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## POST-APOCALYPSE NOW: LANDSCAPE AND ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES IN THE ROAD AND THE WALKING DEAD

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### Abstract

May landscape description be considered an eco-critical metaphor? This paper proposes a text analysis of two post-apocalyptic narratives, Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, as novel and movie, and the zombie drama *The Walking Dead*, as graphic novel and television series. Neither narrative provides an explanation for its apocalypse, or a direct warning as regards human environmental misbehaviour. But both the barren landscape described in the former work, and the renaturalizing one presented in the latter second may convey an environmental meaning, albeit in a different way. To evaluate the way in which contemporary audiences negotiate this, further research would be necessary.

### Key words

popular geopolitics • ecocriticism • post-apocalypse • landscape • *The Road* • *The Walking Dead*

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“What continues to strike me, is that the ‘environmental issue’ necessarily means such different things to different people, that in aggregate it encompasses quite literally everything there is.” (Harvey 1993).

### Introduction

“A few weeks ago I read what I believe is the most important environmental book ever written. It is not *Silent Spring*, *Small is Beautiful* or even *Walden*. It contains no graphs,

no tables, no facts, figures, warnings, predictions or even arguments. Nor does it carry a single dreary sentence, which, sadly, distinguishes it from most environmental literature. It is a novel, first published a year ago, and it will change the way you see the world”. These few sentences open a book review printed in *The Guardian* (30 October 2007); the author is the environmental activist George Monbiot and “the most important environmental book ever written” is Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road*.

Saying that a novel can change the way people will see the world may sound quite a bold announcement; also saying that a novel, even if relevant like *The Road*, is "the most important environmental book ever written" may seem an enthusiastic declaration. All the same, Monbiot's statements raise two relevant issues, the matter of environmental awareness and the question of the role of popular culture in shaping it.

Obviously, the awareness that the meaning of 'nature' is variable and the way we 'make sense' of it in connection with our 'culture' has been widespread among geographers for many years, at least since the publication of Clarence Glacken's renowned book *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* (1967);<sup>1</sup> or maybe even before, since Tuan, in reviewing the soft cover edition of the same book, could write, quoting an author from the nineteenth century, that "Nature is a word contrived to introduce as many equivocations as possible into all the theories – political, legal, artistic, or literary – into which it enters" (1977: 461).

However, since the beginning of the nineties, the "production and consumption of environmental meanings" have started to be scrutinized under the new lenses of post-structuralism, in connection with mass media, popular culture and other sources of information (Burgess 1990;<sup>2</sup> Bennet & Cholouptka 1993; Gandy 1996), and now, the fact that "personal narratives and social discourses about the nature of the world and the environment"<sup>3</sup> are a fundamental issue to be investigated, are also recognized by global scientific research programs.

Cornerstone 4 of the Transformations to Sustainability Program, launched by the

International Social Sciences Council (ISSC) in 2014, for instance, specifically underlines the importance of investigating "the values, beliefs, interests, worldviews, hopes, needs and desires that underlie people's experiences of and responses (or lack thereof) to global change", since they "(...) drive people's views on the necessity for a transformation to global sustainability".<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the same research program underlines that such a question has a very practical relevance, since it "challenges social scientists to make sense of the assumptions and blind spots that underlie choices and priorities. These assumptions can block awareness of what needs to change and keep systems deadlocked in inaction".

In order to "make sense of Earth's politics" (Dryzek 2013), in the field of political sciences a discursive approach has been developed<sup>5</sup> aimed at understanding the transformation of environmental concerns (ranging from wilderness preservation to toxic wastes and climate change), debates, policies, and the role of 'writing'<sup>6</sup> in official documents, and the media in the making of them.<sup>7</sup>

A similar interest in trying to understand the role of 'writing' in shaping the meaning of concepts like 'wilderness', 'nature' or 'human' and 'not human' has been developed, in a parallel way by 'ecocriticism'. Unlike environmental discourse analysis in the political sciences, ecocriticism has progressively opened its interests to other forms of expression, from writing to the visual arts, cinema, theatre and comics. Ecocriticism from this perspective has made acceptable the idea that every form of popular culture can convey the shared ensembles of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that we use to apprehend

<sup>1</sup> "Has any book written by a geographer in the last thirty years been so widely reviewed or as highly praised?" With these words, Tuan (1977: 461) comments on the reprinting, in soft cover, of Glacken's book.

<sup>2</sup> "My central proposition is that the media industry is participating in a complex, cultural process through which environmental meanings are produced and consumed" (Burgess 1990: 139).

<sup>3</sup> See specifically "Cornerstone 4: Interpretation and Subjective Sense Making", in "Transformations to Sustainability Programme", ISSC.

<sup>4</sup> *idem*.

<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive review, see Haier and Versteeg (2006).

<sup>6</sup> "This inquiry rests on the contention that language matters, that the way we construct, interpret, discuss, and analyze environmental problems has all kinds of consequences" (Dryzek 2013: 11).

