Post-Apocalypse: A New U.S. Cultural Dominant

1. Post-Apocalypse As a New Cultural Dominant

U.S. culture today features a renewed—and more extreme—fixation on sudden disaster. Its extremity expresses itself in the sudden surge of narratives (in literature, film, and even non-fiction) set in post-apocalyptic times. Over the course of three decades, the utopian imagination seems to have first swallowed a large dose of catastrophism and then given up at least a lot of its ghost, forming either an uneasy dystopian-utopian hybrid or morphing into the dystopian altogether. In the spate of often large-budget, special-effects-rich films since *Blade Runner* (1982), and in an equally impressive volume of high and low fictions, the future has regularly taken on a dystopian veneer and been depicted as post-apocalyptic: its action-adventures, relationships and entanglements are set in an unraveled time after a world-altering calamity or technological break with the past, a time in which society has collapsed, nature has been extinguished or drastically altered, and an embattled remnant of people are struggling for survival.

A key difference between these fictions and previous apocalyptic ones is not just that their genre has moved from the margins (tacky science-fiction) into the mainstream (legitimate, widely-recognized and practiced speculative fiction), but that the new wave post-apocalypse has lost all its predecessors' impact as critical-prophetic intervention into social debate. If Charlton Heston's final pronouncements in *Soylent Green* (1973) and *Planet of the Apes* (1968) had the apocalyptic edge of a critical revelation made (alas) too late to a benighted people (a group that included the films' audiences), today's post-apocalyptic fictions begin in a space in which world-transforming disaster yields no such revelation in its depiction

in fiction and film. Apocalypse, as an end of the world brought about by, these days, mostly environmental or technological disaster, has become instead routine—an eminently saleable and easily-packaged setting for action-adventure, soap-opera serials, romances, even young adult and children's fiction. The apocalyptic scenarios of post-apocalyptic fictions are designed to interest, not awaken. A correlative to this development is that the uncontrollable anxieties 1960s and 70s nuclear and environmental prophets warned about neither occurred nor were solved, but, though repressed, grew in abundance and diversified in character and site even as they became more deeply (and consciously) integrated into U.S. social norms and ways of life.

In operationalizing the prospect of a catastrophic break with the past as a constituent of today's norms, contemporary post-apocalypticism has recently cast a longer and longer shadow within U.S. culture. I am tempted to call it a cultural dominant, replacing Fredric Jameson's claim (1991) that postmodern art and theory occupied that place. The list of texts embodying post-apocalypse grows longer every day. To pick some of the more interesting popular texts, films as various as *Blade Runner* (1982), *Waterworld* (1995), the *Terminator* series (1984–2003), *12 Monkeys* (1995), *The Matrix* series (1999–2003), *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999), *Dark City* (1998), *Mimic* (1997), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *Children of Men* (2006), *I Am Legend* (2007), *The Book of Eli* (2010), and the *Avatar* series (2009–) all depict catastrophic post-apocalypse and/or post-apocalyptic postnatural posthumanism. Television series with similar burdens now abound: for example, *The Walking Dead* (2010–) and *Revolution* (2012–) use post-apocalyptic settings as sites for a combination of serialized soap opera and action-adventure, and *Life After People* (2008–2010) and *Doomsday Preppers* (2012–) explore those settings and actions in a strangely flat, straight-faced, tongue-partially-in-cheek serious non-fiction mode, the former enlisting expert scientists and the latter presenting non-experts' schemes for preparing for fully-expected apocalypse. Perhaps more surprisingly, young adult fiction has undergone a post-apocalyptic growth spurt with Disneyesque films like *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence* (2001) and Suzanne Collins' action-adventure/young adult *Hunger Games* trilogy (2008, 2009, 2010; film version 2012). Wee children now play with Hazmat Lego figures (Heise) and see films like *Wall-E* (2008). And slyly post-apocapyptic landscapes, thus domesticated into the ordinary fare of American entertainment, have supported sappy romantic comedies, like the film version of Philip H. Dick's *Adjustment Bureau* (2011) or

Isaac Marion's recent zombie novel *Warm Bodies* (2012; film version expected in 2013).

