is going to upset man’s conception of his own situation and prompt him to relate his existence to a broader framework. It is the particular function of all worthwhile science fiction to explore the philosophical consequences of any such radical disorientation.” Rose, Mark., Science Fiction A collection Of Critical Essays, Prentice-Hall, Inc, USA (1976)

Max: “I’m just here for the gasoline.”

Apocalyptic thought is hardly unique to the contemporary literature. It's been a fixture of mankind's culture for centuries, since it is being referred to in the three holy books. The post-apocalyptic thought however, is rather new; a theory where the human race is not wiped out completely but a new generation (or just a few survivors) is born from the ashes of an apocalypse. Such a theory could only be delivered in the science fiction genre and it was originated in the 19th century. This essay focuses on the evolution of post-apocalyptic film genre through the early SF catastrophe and holocaust novels, elements of post-apocalyptic settings and societies, post-apocalyptic master-pieces, influences and exploitation flicks.

The idea of a natural mass scale disaster, which can send the human civilisation the way of the dinosaurs with an exception of some survivors, was initially explored in the 19th century. Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) "in which plague crosses Europe from the Middle East, leaving one survivor in Rome who is possibly the last man"¹ is considered to be the starting point for such theories in science fiction literature. Later in 1859, in Herrman Lang's *The Air Battle: A Vision of the Future*, "European civilization is destroyed by flood and earthquake, but a benevolent North-African federation brings peace to the world, Black leading White back to social order"². This is the first story in literature that depicts an altered society structure in the aftermath of an apocalyptic disaster, which will later be an essential element in post-apocalypse films of the following century. Finally, the novel in which the post-apocalyptic story takes on its distinctive modern form is Richard Jefferies's *After London* (1885) where "an invasion by the North Sea swamps the entire Thames Valley, leaving London a stinking island of poisonous fumes: a deadly remainder of the bad old days"³.

The causes of the various apocalypse theories were entirely natural at this level. This comparative innocence, which can not see the self-destruction of mankind as an option, also persisted in the beginning of the 20th century. Stories such as Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1914), George Allan England's *Darkness and Dawn* (1914), Anderson Graham's *The Collapse of Homo Sapiens* (1923), Fowler Wright's *Deluge* (1928), H.G. Wells' *When Worlds Collide* (1932) and George Steward's *Earth Abides* (1949) were all portraying various post-apocalyptic settings but the causes of the apocalypse were still non-human.

In the late 1940's and 50's, a darker approach has emerged in Science Fiction towards the post apocalyptic idea. Mainly because it was now a world, which had experienced the World War II that is far more global, ruthless and devastating than any other war in the history of mankind. After the World War II, "there has been a decline in positive, utopian visions of the future and an increase – particularly in Science Fiction – of visions of imminent decline and disaster"⁴. The belief of a human-caused end to the civilisation became more powerful and sensible than a natural catastrophe theory such as a comet, plague or flood. Mankind has experienced the threat of natural disasters and plagues and even thought of a probable collision with a comet, but has never been this close to its own destruction by a war.

During the research for this essay, the sources about the earlier science fiction literature tend use the term post-holocaust or post-catastrophe for the genre. However, the sources for the films after 1950's use the term 'post-apocalyptic'. This is a

¹ Clute, John and Nicholls, Peter., *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, Orbit, London (1999) p.581

² *ibid* p.581

³ Stover, Leon., *Science Fiction from Wells to Heinlein*, McFarland & Company, London (2002)

