

Sibylle Machat

In the Ruins of Civilizations

Narrative Structures, World Constructions and
Physical Realities in the Post-Apocalyptic Novel

Walter Göbel, Therese Fischer-Seidel, Klaus Stierstorfer (Hg.)

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Für meine Eltern und meine Schwester

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Table of Contents

1	Introduction	1
2	The Post-Apocalypse	11
2.1	Terminology	11
2.2	A Brief History of the Post-Apocalypse	12
2.2.1	Eschatological Tales	12
2.2.2	Fictional Post-Apocalypses	14
2.2.3	First-Generation Survival vs. Ages-Gone Cataclysm	22
2.3	Theories of the Post-Apocalypse	24
2.3.1	Localizing the Post-Apocalyptic Genre	25
2.3.2	Uses and Gratifications	27
2.3.3	Wolfe's Five Stages Model	31
2.3.4	Characteristics of the Post-Apocalypse	39
3	Theory	40
3.1	My Theoretical Interest	40
3.2	Narrative Levels and Structures	40
3.2.1	Franz Stanzel, A Theory of Narrative	41
3.2.2	Gérard Genette, Narrative Discourse	42
3.2.3	Reactions and Revisions to Genette's Theory	44
3.2.4	Narrative Levels	45
3.2.5	Narrative Communication	48
3.2.6	Space in Narrative	49
3.3	The State of the Physical World	50
3.3.1	Ecocriticism	51
3.3.2	The Effects of the Catastrophe	52
3.3.3	A Theory of Landscapes, Wildernesses and Ecosystems	58
3.3.3.1	Examinations of the Physical World in Post-Apocalyptic Analyses	62
3.3.4	Ingredients of the Post-Apocalyptic World	63
3.3.4.1	Objects in the Post-Apocalypse	63
3.3.4.2	Ruin Theories	72
3.3.4.3	Ruins and the Post-Apocalypse	74
3.4	Recapitulation	79

4	Margaret Atwood, <i>Oryx & Crake</i>	81
4.1	Introduction	81
4.2	Locating <i>Oryx & Crake</i>	81
4.2.1	The Crakers	83
4.3	The Narrative Structure of <i>Oryx & Crake</i>	84
4.4	Names and Quotations as Tools of World Building	88
4.4.1	Names in <i>Oryx & Crake</i>	88
4.4.2	Quotations in <i>Oryx & Crake</i>	89
4.5	The State and Shape of the Pre-Catastrophe Society	98
4.5.1	Digital Realities	100
4.5.2	Outside of the Digital	104
4.6	The Physical World after the Catastrophe	106
4.6.1	Ruins in the Post-Catastrophe World	109
4.6.2	(Nonfunctional) Objects in the Post-Catastrophe World	111
4.7	World Construction by Characters	116
4.7.1	World Construction in <i>Oryx & Crake: Crake</i>	116
4.7.2	World Construction in <i>Oryx & Crake: Oryx</i>	124
4.7.3	World Construction in <i>Oryx & Crake: Snowman</i>	127
4.7.4	World Construction in <i>Oryx & Crake: The Crakers</i>	133
4.8	Recapitulation	134
5	Cormac McCarthy, <i>The Road</i>	136
5.1	Introduction	136
5.2	The Organization and Style of <i>The Road</i>	137
5.2.1	Contractions in <i>The Road</i>	140
5.2.2	Narrative Perspective in <i>The Road</i>	143
5.3	Constructing the Physical World	144
5.3.1	The Catastrophe and its Effects	145
5.3.1.1	The Nature of the Catastrophe	145
5.3.1.2	The Effects of the Catastrophe	151
5.3.2	The Isochronic World	156
5.3.2.1	Ruins in the Isochronic World	158
5.3.2.2	The Beach	160
5.3.2.3	Objects in the Isochronic World: Non-Functional Objects	162
5.3.2.4	Objects in the Isochronic World: Functional Objects	165
5.4	World Construction by Characters	174
5.4.1	The Man and the Boy	174