In serious fiction, texts like Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *The Year of the Flood* (2009), or Octavia Butler's trilogy *Lilith's Brood* (1987–2000) and *Parable of the Sower* (1993), the first book of a never-completed trilogy, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006; film version 2009), William Kunstler's ongoing post-oil series, starting with *World Made By Hand* (2008–) and Colson Whitehead's literary zombie novel, *Zone One: A Novel* (2012) have made post-apocalypse as familiar a dwelling space as Jane Austen's England. (Indeed popular mashups like *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) have transported zombies back into Austen's England). Recently, Zombie post-apocalypses have been invoked by the U.S. government public health agency, the Centers for Disease Control, and Republican political operatives in pursuit of their goals (which seem, respectively, to be promoting public health awareness of epidemic infectious disease (2011) and finding ways to score satirical points against President Obama and Democrats (Folbre). Lively internet lists, like Wikipedia's "Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction" and "After the End—Television Tropes and Idioms," have gathered together extensive troves of this material. What I will slightingly call non-serious fiction has become a wild, post-apocalyptic playground. Justin Cronin, author of *The Passage* (2010) and *The Twelve* (2012), the first two volumes of an ongoing post-apocalyptic vampire trilogy, is now the most complex and lionized of a host of writers crafting popular sci-fi/speculative fictions featuring futuristic genetic posthumans, killer viruses and social mayhem, and many (more than thirteen) different ways of positioning zombies. Tim Lahaye's and Jerry B. Jenkins' immensely long, best-selling Christian series of *Left Behind* novels (1995–2007) stretches the apocalyptic drama taken from the Bible—and that St. John compressed in one short text—out into a vast narrative landscape that I will call post-apocalyptic because its end is (alas) so long delayed, while its imaginative energies are spent on portraying a small cast of characters as they attempt to live and act in a time of tribulation.

But if post-apocalypse is a cultural dominant today, what sort of social formation or set of social processes underpins it? I shall try to give some answers in what follows.

2. The Emergence of an Era of Structural Uncertainty

Post-apocalypse is, I argue, the dominant of our present era of entwined environmental, economic, technologic and social entanglements—a set of intra-acting entanglements out of which an increasingly shaky, daily normality seems not to develop or evolve, but day-by-day somehow repeatedly to materialize (Barad 472). Though it represents the future, it does so for audiences unable and undisposed to imagine any actual future further than the news cycle. In the following, I will look at public issues and debates in the U.S. in four different areas (technology, environment, social structure, and the economy) over the last half-century to show how U.S. culture's representation of these essential building blocks of social norms has developed to produce today's sense of confinement in a present marked by deep structural uncertainty. In each area—in debates about technological, social, environmental, and economic change—widespread public attention has condensed around and sought to explain key transformative moments, times when everything seemed to be changing. Examining discourses in these supposedly disparate areas will show how, increasingly, they have converged to construct a new sense of the normal: of the normal as a solidly, visibly material structure inhabited at every site by a spectral image of uncertainty, one which, whenever perceived or thought of, as it routinely daily is, seems to dissolve that visible materiality and reveal an actual, fearful, frayed and fraying, interconnected, uncertain infrastructure.

First, since the 1980s, U.S. accounts of technological history have featured the emergence of a new technological revolution. The new technologies—information, genetic, robotic, and nanotechnologies—were repeatedly seen as erasing boundaries between the human, animal and other biological forms, and nonhuman matter. Moreover, people wanted to merge with these technologies, fantasizing they augmented the human, gave them new experiences, made them smarter.