⁴ Rabkin, S. Eric., *Fights of Fancy Armed Conflict in Science Fiction and Fantasy*, The University of Georgia Press, London (1993) p.121

deliberate and striking distinction between eras and genres. The word apocalypse has the concept of 'sin' immersed in it. Since it is the human rage that causes the end of civilisation in the post-WWII science fiction stories, this particular genre was renamed as 'post-apocalyptic'. Apocalypse in Science Fiction is frequently used as a mirror theme for the fear of the uncontrollable consequences of the human evolution. The overwhelming acceleration of the technological developments and globalisation became the central cause for post-apocalyptic theories in the second half of the 20th century. *Them!* (1954), delivers an apocalyptic threat of giant ants, which mutated as a result of nuclear bomb tests. At the end of the film, where the last giant ants are being burned by flamethrowers, 'the all-American general' asks 'the wise old scientist' of what will happen next. The old scientist's answer is naïve but nostalgically informative about the post-WWII paranoia; "We can't possibly know, Man has entered the atomic age!"... and the movie fades out, showing the last remaining burning and screaming giant ants as they suffer the sins of men.

The first film in the post-WWII era that clearly indicates the cause of its post-apocalypse setting as a devastating 'war' is *The Omega Man* (1971). Charlton Heston is the sole survivor of a biological warfare and he is fighting against zombies which were once human but now biologically turned into soulless monsters. But *The Omega Man* doesn't really deliver a post-apocalyptic society which is the main element to create and play with the social and political metaphors. It is definitely the cult, low-budget *The Boy And His Dog* (1975) which sets the basic features for the post-apocalyptic genre. The main elements of the post-apocalyptic films are 'a desert setting in the aftermath of a nuclear war', 'an altered society structure in the remains of a wiped-out civilisation', 'duel-society structure' and 'morally corrupt heroes/characters'.

'A desert setting in the aftermath of a nuclear war' and 'an altered society structure in the remains of a wiped-out civilisation' are the core elements for post-apocalyptic movies to build upon. Desert wastelands definitely became a vital part of post-apocalyptic films after the *Mad Max I* (1979) and *Mad Max II: The Road Warrior* (1981). *Mad Max II: The Road Warrior* is one of the most influential movies ever considering its genre. George Miller uses the high-way, road rash theme (which is perfect for a low-budget, wasteland setting) as well as the punk, biker-gang attitude and manages to create a very dark, pessimistic and immoral society. The social corruption is used as a tool to illustrate the devastated moral values as a result of the World War III. The same issue goes for *A Boy And His Dog*; the film depicts a small gypsy-like society where people barter and watch porn. The fact that this society, too, was created with low production values became very efficient for the plot and influential for the later post-apocalyptic films. The desert setting is used in many later post-apocalyptic settings such as *Death Sport* (1978), *Cyborg* (1989), *Tank Girl* (1995), and *The Postman* (1997). A desert wasteland was rather easier to create in terms of production values but the idea became so dominant and inseparable from the post-apocalypse concept that *Fist Of The North Star* (1986), which is a milestone-cult-anime, takes place entirely in deserts with biker-gangs and ruined cities. Moreover, In *Waterworld* (1995), the movie's astronomical budget was used mainly to create a desert wasteland environment, only this time, disguised as infinite oceans.

In all of the movies cited above, 'the altered society structure' is exclusively dominant. The viciousness and barbarity give the post-apocalyptic movies a medieval atmosphere to stress on the lack of humanity and altruism. This is clearly an extent of the post-WWII pessimism. The 'society structure' in post-apocalyptic movies are parallel to their time of making and their budget. Also, the amalgamation of the