5.4.1.1	Bad Guys and Good Guys (Who Carry the Fire)	178
5.4.1.2	Religion	180
5.4.2	Ely	182
5.4.3	The Boy	185
5.5	The Ending of <i>The Road</i>	187
5.6	Recapitulation	189
6	Bernard Beckett, <i>Genesis</i>	191
6.1	The Setting of <i>Genesis</i>	192
6.1.1	Plato's <i>Republic</i>	194
6.1.2	Plato's <i>Politeia</i> and <i>Genesis</i> ' Plato's Republic	197
6.2	Names in <i>Genesis</i>	198
6.2.1	Greek names in <i>Genesis</i>	201
6.2.2	Biblical names in <i>Genesis</i>	206
6.2.3	Other names in <i>Genesis</i>	210
6.2.4	Interim Summation	210
6.3	World-Building by Characters	211
6.3.1	World-Building by Artfink and Adam	212
6.3.2	World-Building by the Academy	217
6.3.2.1	Public Knowledge in the Isochronic Society	217
6.3.2.2	The Hidden Truth	218
6.3.2.3	Adam's Secret Legacy	221
6.4	The Implied Author's World Construction	225
6.5	The Physical World in <i>Genesis</i>	227
6.5.1	Ruins and Objects in the Isochronic World	228
6.6	World-Building via Cover Art	229
6.7	Recapitulation	236
7	Robert Charles Wilson, <i>Julian Comstock: A Story of 22nd-Century America</i>	238
7.1	The Historical Background of <i>Julian Comstock</i>	239
7.1.1	The Byzantine Empire	239
7.1.2	Emperor Julian	240
7.2	The Narrative Perspective of <i>Julian Comstock</i>	248
7.3	The Physical World in <i>Julian Comstock</i>	250
7.4	The Future History and Society of <i>Julian Comstock</i>	252
7.4.1	The Efflorescence of Oil and its Effects	252

7.4.2	The Dominion of Jesus Christ	254
7.4.3	The Isochronic Society	255
7.4.4	Ruins, Reminders and Relics in <i>Julian Comstock</i>	258
7.5	Julian Comstock – the Character	265
7.5.1	World-Building by Julian Comstock	272
7.5.1.2	Julian’s Legacy	276
7.6	Metafictional elements in <i>Julian Comstock</i>	278
7.6.1	<i>On the Beach</i>	278
7.6.2	On Writing	280
7.7	President Julian and Emperor Julian – a Summary	281
7.8	Recapitulation	282
8	Conclusion	284
9	Appendix	296
9.1	Hubert Robert, <i>Vue imaginaire de la Grande Galerie du Louvre en ruines</i> (1796)	296
9.2	Joseph Gandy, <i>The Bank of England as a Ruin</i> (1830)	297
10	Bibliography	298

List of Illustrations

Illustration 1: Genette, Narration on Different Diegetic Levels	46
Illustration 2: Homodiegetic Narration on the Metadiegetic Level	47
Illustration 3: Narrative Levels	48
Illustration 4: Francesco Orlando's structuring table	65
Illustration 5: <i>Oryx & Crake</i> 's temporal arrangement	85
Illustrations 6-15: <i>Genesis</i> Covers	233
Hubert Robert, <i>Vue imaginaire de la Grande Galerie du Louvre en ruines</i>	296
Joseph Gandy, <i>The Bank of England as a Ruin</i>	297

List of Tables

Table 1: Search Tests of Term Distribution	12
Table 2: Effects on Nature and Mankind	52
Table 3: Nature and Mankind in the Post-Apocalypse – a classification of some major examples	54
Table 4: Francesco Orlando's 12 categories	71
Table 5: Excerpts from Michael Paine, "Environmental Damage from Asteroid and Comet Impacts"	147
Table 6: Names and their origins in <i>Genesis</i> , sorted by origin	199
Table 7: Names and their origins in <i>Genesis</i> , chronological table	200
Table 8: A Chronology of Julian Comstock's life	269