Jacques Ellul in *The Technological Society* (1954) articulated the key terms of twentieth-century concern about technology when he described how technological society coercively surrounded its members with both material technology and social techniques. Orwell's *1984* (1949) wove a dystopian technological vision seamlessly into a withering satire of bureaucratic tyranny. It was no longer "man" beside machinery (as in the 19th century), it was men and women inside the machine, coercively separated from their natural selves. But in the enthusiasms of the postwar technological revolution, people seemed willingly to embrace not just

inhabiting, but actively merging with 'machinery' that had itself changed, becoming interestingly lifelike itself. Suturing themselves eagerly into the new infrastructure, it became cutting-edge to dwell in technospheres rather than ecospheres, to embrace a new context which was explicitly post-foundational and post-natural and perhaps even a new identity as post-human (Kelly). Computer interfaces inspired dreams of splicing human nervous systems into cybernetic systems; biotech suggested posthuman genetic enhancements thanks to a technology that had seemed to literally colonize nature's last enclaves of evolution and species differentiation. Films like *The Thirteenth Floor* (1999) and fictions ranging from Philip K. Dick's prescient *Ubik* (1969) to Daniel Galouye's even more prescient *Simulcacron 3* (1964) became seemingly plausible speculative fictions about the technological construction of new ontologies. Existing biological, physical, and cultural foundations seemed to turn fluid everywhere, and reality seemed malleable all the way down.

From the start, these developments were fetishized simultaneously by techno-enthusiasts and techno-catastrophists; simultaneously, side by side, ultimate liberation and ultimate destruction were prophesized. In the 1980s and 1990s, this mix of excitement and catastrophe was, however, decisively exuberant, sponsoring an assessment of the period as a fourth (post-) industrial revolution, and even a new Renaissance, and producing the enthusiastic brio of popular technocultural claims of transformation charted by Mark Dery in *Escape Velocity* (1997). Gradually, however, techno-exuberance became routinized and dulled, and techno-catastrophism emerged as the dominant partner. As people became aware of banality in the new (wild immersions into cyberspace became exhausting data-entry into corporate computers), techno-critiques gained traction while catastrophists' awareness of the immense dystopian possibilities of the new technology stayed prominent. Fears of what would happen if the new-technological edifice crumbled or what the effects it, enabled, might produce included Y2K, bioterrorism, biosphere-deforming workplace accidents or unforeseen consequences, cyber-terrorism, and bioengineered food. In many ways, the new perception of structural instability was most dramatically underscored by a sense of what would happen were the shaky and antiquated electric grid to go down—as indeed was represented in a number of post-oil fictions like William Kunstler's.

Environmental-historical change is a second ingredient, one that includes both geophysical-biological alterations and changing conceptualizations of them. Modern assumptions about the separation of

nature and culture, gradualist concepts of environmental change, and ecological assumptions of stability and equilibrium as features of mature ecosystems seemed destined to hit a wall with proclamations of imminent environmental apocalypse in the 1970s (Buell, 2004). Then, after the apocalypse did not come and politics changed, U.S. environmental-political discourse was dominated for several decades by an exuberant anti-environmental cornucopianism, one that enshrined a positive vision of nature's malleability (Simon, 1981, 1986). By the time climate change helped put environmental crisis again on public agendas former holdings about nature had changed. No longer did environmental crisis mean an end to a nature that enshrined stability; no longer was cornucopianism anything believable; instead, nature's malleability was fused with environmental crisis in a new way. Climate change led the way to a new public appreciation of critical environmental problems and was seen not as an ending at all, but instead as taking nature and people into deeply uncertain and parlous new conditions.

Soon, this passage was named by Paul Crutzen in 2000 (Nixon) and conceptualized by Dipesh Chakravarty (2009) and others, as an entrance into a new geologic age, the Anthropocene. In the Athropocene, human beings had acquired the ability to change the world everywhere and do so in a geologically rapid fashion, thereby exposing human beings today to a new version of the immense climatic instabilities normative before the Holocene, the period of exceptional climate stability credited with being a precondition to the development of agriculture and human civilization. The theory of abrupt climate change then suggested that the bad times to come could come quickly in human, as well as geologic time. Increased incidents of 'supercat' weather events put the threshold for instabilities in the present. The figure for atmospheric carbon of 350 ppm. as the key climatic tipping point then put that threshold in the recent past.