primitive and advanced tools and vehicles, depict both regression and progression in the post-apocalypse technology. The objects used in the film can be identified with their iconography of their own; Cars, for instance, are significant elements for the description of the post-apocalyptic setting of Mad Max. “In the Mad Max films, the rage is fixed on the automobile itself, for the automobile embodies many of the basic contradictions of contemporary capitalism.”⁵ Since capitalism’s roots go deep down to the survival-of-the-fittest, the pessimism, disbelief and the rage against the human nature also aim the capitalism and build on capitalist elements to portray the post-apocalyptic wastelands of Mad Max. “*Mad Max: Beyond the Thunderdome* demonstrates attitudes toward the state and the violence, for with Bartertown, it tries to imagine the re-emergence of the state in social Darwinist terms, one based not on any innate or learned system of morals or laws but functioning solely on economic conventions”⁶ This attitude toward the state and the violence is very familiar to the Mad Max viewers, since the first two Mad Max movies were influenced by films like *Bullit*, *Wild One* and *Easy Rider* (where car chases and biker gangs are inseparable elements). ‘The remains of the civilisation’ is substantial to the making of the post-apocalyptic societies. This concept was first portrayed intensely in *Logan’s Run* (1976), where the survivors of the apocalypse sealed themselves into a domed city and to maintain the population balance, the computers that run the city have decreed that all people must die at 30. When Logan is 30, he decides to escape to the outside world where he finds Washington D.C. in ruins. The vision of the collapse of civilisation, where people move among the ruins of technology they no longer understand, is an important subset of the post apocalypse. It creates an alienation for the inhabitants of the wastelands but at the same time, manages to illustrate a totally unique setting free from any technological or chronological borders. The theme of “the remains of the prior civilisation” was also used in early SF Mars stories to portray Mars as an older dying planet. The most recognized example of this, is the ruins of Krull, in *The Forbidden Planet*. Another eminent image for a collapsed civilisation (this time, human) is the Statue of Liberty at the end of *Planet of The Apes* (1968), which sets the scene suddenly from a distant planet to a post-apocalyptic earth.

The ‘duel-society’ element in post-apocalyptic movies is probably the best method to feed in the social and political themes under the wasteland settings. It gives the viewer the chance to compare and contrast two different societies who were formed in the aftermath of an apocalypse. Since, generally these societies are recently formed, their different paths of evolution are also there which deepen the social texture. This issue was first brought up in H.G. Wells’ *Time Machine* (1960) which is not necessarily a post-apocalyptic movie. The movie explores the distant future on earth where there are two races, a mild gentle race, and a cannibalistic one living underground. Ironies like ‘working class’, ‘racism’ and ‘geo-politics’ are delivered in an exaggerated manner using two opposite races. Later, the idea of two different races was shaped into many different aspects. In *Mad Max*, *The Road Warrior*, *The Postman*, *Waterworld* and *Reign of Fire*, there are not two races but two societies; one is settled and the other one is nomad. They are usually are clashed with a siege scene. This clash delivers lots of contrasts; in *The Road Warrior*, the scavengers are depicted as the barbarian nomads who ask the people of the besieged community to *walk away*... In *Waterworld*, the scavengers are called ‘the smokers’ who use motorboats

⁵ Rabkin, S. Eric., *Fights of Fancy Armed Conflict in Science Fiction and Fantasy*, The University of Georgia Press, London (1993) p.121

⁶ *ibid* p.123

and jet-skis where as the people of the besieged community in *Waterworld* use sails and wind-based machines. In *Reign of Fire* where the world is dominated by dragons, a small British society lives in a castle (the medieval theme, once again) without any connections to the outside world (if there are any other survivors). One day a group of rogues show up and the inhabitants of the castle get armed and waiting. The closer the rogues they get, it is understood that they are not the mobile-scavengers that they fear but, worst, they are the Americans! One can say that the concept of dual-society fits in the apocalyptic settings perfectly and it can be expanded parallel to the use of endless metaphors and ironies.