<sup>7</sup> From a geopolitical standpoint on this, see Simon Dalby's analysis of the coverage given by *The New York Times* to the Rio Earth Summit (1996).

and interpret the relation between what is accepted and considered human, and what is defined as 'non human' and/or 'natural'.

The influence of 'mediated' information, and specifically of popular culture, in the making of our understanding of the word has also been clarified by popular geopolitics, which, to the general assumptions of the two theoretical approaches previously quoted, has added the idea that meanings may be negotiated at different sites – from the site of production to the one of consumption – and that in order to get a more complete picture, it is necessary to go beyond text analysis.

So, it is now acceptable that 'nature' is a social construct and that environmental discourses are very important in the making of 'Earth's politics', but also that, along with formal documents, popular culture is also relevant. From this standpoint, Monbiot's statements look less outrageous.

This paper is in five sections. It first tries to connect environmental discourse analysis, ecocriticism, and popular geopolitics to set the theoretical ground; it then attempts to put such an analytical approach into practice. To this purpose, it concentrates on the rhetoric of the 'apocalypse', a narrative metaphor popular in both non-fictional environmental texts and popular culture; more specifically, special attention will be devoted to descriptions of post-apocalyptic landscapes as environmental metaphors. As case studies, two post-apocalyptic narratives will be examined: *The Road*, both as novel (2006) and movie (2009), and *The Walking Dead*, as graphic novel (2003-) and television series (2010-). The paper closes with some remarks on the connections between the different landscape descriptions and the environmental values conveyed.

### Ecocriticism, environmental discourse, eco-critical geopolitics

The existence of a connection between literary descriptions and geographical knowledge was made clear many decades ago, when John K. Wright, then president of the

Association of American Geographers, devoted his opening lecture to the annual meeting of the association to the role of imagination in geography (Wright 1947).<sup>8</sup> In the reverse perspective, the link between literature, geographical descriptions, and sense of place is also analysed from the perspective of literary criticism, and specifically by the field of studies called 'ecocriticism'.<sup>9</sup>

Ecocriticism, which may be defined synthetically as an ecological extension of post-structuralist criticism, was first developed in the nineties as "the analysis of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glafeltz 1996: XIX), but it quickly enlarged its field of interest, moving from nature writings to any kind of human representation of nature, or pertaining to the relationship between human and non-human, or to critical analysis of the term 'human' (Garrard 2012: 5). Beyond literature, ecocriticism now analyses other forms of popular culture, such as theatre, the arts, and above all, cinema (Willoquet-Maricondi 2010).<sup>10</sup> From a methodological point of view, practitioners of ecocriticism suggest going beyond the analysis of plots and characters to verify the presence of metaphors and other rhetorical figures connected to the world of nature, or to assess the quality of landscape descriptions. From this perspective, the storyline is just one of the many elements to be taken into account, whereas the narrative strategy, the *genre*, the use of a given lexicon, of specific tropes, and of certain figures of speech, are equally significant.

<sup>8</sup> At that moment, he practically opened the door to a new sub-discipline, later to be defined as humanistic geography. A so-called "literary geography" (Scuders 2010) soon flourished, which followed a rich variety of strands, from the attempt to compare reality and literary description (Darby 1948; Pockock 1981), to the analysis of the geographic imagination and the sense of place offered by different texts and authors (Cusimano 1999).

<sup>9</sup> The term 'ecocriticism' was introduced by William Rueckert in 1978.

<sup>10</sup> On the role of popular culture as a form of 'soft power', specifically in relation to our 'making sense' of 'nature', see also Castree (2014).

The role of writing in the making of 'nature' as a cultural construct also lies at the core of 'environmental discourse analysis', even if in this case the main research interest focuses on official documents, speeches, and news. In this case, the different elements to look at are: the 'basic entities whose existence is recognized or constructed', the 'assumptions about natural relationships', the 'agents and their motives', and, beyond the storyline, also the 'key metaphors and other rhetorical devices' (Dryzek 1997, 2013). With the help of these elements, it is possible to recognize different discourses (such as 'environmental problem solving', 'limits and survival', 'sustainability' and 'green radicalism'), and attitudes towards the environment (like conservationism, biocentrism and deep ecology). Each of these attitudes and discourses not only has a social and cultural impact, but can also affect politics, policies, and institutions.

Critical geopolitics focuses on the connection between mediated information, politics and political behaviour. Its fundamental assumption is that any form of representation, whether offered by scientific literature, the media, or popular culture, is "an active writing of the earth" (Ó Tuathail 1996: 1), that is to say, a discursive vehicle, producing the system of values and interpretative categories of our taken-for-granted-world (dell'Agnese 2008). For this reason, critical geopolitics distinguishes between formal geopolitics (the representations of the world offered by academics), formal geopolitics (those presented in official documents and the speeches of politicians and policy-makers), and popular geopolitics. As defined by Jason Dittmer (2010: 14), "popular geopolitics refers to the everyday geopolitical discourse that citizens are immersed in everyday", in other words all the representations of the world 'mediated' by the news and popular culture in all its forms (cinema, cartoons, art, literature, even music). It is usual for critical geopolitical analyses to highlight political identities, the process of Othering, and the outlining of the world political map as a map of borders and dangers (Power & Crampton 2007). However, discourses about environmental security

or climate change also have a geopolitical flavour and are connected with our 'making sense of nature' (Castree 2014). In turn, our 'making sense of nature' is not mediated by either a single text or set of texts, but is negotiated through the different sites of production and consumption, and through intertextuality.