As important, perhaps, under the umbrella of climate change, public concern deepened about a host of other human-made environmental instabilities, including new forms of environmental toxification from industrial chemicals, the appearance of new global pandemics, the disappearing and privatization of freshwater, ocean pollution, and a new set of agricultural and food crises. The history of all these changes can be tracked by lining up a series of theoretically-charged cultural key-words: with environmental apocalypse, nature was coming to an end; then with postmodernism, it ended and became post-nature (McKibben, 1989); and then it rematerialized in a world packed with human and extra-human

agencies creating a complex of changing and often institutionalized arrangements called naturecultures (Latour), which for the most part meant a world continuing without predictability or teleology, but with proliferating instability.

Third, recent postwar discourse about social change has focused on two key areas. After decades of cold-war nationalism, a feared slide of the U.S. into the third world in the 1970s, and resurgent nationalism in the 1980s, contemporary globalization seemed to suddenly undermine the nation and announce a new world order. This new era of global reorganization was seen as creating a culturally, socially, and economically interactive world. Globalization began, in U.S. discourse, in a liberatory fashion, as a development that could evade and alter the patterns of colonial domination, yield a new level of wealth and development worldwide, and open the promise for postnational or transnational connections that might end old conflicts between nations (Buell, 1998, 2001). But with the new millennium, globalization's promise to make an end-run around colonialism and global inequality came to seem hollow. Increasingly critiques argued that it had actually augmented these inequalities. And after 9/11, the new links that connected the world together became links along which crises could more rapidly propagate—thereby becoming arrangements that could expose far-removed societies to new global catastrophes. Financial crises could thus speed around these new links even as global conflicts could threaten to arise out of their structural arrangements, such as oil and mineral exploration and the structural inequalities and instabilities it created in resource-rich poor nations. Also important was the rise of a new pollution-colonialism that offloaded environmental hazards onto the developing world. With globalization, as with technology and 1980s environmental cornucopianism, enthusiasms morphed seamlessly into uncertainties.

As important, a second component of contemporary social change was the emergence in the U.S. of a vivid version of what Ulrich Beck has called *Risk Society* (1986). Risk society, as theorized by Beck, sought to show how risks that modernization had produced and that modernism helped conceal had grown so large they could no longer be externalized or contained. In the wake of 1970s environmental politics, which used a combination of nature idealism and the threat of apocalyptic destruction to help bootstrap the modern environmental movement into existence and pass signature legislation, these risks seemed still possible to contain. But then, in the 1980s, new environmental regulation was stopped by an

anti-environmental counter-movement; a new commitment to economic growth, globalization, and new industries coincided with a new, supposedly inexhaustible abundance of cheap oil; and, despite 1970s environmental regulation, risks again proliferated, and did so this time not just despite but also *within* the protocols of the system set up to contain them. The result was a unique synergy between risk aversion and risk production. Risk-averse regulation heightened public awareness of problems at every turn, with every new contention over an environmental impact statement; risk-containment seemed unable to solve the problems, even as the system as a whole stood as a testament to the fact that risks were being regulated (for example, Wargo). One consequence of this double-edged situation was that the environmental movement, though embattled, broadened its reach, embracing issues like human health and environmental inequities and injustice as well as 'ecology' issues (Gottlieb; Dowie). In the process, Beck's risks—ones invisible to the eye, and only seen through a glass darkly by experts—have been woven contentiously into public mediascapes and private imaginations everywhere. As a result, society and individuals seemed to dwell in normalities ambiguously warranted by risk-control, even as these normalities seemed contained within a deeper, phantasmagoric context of unseen, but probably actual, runaway risk.