The dark, pessimist approach gets even more influential in the later films of the century and this delivers the final element which is the 'morally corrupt heroes/characters'. During and after the Mad Max films, the demoniac and Reaganistic view became more popular resulting in a comic-book-like symbolisation of the wild-capitalism. Movies like *The Terminator* (1984), *Cyborg* (1989), *American Cyborg* (1994) and *Tank Girl* (1995) were aggressive and brutal but moreover they had morally corrupt main characters to lead the stories. The initial example of this element is, once again, *The Boy and His Dog* where the main character, Albert, is a loner whose needs are survival, food and sex. He steals, rapes and wanders around in a society where people watch porn publicly. The character, Albert, was influential for *Waterworld's* Mariner who is ready to kill a little girl in order to survive. Mariner is a character with a lot of rage in him against the humankind (he is not exactly human, having evolved, he can swim as fast as a fish and has some mutated body parts like his ears and feet). The rage of the main characters in post-apocalyptic films, force them to be morally unacceptable for our way of life. Paradoxically, since our way of life caused their pains, their rage is almost sympathetic to the viewer. Even if they are not ruthless, at least they have an immoral attitude against sex like the Tank Girl. These basic mutations in the traits of the post-apocalyptic characters deliberately add to the societal tone of each setting, criticising human rage. But certainly none of them can reach the level of their pioneer; At the end of *The Boy and His Dog*, Albert logically chooses to cook and eat the girl who is in love with him, in order to feed his starving telepathic dog. The dog is the most vital figure for Albert's survival in the wastelands and such other behaviour of Albert would be totally unreasonable...

Post-apocalypse genre with its metaphors, ironies and social context delivered great pictures but inevitably it has an exploitation faction as well. The *Ultimate Warrior* (1975), *Damnation Alley* (1977) and *Death Sport* (1978) are some of the pre-Mad Max B-movies. As it's mentioned several times in this essay, post-apocalyptic concept doesn't lose much from its efficiency when it's done on a low budget. This allowed the exploitation wave and the B-movie producers to work on post-apocalyptic stories. With lots of ridiculous acting, cheap effects and poor dialogue, post-apocalyptic trash almost became a genre of its own. But, the peak of the post-apocalyptic trash was the eighties. With the success of Mad Max films and John Carpenter's *Escape From New York* (1981), the market became packed with cheap rip-offs. *Escape from New York* wasn't a post-apocalyptic movie exactly but with the heavy dystopian elements and a marvellous depiction of a sinful isolated society, it became immensely influential for the post-apocalyptic genre. Maybe the most interesting example of post-apocalyptic exploitation movies is Stephan Sayadian's *Café-Flesh* (1982), where in the aftermath of nuclear apocalypse, 99% of the survivors are Sex Negatives; they become violently ill if they attempt to have sex. The minority Sex Positives engage in carnal theatre for the entertainment of the Negatives at Cafe Flesh. This cult, sexploitation film delivers a deep and coherent plot, good

dialogue and artistic imagery as well as hardcore porn with the complete elements (which are constructed in this essay) of a post-apocalyptic movie.

The first half of the 80's, was also the era of cheap Italian post-apocalypse flicks like *Warriors of the Wasteland* (1982), *After the Fall of New York* (1983), *Stryker* (1983), *Exterminators of the Year 3000* (1983) and *Rats – Night of Terror* (1984). While they are mainly *Mad Max* and *Escape From New York* rip-offs with horrible dubbing, poor dialogue and cheap effects with no exception, they managed to grab the attention of the kids and b-movie geeks due their post-apocalyptic elements resulting in profit. Bruno Matteo's *Rats – Night of Terror* is probably the most popular of its kind; One hundred years after a nuclear war has devastated the planet, society has been reborn into two factions; the underground society and the scavengers above in the wastelands. A group of biker-scavengers (with ridiculous names like Chocolate, Video and Deus) come across a town infested with flesh eating rats and the night of terror begins. After an hour of boring, cliché horror scenes, at the end of the movie only two survivors are left and they are rescued from the rats by the underground society. When one of the underground society members takes off his mask, it is revealed that they had mutated long ago in to half human – half vermin freaks of the God!

Even the unashamed rip-offs and the low-budget pure action flicks eventually expanded the post apocalyptic genre. Although they were ridiculous, they offered some wild imagination which influenced the later post-apocalyptic films and computer games of the 90's. Born and evolved with pure imagination and the fear of the mankind, the post-apocalyptic genre proved to be an innovational and resourceful ground for alternative future theories. Each film influencing the next one, post-apocalyptic movies and novels will be in constant change, coextending with the human way of life. The post-apocalyptic idea will always be an exhortation for the uncontrolled human evolution and the rage.

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