Ecocriticism's methodological tools, together with the elements of investigation suggested by environmental discourse analysis, may be useful in researching the compositional elements of texts and their intertextualities. By combining these elements with the theoretical assumptions of critical geopolitics regarding power and popular culture, a form of critical approach, labelled 'eco-critical geopolitics' (dell'Agnese 2011), might be achieved. Eco-critical geopolitics will be the theoretical and methodological standpoint for the text analysis provided in this paper. In order to offer a fuller picture of the process of meaning negotiation, a step forward should be taken, so as to observe audience feedbacks (Dittmer 2010). Given the limited space available here, a more detailed analysis will be developed in a further paper.

## Apocalypse (now)

References to the environment are almost ubiquitous in popular culture, so, from the point of view of eco-critical geopolitics, any text may offer suitable cues. However, some cultural products, like non-fiction environmental essays and documentaries, are more intriguing than others. And in this context, among fictional works, *films verts* (Ingram 2000; dell'Agnese 2011a) are a real goldmine. Sci-fi and dystopian texts are quite interesting too, since, while representing an imaginary future, they transmit the concerns of the present (dell'Agnese 2009, 2011b, 2012).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Science-fiction performs its best political service when it participates in a culture of opposition and gives form to an anticipatory consciousness to subject the present to trenchant critique. By so doing, it points the way to a better future if we but liberate our dreams and desires and channel them into hard political struggle" (Yararela 2001: 14).

Non-fictional environmental texts and dystopian fictional works share a common penchant for the Apocalypse and its aftermath as a narrative strategy (Ketterer 1974; Kreuziger 1982).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, *Silent Spring* (Carson 1962), the cornerstone of contemporary environmentalism, starts with a dystopian representation of a rural world in which no birds have survived the indiscriminate use of pesticides. In *Silent Spring*, the world has been poisoned. In other non-fiction environmental texts, like *The Population Bomb* (Ehrlich, 1968) and Bill McKibben's *Earth* (2010), the apocalypse is used as a metaphor for advancing the discourse on 'global limits', or 'in order to underline the dangers of the contemporary 'unsustainable' energy regime. In most recent texts, it is used as a warning about the risks of climate change (indeed, as remarked by Swyngedouw, the climate change debate is infused by "the attractions of the apocalyptic imaginations", 2010: 216).<sup>13</sup>

In fictional works, the end of the world may be caused by a 'natural' disaster, or may have human causes.<sup>14</sup> For instance, the fore-runners of the genre, starting with Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), and Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912), connected the end

of the world to a mysterious pandemic.<sup>15</sup> Anthropogenic catastrophes, in contrast, are consequences of environmentally dangerous behaviours (Katz 1994; Killingsworth & Palmer 1996; Yanarella 2001). In the avalanche of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fictional works that is now submerging bookstores, cinemas, cable television and games,<sup>16</sup> the causes of the end of the world are more varied. Since the post-Hiroshima years, the fear of a 'nuclear holocaust' has inspired a proliferation of texts (Brian 1984; Broderick 1993; Porter 1993).<sup>17</sup> More recently, other worries have emerged, like climate change (*Waterworld*, 1995; *Last City Raiders*, 2008), garbage (*Wall E*, 2008), or the growing power of the pharmaceutical industry and the deadly consequences of genetic mutation (see *12 Monkeys*, 1995; *28 Days Later*, 2003; the most recent film adaptation of Matheson's novel, *I Am Legend*, 2007; and the latest remake of the Planet-of-the-Apes saga, *The Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, 2012).

In both fiction and non-fiction, the apocalypse represents a very effective rhetorical strategy, since it may activate "warnings, appeals to emotion and fear, and dystopian imagery in order to attract and galvanize audiences to act in favor of environmental aims" (Hambrick 2011). For this reason, it has been defined "the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary

<sup>12</sup> In this vast production, a distinction must be made between texts forecasting disaster in a sort of millenarian attitude, texts offering a catastrophic representation of disaster as a single event, which may even perform its own 'peculiar beauty' (Sontag 1965), and texts where only the new world, after the disaster, is represented.

<sup>13</sup> "The distinct millennialist discourse around the climate has so produced a widespread consensus that the earth, and many of its component parts are in an ecological bind that may shatter circuit human and non-human life in the not too distant future if urgent and immediate action to retrofit nature to a more benign equilibrium is postponed for much longer" (Swyngedouw 2010: 216).