1 Introduction

Imagine, if you will, the following settings and situations taken from different post-apocalyptic fictions: The climate has warmed and turned most of the world into a Triassic jungle, complete with large fern trees and the reappearance of animals long extinct. From the drowned lagoon that lies where London used to be, ruined and overgrown skyscrapers rise into the humid air, while the surviving remnants of mankind fight against alligators and the ever increasing water levels (Ballard, *The Drowned World*). In a different story – and thus in a different future – the ozone layer is shrinking dramatically, temperatures are rising, drought is plaguing the land. In order to survive nations have been forced to abandon the more arid regions of the world, leaving most of the southern United States in the hands of lawless criminals and ruthless scavengers, against whom innocent survivors are facing a hopeless battle (Braziel, *Snake-skin Road*). In another alternate vision the Earth has been torn away from the solar system by a rogue planet, eternal darkness has replaced the perpetual succession of night and day, the interstellar cold has frozen the atmosphere, and the surviving remnants of mankind huddle in isolated and insulated buildings and venture outside only when necessary to carry ‘a pail of air’ inside, which they then heat up next to the fire so that they have a breathable atmosphere (Leiber, “A Pail of Air”). Another possible scenario goes like this: an astronaut who is seemingly stranded on a strange planet ruled by apes takes a ride along a beach, only to break down in despair when he discovers the decaying head of the Statue of Liberty resting on the shore, realizing that he is stranded in the future. Something must have happened to irrevocably change the world he knew (Schaffner, *Planet of the Apes*). In a similar setting ruins are discovered by a boy who visits a long-fallen New York and makes the climactic discovery that the ‘gods’ his culture prays to are not gods at all, but were members of a fallen civilization of mankind which once ruled the Earth and then destroyed itself in a thermonuclear war (Benét, “By the Waters of Babylon”). In another vision of future ruin a monk travels through a harsh and arid desert littered with decaying highways, in perpetual fear of the monster “Fallout,” on his way back to his Abbey from a visit he made to the Pope in New Rome (located somewhere on the Western shores of the United States), on a quest to retrieve a stolen blue-print left over from a civilization that destroyed itself six centuries ago, the meaning of which is a mystery, but the preservation of which is regarded as a sacred duty by his order, which considers it a holy document left over from a different age (Miller, JR., *A Canticle for Leibowitz*). In a different but comparable fictive future a band of adventurers are on a quest to discover the secrets of the crumbling roads and decaying ruins that they grew up amongst. They come across a still working hologram projector and have an unlikely encounter with an interactive projection of Winston Churchill, whose stories make no sense to them whatsoever, but who nevertheless manages to tell them that it is important to ‘never despair’ (McDevitt, “Never Despair”). What these versions of post-apocalyptic settings have in common is this: they all depict interactions between characters and the leftover remnants of a

previous civilization, and they do so in physical settings that range from closely similar to very different from the one a reader will have experienced, in regards to questions of temperature, atmosphere, plant and animal life etc.

This thesis explores the interactions between narrative levels and physical circumstances in post-apocalyptic novels. The state and structure of the physical world the author imagines for his or her post-apocalyptic tale determines what options characters have in that world and what societies can exist there. Within these worlds, and to make sense of the ruins and objects they encounter, characters bring their own interpretations to these objects, either coming up with their own explanations or working with myths about the lost civilization that have already become traditional in their isochronic (contemporaneous) cultures. Characters can also be influential agents of world construction in themselves, either by performing actions that lastingly affect their physical world and society, or by profoundly shaping the mental constructs of said world that other life-forms around them have. All of this takes place within the fictional world of the story as it has been constructed by its author, and to depict these worlds and interactions, authors make choices that structure their narrative in certain ways according to the effects they want to achieve. These narrative choices have a profound influence on the stories they are telling and on the discrepant or corresponding awareness that exists between the characters on the ‘level of action’ and the implied reader on the ‘level of implied communication’. Thus the interplay between the different narrative levels, how they form the post-apocalyptic world, and the world the characters encounter, interact with and shape, will be the focal point of this thesis.

The first part of the title of this monograph – “In the Ruins of Civilizations” – refers to a common but often neglected aspect of the post-apocalyptic novel that I want to focus particular attention on, because I believe that the setting of a novel profoundly influences the interpretative and structuring world constructions characters can engage in within that given setting. Fictions of the post-apocalypse share an omnipresence of ruins with travelogues from Italy from the late 18th and early 19th century, as well as with Roman writings about Greek ruins, and I will use some quotations from those writings to explain what initially fascinated me about the post-apocalypse and made me decide to cover this subject in my monograph.

In the January of 1804 Francois-René Vicomte de Châteaubriand wrote a letter from Rome which later became part of his *Recollections of Italy*, which it exemplifies one of the central aspects that makes the post-apocalypse such a rich setting to analyze:

At the moment that the sun descended below the horizon, the clock in the dome of Saint Peter resounded under the porticoes of Collisée. This correspondence, through the medium of religious sounds, between the two grandest monuments of Pagan and Christian Rome, caused a lively emotion in my mind. I reflected that this modern edifice would fall in its turn, like the ancient one, and that the memorials of human industry succeed each other like the men, who erected them. (17)

The edifices that have fallen in post-apocalyptic fictions are the modern ones that Châteaubriand still contemplates in their wholeness; their future ruin and the fact that much about them has become forgotten and obscured contributes to the richness of the post-apocalyptic world. This ‘forgetting’ leads to another aspect that this thesis will analyze – the different levels of knowledge and forgetfulness that exist between the different narrative levels of post-apocalyptic fictions – were Châteaubriand’s travelogue a post-apocalyptic text, then on the extra-textual level the Coliseum would still be whole for the contemporary reader, its ruin existing only within the story-world of the text itself, as it would be a future ruin that Châteaubriand would be depicting. A doubling between extra-textual wholeness and fictional ruin takes place in a reader’s contemplation of the post-apocalyptic novel, and the novel plays with this double perception of the world and the ruins and objects within it.