Finally, the postwar expansion and reinvention of capitalism is the fourth factor. Displayed dramatically in the postwar economic miracle, then in recovery from subsequent delegitimization by over a decade of leftist environmental, anti-racist, anti-colonial criticism, capitalism reemerged in the 1980s apparently triumphant. Fredric Jameson (1991) has argued that the new postmodern version of capitalism, in theory as well as in practice, not only was now global, but it had eliminated the last open enclaves left within itself, by penetrating and colonizing both Nature (for example, the industrialization of agriculture) and the Unconscious (for example the expansion of the media and information). Capitalism's image, moreover, underwent a vast facelift, as, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, it emerged as (in Margaret Thatcher's acronym) T.I.N.A., or There Is No Alternative; a host of conservative Washington insiders proudly constructed their lives around Ayn Rand's bad fiction; and people generally agreed with Bill Clinton that "[i]t's the economy, stupid" that was now the central fixation of U.S. society and culture. Yet, in the wake of the 1992 UN Earth Summit in Rio, and with the mainstreaming of the concept of sustainable development, that same capitalism began to re-emerge as the most powerful force behind rising unsustainability. By the 2000s, its

globalization seemed as much vulnerability as asset. And its size became not its triumph, but its vulnerability. Today catastrophes in other areas (terrorism, climate change) are regularly seen as likely to initiate economic collapse; hence the magnitude of the risks they are exponentially raised by their ever-tighter integration with capitalist economic structures. And in the wake of the recent financial crisis—one created in part by the financial industry's invention of new investment vehicles to manage risk—it is disturbing to wonder whether if the fact that some banks were indeed too big became a critical problem, what then about globalized capitalism itself? T.I.N.A. now sounded sinister, not triumphalist, and withdrawing enthusiasms and illusions seem to have left behind a mucky, unnavigable tidal plain of uncertainty.

And thus, to return to post-apocalyptic fiction and film, we can now understand one of their great pleasures. There is something seductive about them for people living in a now global context of so thoroughly rationalized a confluence of anxieties. It may be difficult for the small remnant of fictional heroes to survive after an apocalyptic intervention; they will live on a landscape of actualized risk and uncertainty. But compared to normalities so densely packed with spectral life, their simplified and actualized world is a relief from this one.

Contemporary theory has described, internalized, and situated—and in so doing, added to—much of the uncertainty I have noted above. One can look to postmodern theory, eco and environmental theory, science studies, and the new 'material turn' in these theoretical traditions for powerful formulations of the processes that lie behind the U.S. discourse and debate I have outlined above. If postmodern theory grew out of the 1980s, active matter theory is shaping up to be a worthy companion to the 2000s. It speaks powerfully to today's sense of multiple exposures to structural uncertainties surrounding each present moment, ones embedded in ghostly infrastructure that is continuously self-assembling irrespective of individual humans actions or wishes (Iovino). It offers a vision of changing "relational ontologies" (Barad) materializing and rematerializing from a dense compression of human and non-human actants (Latour). Compressed thus in the midst of the very "thick of things" (Pickering) human exposure is heightened by the fact that these things, including human bodies as well as non-human actants (like, for example, streams of pollution and flesh-eating bacteria), co-create each other in a fundamentally "transcorporeal" fashion (Alaimo).

Theory like this thus draws a vivid picture of autonomy-destroying entanglement. What a profound refreshment for a culture as dependent as the U.S. is on the ideology of democratic, individualistic autonomy to step into the thinned-out, purified though speeded-up, video-game risks of post-apocalyptic entertainments, where even an ordinary small-town sheriff, coming to consciousness in a world where transcorporeality is activated by a deluge of flesh-eating zombies, may become a hero not just for a nation, but a species. Male-centered survivalist action-adventure thus, unsurprisingly, stands at the center of many post-apocalyptic fictions, but women-centered versions, and dramas of relationships and struggling to dwell in such conditions also claim a share.