<sup>14</sup> In a list compiled by *Scientific American*, "Death to Humans! Visions of the Apocalypse in Movies and Literature" (25 August 2010: 62), the different possible reasons for the end of the world are: astronomical catastrophes, biological calamities, geophysical disasters, wars, machine driven takeovers, and unspecified catastrophes.

<sup>15</sup> Mysterious plagues were also popular after the Second World War. See for instance George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides*, Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*, 1954; Samuel Yule's *The Death of Grass*, 1956, and Charles A. Mearns's *The Darkest of Nights*, 1967.

<sup>16</sup> The term 'avalanche' is appropriate, because, even if the only list is the one compiled by Wikipedia, the popularity of apocalyptic rhetoric is made evident by the growing number of apocalyptic titles for movies, video games and even television series. See Almond (2013), who remarks: "(...) consider the following grim statistic: in the 1990s, Hollywood released 74 films with apocalyptic themes. We're at 76 and counting for the first four years of this decade".

<sup>17</sup> The most celebrated of the novels written in the 1950s on this topic are *Pebble in the Sky*, 1950, by Isaac Asimov; *Level 7*, 1959, by Mordecai Roshwald; *The Chrysalids*, 1955, by John Wyndham; and *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, 1959, by Walter Miller.

**Table 1.** Landscape

Post-apocalyptic landscape	Catastrophic event	Fictional examples
Barren, blasted, lifeless	Nuclear holocaust	<i>The Road; The Book of Eli; Terminator Salvation</i>
Inundated, desiccated, ice covered	Climate change	<i>The Drought; Waterworld; Last City Raiders; The Day after Tomorrow</i>
Post-capitalist, post-abundant	Various disasters	<i>The World, the Flesh, and the Devil; The Last Man on Earth; 28 Days Later; The Road; The Walking Dead</i>
Garbage filled	Consumerism, machines, war	<i>Terminator; Wall E</i>
Altered, mutant, poisonous	Alien invasion, nuclear holocaust, cataclysmic events	<i>The War of the Worlds; Nausicaa in the Valley of Wind; After Earth</i>
Renaturalized, post-human	Plague, various disasters	<i>The Last Man; Earth Abides; The Drowned World; I Am Legend; The Walking Dead</i>

environmental imagination has at its disposal" (Buell 1995: 285).

Generally speaking, all post-apocalyptic narratives offer a warning about the precarious nature of the presence of humanity on the planet, above all in the social forms we are used to. So, most analysis of this kind of text concentrates on the psychological, political, or emotional explorations of human relations in a society where all contemporary conventions have been stripped away.<sup>18</sup> From the standpoint of eco-critical geopolitics, however, not only the plot of post-apocalyptic rhetoric is relevant: other elements deserve to be taken into account. The most relevant is, perhaps, the landscape (Tab. 1).

Post-nuclear holocaust narratives are usually set in a blasted and inhospitable landscape, generally hostile to human life (Sponsler 1993). Post-apocalyptic landscapes may also suffer from environmental alterations, be covered by ice or flooded; they may be altered by mutant species, their woods

turned into poisonous forests and domestic animals transformed into dangerous beasts. Frequently, the disappearance of humans does not imply also the vanishing of their belongings, so the post-apocalyptic landscape is uninhabited but scattered with the remnants of human presence; it is strewn with abandoned cars and other technological devices made useless by the lack of energy; it is covered by ruins and by debris. Or, "humanity's emergence from the forest into the city is undone" (de Bruyn 2010: 778); the balance between the transformative presence of the humans and the 'force of wilderness' is broken and the landscape can go back to its feral appearance, 'renaturalized' (Tab. 1).

In this paper, the main hypothesis is that these various landscape descriptions may be connected with a different attitude towards 'nature', convey different environmental worries and promote different environmental values. In order to validate this hypothesis, two case studies are made, *The Road* and *The Walking Dead*. Notwithstanding some similarities, these two post-apocalyptic narratives push the representation of the post-disaster wasteland to opposite extremes, the first offering the bleakest possible version of a planet where there is no more biosphere, the other one representing a world where

<sup>18</sup> Writing about post-apocalyptic/post-nuclear movies, Broderick (1993) remarks, "These films (...) have drawn upon pre-existing mythologies of cataclysm and survival in their renderings of post-holocaust life. The most potent of these myths is the recasting of the Judeo-Christian messianic hero who battles an anti-christ and his followers, liberating an oppressed community and thereby enabling social rebirth".

the disappearance of humanity progressively leaves space for a process of continuous renaturalization.