Here are some examples to illustrate what I am talking about: In Jack McDevitt’s *Eternity Road* universe (to which “Never Despair” belongs), the characters search for the lost secrets of the mysterious Roadmakers, of whose age only crumbling buildings and unidentifiable objects remain, the mysteries of which some of the characters are trying to solve: “Quait talked extensively through the evening, about his ambitions, about how important it was to find out who had built the great cities scattered through the wilderness, and what had happened to them, and about mastering the ancient wizardries” (109). The *bon mot* that “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic” is commonly ascribed to Arthur C. Clarke (Prucher 22), and an example for its veracity can be seen at work here – all knowledge of the pre-catastrophe society has been lost, and since the isochronic society cannot explain electricity and other advanced technologies by rational means, these phenomena are shifted into the realm of the supernatural. Other characters in the *Eternity Road* universe are more sceptical about exploring the remainders of the previous world, as it is a dangerous and unsettling business: “She avoided the ruins when she could. It wasn’t easy because they were everywhere. [...] The structures were dangerous, [...] prone to cave-ins, collapsing floors, you name it. [...] They were a long way from home, alone in a wilderness filled with savages and demons and dead cities in which lights blinked and music played and mechanical things moved” (McDevitt 109f). H. G. Well’s *The Time Machine* also depicts future ruins extensively, but it occupies a special place in the knowledge/rediscovery equation because its focal character is the time traveller himself, who sets out into the future equipped with the knowledge of his own present day. Accordingly, in *The Time Machine*, the reader discovers the state of the future world along with the time traveller himself, starting out from equal positions of ignorance about the future, but also with equal knowledge of the past and its buildings and civilizations. Rather than discovering the lost *history* of mankind from a vantage point of familiarity with the isochronic world, what the time traveller is curious about is the state of the isochronic world *itself*, as well as the events that led the human race from the state he is familiar with to the future one he finds it in. His questions parallel the ones a reader might bring to stories of the post-apocalypse:

No doubt the exquisite beauty of the buildings I saw was the outcome of the last surgings of the now purposeless energy of mankind before it settled down into perfect harmony with the conditions under which it lived – the flourish of that triumph which began the last great peace. This has ever been the fate of energy in security; it takes to art and to eroticism, and then come languor and decay. (35)

Time travel stories are a different genre from the post-apocalypse and time travel is rarely found in post-apocalyptic fiction, as time-travel stories usually depict a journey into the *past*, not into the future.

Common to the post-apocalypse, on the other hand, are not only fictions of a completely new civilization that has grown amongst the aged and weathered mysterious ruins of a long vanished civilization (what will be classified as *ages-gone cataclysm* in my analysis), but also stories where the surviving characters within the story themselves experienced the cataclysm that created the post-catastrophe world, that thus have knowledge of both the pre- and the post-apocalyptic state of the environment and of society (*first-generation survival* fictions).

Mary Shelley wrote one of its earliest examples in her 1826 novel *The Last Man*. Her last survivor of the end of mankind, Lionel Verney, travels to Rome to soothe his loneliness and despair amongst its vaunted glory:

I entered Eternal Rome by the Porta del Popolo, and saluted with awe its time-honoured space. The wide square, the churches near, the long extent of the Corso, the near eminence of Trinita de' Monti appeared like fairy work, they were so silent, so peaceful, and so very fair. [...] The knowledge that I was in Rome, soothed me; that wondrous city, hardly more illustrious for its heroes and sages, than for the power it exercised over the imaginations of men. I went to rest that night; the eternal burning of my heart quenched,--my senses tranquil. (367)

Post-Apocalyptic societies – no matter how long ago the catastrophe took place – are societies that come into existence in the ruins of previous civilizations, and either knowledge about the previous societies and its remnants, or curious investigations of the unknown remnants shape these stories. What interpretations characters arrive at and to what uses they put the debris, relics, remainders, remnants, vestiges and ruins of the previous civilizations will form a central part of my analyses, as it are not only the ruins that play a role in the formation of the post-catastrophe society, but also the physical objects that are left from the previous world. Jean Francois Casimir Delavigne's *The Messéniennes*, a collection of poems written in 1818, of which "Parthenope and the Stranger" is one part, features a stanza that covers this disconnection between the isochronic and the (future-) past world vividly:

What city once covered these hills?
 "Sparta," replied my guide. Hold on!
 These abandoned walls,
 A few nameless stones,
 Some tombs, some ruins,