3. The Dynamics of Risk in U.S. Culture

Just as Fredric Jameson's postmodernism was a dominant that had only a little more than fifteen years of fame, and that was rightly criticized by Ashis Nandy as a neo-imperial core-cultural movement (Buell, 2000), so also post-apocalypticism will probably be quite short and is likewise a culture of a neo-imperial core. Behind both the prominence and (probable) brevity of both is, I believe, an interesting U.S. cultural dynamic, one I shall call the dynamic of risk.

Picture just one instance of apparently radical change that occurred in postwar U.S. culture in the short space of several decades. Picture the Reagan era as fostering the celebration of a newly-liberated, deregulated, dynamically entrepreneurial, technologically-adventurous capitalism. Risk-taking was popularly fetishized. Even the energy (and some of the personnel) of the old counter-culture became intensely invested in the transformative promises of the new capitalist technoculture. Entrepreneurs working in their garages could become hugely wealthy and transform the world. Liberation became libertarian, as politicians called on the abolition of environmental and economic regulations so as "to unleash" (a favorite phrase) the productive forces of capitalism. This celebration was so intense and focused that even the vision of this unleashing described by the postmodern sci-fi/speculative fiction writer William Gibson made "social Darwinism on fast forward" (Gibson's provocative 1984 label for it) seem positive and even sexy. Meanwhile, Communism fell, and capitalism reclothed in a new social-Darwinist style became the one act in town.

Now fast-forward to George W. Bush's presidency. Think of the dot.com collapse; the 9/11 attack, and the transformation of globalization from a new world order to be celebrated into a vulnerability to be feared; the

emergence of a widely diffused war on terror and land wars; sharp price spikes in oil and a new round of near-apocalyptic predictions of peak oil; a return of environmental catastrophe to mainstream consciousness in the form of climate change and the (ill-coped with) devastation of hurricane Katrina; and then finally the great financial collapse. This compound of contingency and surprise in many different, apparently unrelated areas was, together with after-echoes of the previous decades, what specifically laid the ground for post-apocalyptics today and, along with deeper structures, must be examined in considering the emergence of post-apocalypse as a new cultural dominant.

Is this contingency run amok? If so, 'amok' is startlingly tightly patterned. Instead, I believe, it represents the transformation of several cultural themes into a full-fledged U.S. cultural dynamic. One half of this dynamic I have referred to above in commenting on Ulrich Beck. By the 1980s in the U.S., a local vision of Beck's risk-control and aversion appeared as a concept essential to managing the growing legacy of past damage (the legacy the 1970s made Americans so aware of) and the production of new dangers.

This opposite tradition has a much older lineage in Western modernity than Beck's notion; it appears as a key part of Western modernity's notions of progress and freedom. This older legacy has interwoven risk with a history of economic and social exuberance and with attempts to structure and maximize economic and social gains. Risk taking, as Peter Bernstein's 1996 history of risk makes clear, has been a key component of capitalism, essential to removing "inhibitions against exploring the unknown and creating the new." "The capacity to manage risk, and with it the appetite to take risk and make forward-looking choices, are key elements of the energy that drives the economic system forward (3)." This tradition goes back to modernity's early roots, helped drive its progress and left an expanding footprint in literary narrative.

Just how tight the juxtaposition of these two versions of risk became after World War II is clear when looked at in two ways. Seen from above in low resolution, the U.S. cultural landscape after World War II was remarkable for its flip flops back and forth between both traditions of risk—between the dominance of one over the other. To do a thumbnail abbreviation of these flippings and floppings: right after the war, exuberant postwar economic growth and the triumphalist creation of a new consumerism as the new American Way of Life were shadowed by cold war anxieties and fears of nuclear Armageddon. If risk-taking

dominated risk-aversion in this period, a decade later, risk-aversion came to the foreground in predictions of environmental apocalypse by Rachel Carson (1962), Paul Ehrlich (1968), and Donella Meadows (1972), OPEC oil embargoes on the U.S. and shortages at home, the Iranian hostage crisis and economic mayhem of stagnation. The American Way of Life seemed to disappear and, anyway, represented not freedom but a certain path into environmental apocalypse. Then the Reagan dawn dawned, apparently totally reversing things; and then the George W. Bush era seemed to reverse that. Such a remarkable series of cultural flip-flops between opposite absolutes suggests underlying dynamics at work: viewed in this way, these flip-flops pose a question to be answered.