### “Looking for anything of color”: *The Road*

*The Road* is the title of a novel, published in 2006 by the celebrated American writer Cormac McCarthy, and adapted for the screen by John Hillcoat in 2009. The plot tells the story of an unnamed father and his son travelling in the American wasteland, a few years after almost total annihilation of every form of biological life on the planet. In the novel, no mention is made of the reason of the disaster, but a few references allow the reader to wonder whether it may have been a nuclear deflagration (in the movie, some very quick flashes from an old newscast suggest the same hypothesis). In a world where there are virtually no animals, or plants, nor even colours or sun, only a few humans survive. Father and son travel south in the dim hope of finding a warmer climate. The journey takes them through an ashen wasteland of torched woodland and decaying structures. Every form of human society (except for the love between the father and his son) has been destroyed, and, while they struggle to remain ‘the good guys’, or, to use one of McCarthy’s metaphors, “to be the ones who carry the Fire”, nearly every other human has apparently been reduced to a scavenging cannibal and now represents, together with cold and hunger, an impending danger to their own survival.<sup>19</sup>

Even if defined by Winkel Holm (2009) as only a ‘virtuoso rewriting’ of the post-apocalyptic subgenre, Cormac McCarthy’s

novel has received numerous prizes<sup>20</sup> and ‘a tremendous critical interest’ (the movie was also well received by the critics, but only gained a lukewarm reception at the box-office).<sup>21</sup> Since the immediate cause of the disaster is not central to the action, most literary critics focused on the religious and moral contents of the book (Wielenberg 2010), its symbols and ethics (Gallivan 2010), its geographical imagination (Edwards 2010), its sense of place and positionality (Walsh 2010), and even on the meaning of the desert (Graulund 2010). Some critics went so far as to dismiss the ‘environmentalist’ reading of the book. For instance, Luttrul (2010) rejects the materialistic interpretation apparently endorsed by Monbiot (2007), suggesting that “Such a reading is only possible (...) if one ignores the novel’s main characters, for the man and the boy (although they are forced to adapt to the changing world) maintain the virtues associated with traditional ethics: love for family and respect for and hospitality towards strangers. Such a reading of *The Road* would also need to ignore the novel’s strangely uplifting ending for these two virtuous characters (...) and final words of hope that seem out of step with the starvation and cannibalism that have followed [them] throughout the novel”. Conversely, when concerned with the (possible) environmental content, discussions have focused mostly on the unmentioned causes of the destruction of the planet in order to understand whether they are connected with a nuclear disaster, or, more broadly, if a link can be made between the disappearance of life on the planet and human activities. In this context, Blackmore (2009: 18) affirms that “McCarthy’s book

<sup>20</sup> Including the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2007.

<sup>21</sup> *The Road*, with a domestic gross of 8 million dollars, is only number 23 in the Box Office Mojo ranking of the post-apocalyptic movie genre (<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?ic=road08.htm> [22 May 2014]). This is not surprising, given the comment offered in an otherwise positive review by *Time Out*: *The Road* is certainly the bleakest and potentially the least commercial product in recent Hollywood history” (<http://www.timeout.com/london/film/the-road-2009> [22 May 2014]).

<sup>19</sup> The opposition of ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’ is indeed typical of many post-apocalyptic narratives. This kind of imagination of the disaster, in Winkel Holm’s opinion, turns the old vertical division between divine and human into a horizontal division between ‘humans’ and ‘non-humans’: one dimension of the human explains why the disaster occurred, the other one why there are still reasons for trust and hope (Winkel Holm 2009).

opens after some kind of undetermined human-created global spasm of destruction (not necessarily nuclear, although it seems very likely) has injected soot into the high atmosphere and rendered the earth a barren, increasingly chilled wasteland of floating ash, dirty snow, and polluted rivers"; while Ibarrola (2009/2010) says: "Although the cause of this global disaster that has filled the atmosphere with soot and transformed the earth into a greyish, barren desert is never explicitly established in the text, we do know that it is human-created and probably related to nuclear weaponry".<sup>22</sup>

Generally speaking, if we consider only the plot, different ways of reading the novel (and watching the movie) are probably all acceptable: "Depending on what one comes looking for, *The Road* can convincingly sustain readings that suggest we invest our hopes either in nature, in humanity or in God. As has hopefully been proved here, any reading focusing solely on one interpretation will have to ignore quite a few signs to the contrary in a novel that tellingly ends with the word 'mystery' " (Graulund 2010: 76). As remarked by ecocriticism, however, the plot is just one aspect of the story and a text may reflect an environmental value through such elements as the description of the landscape. In the novel, the relevance of landscape is elucidated not only by the power of the writing, and by the prevailing 'aesthetic of the grey' (Danto 2012), but also by the significance of the act of looking. Indeed, the reader's attention is focused on the landscape from the opening pages, when the father scans it, "looking for anything of color".<sup>23</sup> Scattered with desiccated

remains of all kinds, the scorched landscape is described by McCarthy "as so utterly defoliated and sterilized" that it represents "the greatest corpse of all" (Chabon 2007). In this perspective, making a comparison between the novel and the movie is difficult, because, as remarked by one film reviewer, "some of the imagery the legendary author evokes, particularly through his unique and often poetic prose, surpasses anything a filmmaker could capture on screen".<sup>24</sup> However, he goes on: "Hillocoat does his best, and for the most part, he succeeds. The horribly desolate landscape and the drab greys and cobalt blues of the scarred sky pervade every shot". Indeed, as remarked by another reviewer, the "stunning landscape photography" is one of the most powerful elements of the movie.<sup>25</sup> To make it look even bleaker, contrasts are often made between the colors of what the father remembers, and the scorched, ashen grey vision of the present.<sup>26</sup>

In *The Road*, the landscape is barren, devastated, and grey; it is also filled with the "debris of twenty-first century consumer culture" (Koliin 2011: 160). A powerful symbol of this culture and its irreversible crises is the supermarket-shopping cart pushed by the father and his son, in which they carry the cast off objects they collect along their journey. But there are things of all kinds 'abandoned long ago'<sup>27</sup> and scattered by the side of the road. For this reason, Bragard (2013) includes this kind of landscape in the category of "wastescapes, that is, landscapes where nature has disappeared and is crammed with the waste and ruins of the past".

<sup>22</sup> However, as remarked by Cormac McCarthy himself in an interview, the event is purposely of unknown. "A lot of people ask me: I don't have an opinion... But it could be anything - we can do a movie or it could be nuclear war. It is not really important. The whole thing now is, what do you do?". See Jurgensen (2009).

<sup>23</sup> "When it was light enough to use the binoculars he glassed the valley below. Everything paling away into the murk. The soft ash blowing in loose swirls over the blacktop. He studied what he could see. The segment of road down there among the dead three. Look-

ing for anything of color." (*The Road*: 2-3).

<sup>24</sup> <http://blog.cu.ckflix.com/cu/2010/01/27/ease-on-down-the-road-review/>.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.timeout.com/london/film/the-road-2009>.

<sup>26</sup> On the geography of the past, and the contrast between green memories and grey present, see Gruber Godfrey (2011).

<sup>27</sup> "Odd things scattered by the side of the road. Electrical appliances, furniture, tools. Things abandoned long ago by pilgrims en route to their several and collective deaths." (*The Road*: 199-200).



## "We're all infected": *The Walking Dead*

The vision of a post-capitalist landscape scattered with every sort of debris is not unique to *The Road*. On the contrary, it has been a cliché of the post-apocalyptic subgenre since at least the Fifties, and has been popularized again recently. The division of post-disaster survivors into good people and bad people is also a staple (Broderick 1993; Winkel Holm 2009). In *The Road*, the father and son (who are always moral and altruistic) are unmistakably 'good guys', while the gangs of wandering cannibals are indisputably the other.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the role of the father in *The Road* is present in many other texts, like the eco-disaster movie *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004), and the post-apocalyptic video game *The Last of Us* (2013).

All three elements – the post-capitalist landscape, the division into good and bad guys (even if more nuanced), and the special attention given to fatherhood – are equally present in *The Walking Dead*. Furthermore, the narrative of *The Walking Dead*, like that of *The Road*, does not reveal the reason for the end of the world, that is, it offers no explanation for the event that has transformed most of humanity into zombies.

Yet, the two narratives belong to different realms, since *The Road* is legitimized as an artistic creation, while *The Walking Dead*,

in the form of either graphic novel or television series, is usually regarded as a consumable product of popular culture. For this reason, notwithstanding the positive critical reaction<sup>29</sup> (and despite the fact that the television series is one of US cable television's most popular shows),<sup>30</sup> *The Walking Dead* has thus far received much less scholarly attention than *The Road*, with much of the debate remaining in the form of blogs and newspaper comments.

*The Walking Dead* was first published as a comic book in October 2003, and developed as a television series in 2010. The storyline, common to both formats (even if there are a few dissimilarities), is about a group of survivors led by a former Deputy Sheriff named Rick Grimes, who, after a zombie apocalypse, wander rural Georgia looking for a safe haven and food.<sup>31</sup> Since both the comic

<sup>28</sup> The comic book was awarded as "Best Continuing Series" in 2010; and the television series has also been nominated for many different awards.

<sup>29</sup> The television series, produced by the independent cable network AMC, opened its fourth season with the highest ratings of any episode in series history: it was watched by 16.1 million viewers. The show may also be watched legally on Netflix, or downloaded illegally. Indeed, it is one of the shows most downloaded illegally in the world (following a statistic reported by *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Walking Dead* in February 2014 was the second most pirated show, after *Game of Thrones* and, surprisingly, the top country was Brazil) <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/news-10751897/Game-of-Thrones-still-most-pirated-TV-show.html>.

<sup>30</sup> The narrative opens with the main character (narratively played by a British actor, though with an American accent) coming out of a coma in a hospital to discover that a sort of 'zombie' apocalypse has destroyed the world. In this, and in some other different issue, it is reminiscent of the British movie *28 Days Later* (2002) (even if in the British movie there are not zombies, but humans infected by a virus). Much discussion has been raised on the topic online. However, in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Robert Kirkman, the author of the comic book, says that it is a complete coincidence, since the comic was written before the US release of the British movie <http://popwatch.ew.com/2010/11/01/walking-dead-amc-plot-kirkman/>. Indeed, the 'coincidence' may be an example of genre intertextuality, since the idea of the main character awakening from a coma and discovering that the world as he knew it has been wiped away by a plague is present also in an early post-apocalypse novel, published in 1949: *Earth Abides*.

<sup>28</sup> Other texts push the division to its extremes: after the disaster, a few humans have to defend themselves from multitudes of very aggressive post-humans, like vampires, zombies and the undead (and this particular subgenre is now so popular to be defined as "the tenuous part of mainstream American culture") (Bishop 2010). This kind of representation finds its forerunner in Richard Matheson's novel *I Am Legend*, (1954), and was later developed in so many forms (such as the British movie *28 Days Later*, 2000, the novel *World War Z*, the *Resident Evil* videogame based film series, and the game *Zombie Pandemic*) that it has become a very common fixture of contemporary popular culture. In consequence, scholarship on the 'zombie renaissance' (Bishop 2010) phenomenon is growing, and it is now possible to speak about a specific field of 'zombie studies' (Drozner 2011; Saunders 2012; Plotts 2013).

book and television series are still in production, the plot is open. This provides *The Walking Dead* with its most original feature, since it represents "the first ongoing, serialized zombie narrative" (Keetley 2014). Additionally, the serialized narrative offers the possibility of a character analysis rarely possible in zombie movies.

From a geopolitical viewpoint, *The Walking Dead* is intriguing, since the main character is cast as a contemporary cowboy (Young, 2014) and the post-apocalyptic American landscape may be read as a new frontier. As observed by Erin Overbey, in *The New Yorker* (2012) "(...) the series actually draws on the iconography and mood of the Western, complete with a reluctant sheriff, a wilderness to be explored, and 'savages' to be fought. If the frontier of the old West represented a new world to be tamed, then, in *The Walking Dead*, the world of the zombie apocalypse represents the latest frontier to be conquered. The show doesn't resemble the old-fashioned Westerns of the John Wayne era so much as the later Clint Eastwood ones (...), with their haunted, damaged heroes and ambiguous story lines".<sup>32</sup>

The post-traumatic creation of a mini-community is not a novelty in pop epic sagas (like the celebrated television series *Lost*, for instance). As remarked by Baldwin and McCarthy (2013: 79), "the characters (...) are not only presented as the most fit to live another day but also serve as the embodiment of what counts as an ideal citizen within a society transformed by a zombie apocalypse. In addition to *who* survives, *how* these characters win the right to survive and who is deemed unfit for inclusion creates a narrative eerily similar to the pre-feminist and pre-civil rights era".

The main focus of *The Walking Dead* is on relationships among the survivors, and the possible ways of reconstructing a society (and somehow, a political life) while, at the same time, trying to survive the apocalypse itself, and the violence and loss. In the political

rebirth, the retention of maintaining democracy as a political system has to be reconsidered, and leadership becomes a topic for discussion among the little community of survivors. In this case, the remaking of the community, composed of a mix of the US population (a Korean guy, some black people, some racist rednecks, a few educated city dwellers, etc.) is made more intriguing by the leadership of the cowboy-police officer, and the Western icon he represents. Gender relations and race relations need to be reassessed, but the entire narrative is framed by the white male supremacy of the main character, since *The Walking Dead* tends to cast characters of colour and women in subordinate positions. Apparently, it is only through old Western values that a rebirth of the nation is possible. Nonetheless, there is constant ambiguity about the role of violence in this new world. The positive moral terms subsumed by the mythic image of the cowboy are in need of reconsideration. Other topics pertain to the crises suffered by our contemporary world, and the zombies themselves may be interpreted as metaphors of avid consumers in a capitalist society (Yuen 2012 & Keetley 2014).<sup>33</sup>

Violence is found everywhere: there is the brute aggressiveness of the flesh-eating 'biters', the utilitarian violence of the cannibals, the violence for fun of the gangs of loiterers, the political violence of the Governor; there is also the apparently justified violence of the community of survivors. Rick Grimes behaves like a gunslinger, and his son Carl is raised learning how to shoot (and wearing his father's cowboy hat). But sometimes, the justification fades away: the dimension of loss not only relates to pre-apocalyptic life and society, the family members of the main characters, and to some of the main characters, it also deals with the loss of humanity. The mini-community has to be defended with every possible effort even if this implies refusing to give assistance to a boy, or walking alone in the street and asking desperately for

<sup>32</sup> Erin Overbey, *The New Yorker*, 14 October 2012.

<sup>33</sup> Zombies may also be interpreted as a metaphor for globalizing forces (Saunders 2011).

the zombies' help, only to be killed by them a few sequences later, or torturing a boy who belongs to a different group of survivors. As Broderick says, "Disaster here does not merely mean the physical destruction of the world. It means catastrophe in the fullest Benjaminian sense of the term -- a destabilization of the ontological and epistemological experience of the world as well" (1993).

With these underlying themes, *The Walking Dead* tackles what has been defined as the main question of the post-apocalyptic subgenre, which is to say, how to define "the human in the so-called state of nature after the collapse of social structures" (Winkel Holm 2009). But it does not offer an answer. Unlike *The Road*, there is no one 'carrying the fire'. On the contrary, 'we are all infected': not only because, in the narrative, each character already carries the virus, but because even the 'good guys' are not so good, after all.

Another difference is that the landscape represented by *The Walking Dead* is different from the 'Co.d. Desolate. Birdless' world of *The Road* (p. 215). What used to be common in the pre-apocalyptic civilization: of the latter is ruptured and useless. Physical objects remain, but only as vestiges and ruins. Garbage is strewn everywhere, together with objects that were once useful but whose primary function is now ignored (these work as rhetorical images, underlining the contrast between the past and the present). But, in the landscape of *The Walking Dead*, life quickly returns and 'nature' reclaims the spaces vacated by humans (De Bruyin 2010). The ongoing narrative structure illustrates the different stages of the process of Nature taking back the Earth: in each series of the television series, the plants are more vigorous, the bushes more luxuriant, the gardens wilder. Even the relations between the community and its ecological support seem to go backwards: from the technological society of the pre-apocalyptic civilization, they revert to the settled pastoral-agrarian organization of the Hershel farm (series two), to a nomadic existence of hunting and gathering (series four). No attention is paid by anyone, however, to the

landscape or its beauty. The land is there, to be used as a support for human life, and to be controlled, when possible, with a 'colonialist discourse of ownership' (as happens with the Hershel farm and the prison).

## Conclusions

*The Road* and *The Walking Dead* are post-apocalyptic narratives whose storylines have the following similarities: no reason is offered for the event that caused the apocalypse; a post-capitalist landscape marked by the constant presence of ruins and debris provides the prevalent backdrop to the narrative; the main characters are a father and his son; the plot hinges on their efforts to survive in a hostile environment, while facing constant danger posed by very bad 'others'.

From this point on, the two narratives diverge. In *The Road*, the opposition of good guys and bad guys, i.e. between the humans and those who have lost the moral qualities of humanity, is clear-cut and constantly restated. Father and son remain on the side of the 'good guys', and the child is the one 'carrying the fire', that is the flame of humanity that still burns inside his heart. Conversely, in *The Walking Dead*, the father is sometimes pointlessly violent. The child is no longer an innocent: he kills, too, notwithstanding his age, sometimes from necessity, but also from fear or by mistake. It is not only that "the easy labels of hero and villain are gone" (Young, 2014), for so also has the possibility to discern those who have retained their moral qualities from those who have survived but lost their humanity in the process; even the distinction between the human and the post-human (i.e., the undead, the zombie) is blurred.

The main difference, however, resides in the landscape: in both cases, the former equilibrium between human activities and natural forces has been altered forever. But they offer opposing versions of the same "post-cultural landscape", a landscape where "the formalization of space and time" is broken. In *The Road*, the world is "denatured" and there is no return to life. In *The Walking*

*Dead*, the narrative constantly underlines the power of the returning Nature, while the humans become fewer and fewer, and the zombies rot progressively. Whereas the last survivors look at the environment purely as a resource, the animals and plants increase in number and strength, uncaring of human frailty.

Of the four elements identified by Dryzek (2013) as relevant in the making of a certain "environmental discourse", neither of the narratives reflect on the "basic entities whose existence is recognized or constructed", "assumptions about natural relationships", or "agents and their motives", since no reason is offered to explain the cause of the catastrophe. But the post-apocalypse in general and the post-apocalyptic landscape more specifically can be accepted as "key metaphors". In *The Road*, the planet has been made a corpse; the contrast between the desolation of the present and the vivid colours of the past offers an elegiac representation of the landscape, which may suggest a preservationist attitude towards the environment. In *The Walking Dead*, on the other hand, the disappearance of humanity may appear a catastrophe to the surviving humans, but it is pure liberation to Nature. In consequence, whereas it may be hypothesized that in *The*

*Road* life's last hope resides in the human "Fire", in *The Walking Dead* all that remains is the power of nature. Its power to weather the "disturbing presence" of the humans may be considered a biocentric approach, closer to deep ecology than to the mainstream environmentalism that underlies the eco-political stance of *The Road*. It is also close to the idea and beauty of "rewilding" recently promoted by George Monbiot (2013).

Quite possibly, neither *The Road* nor *The Walking Dead* is 'the most important environmental' text ever written. Certainly, both narratives are charged with environmental values and may trigger useful considerations on the topic. However, if we adopt a theoretical framework from critical geopolitics, we know that the meaning and discursive capacity of a cultural product do not stem only from the text itself, but are negotiated in its site of consumption. For this reason, analysis of the two texts may be interesting as a starting point, but a more insightful study is required to investigate the impressions that these texts have made on contemporary audiences.

Editors' note:

Unless otherwise stated, the sources of tables and figures are the author(s), on the basis of their own research.

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