A second way of looking at the U.S. postwar period answers this question. When economic resurgence transformed Reagan's morning in America from rhetoric into fact, the two forms of risk came together in a single dynamic. In the 1950s, the two forms had not yoked themselves together; they represented the ironic juxtaposition of two hugely incommensurate views of the world. By the 1970s, that yoking had begun: environmental apocalypse (risk-aversion) was the result of postwar exuberance (risk-taking) carried out in ignorance of environmental constraints. Yet, even as the critique of positive risk-taking intensified, environmental legislation yoked the two risk traditions together by not adopting the precautionary principle and by creating a regulatory system that, astutely manipulated, came to legitimize corporate risk-taking even as it seemed to curb it.

In the 1980s the two forms emerged as part of a single dynamic—and it was in this decade that post-apocalyptic fiction and film began their dynamic growth. Reaganite risk-exuberance did not simply suppress Carter-era risk aversions and containments; it internalized them. Imaginative texts like Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) internalized the catastrophe-awareness of the 1970s (that is, its depictions of decaying industrial era urban infrastructure) into a *noir-chic* setting in which new high-speed excitements could take place (that is, its adventures in cyberspace and a new social-Darwinist system on fast-forward). The economist Julian Simon, in *The Ultimate Resource* (1986) and *The Ultimate Resource II* (1996), logically rather than narratively, internalized the previous decade's negative apocalyptic environmental risk as the very engine of his decade's positive economic risk. Presented with crises, human genius found solutions, ones that raised society to undreamed-of new levels. Environmental crisis fueled risk-taking progress. Even the old

environmental bugbear, population crisis, became now a motor of growth: if multiplying people multiplied problems, it also increased the number of human geniuses to craft transformative solutions.

Then in the George W. Bush years, this exciting but fearful synergy between the two sorts of risk returned, albeit in a modified form, and in today's consolidation of post-apocalypse, as a cultural dominant was completed. For post-apocalypse was still clearly a synergy of negative and positive risks—yet new versions of it changed that synergy's form. If, previously, positive risk internalized and utilized a heady dose of fearful negative risk in its self-depictions, now negative risk acquired the addictive energy of the positive, as post-apocalyptic settings continued to feature action-adventure narrative and even more supported potentially endless soap-opera dramas of relationships in TV series and provided depictions of romance, family issues, and growing up pains with new settings, sentiments, and significance.

Traditional apocalyptics promise world-end, revelation, and possible salvation. From the 1950s to the 1970s, nuclear and then environmental apocalypse dispensed with salvation. As noted above, today's apocalyptics have also dropped critical revelation and become routine settings uncommitted to social movements and change. Finally it is worth observing that today's post-apocalyptics have even dispensed with world-end. For example, nature has ended, and the Earth is no more, the environmental writer-activist Bill McKibben (2011) holds; but the result is not planetary death, but the creation of a new, fundamentally unstable and diminished "Eaarth" to which people must adapt—a concept that echoes Chakravarty's Anthropocene. Kim Stanley Robinson has dramatized the onset of abrupt climate change as a condition in and against which his characters excitingly struggle in his Capital trilogy (2004, 2005, 2007). While offering a little hope for return to the Holocene, he also compellingly dramatizes adaptation to the new conditions.

Though Robinson and McKibben do not suggest this possibility, such post-apocalyptic adaptationism has a more sinister side, suggesting a still deeper synergy between the overt negatives of post-apocalypse and the old positive risk-taking of capitalism. Perhaps today's post-apocalypticism is an example of what Naomi Klein describes in *The Shock Doctrine* (2008): an industry (albeit a symbolic one) that finds rich new sources of profit in a deteriorating era, capitalizing on both fears of instability and actual disasters. Perhaps it is an industry like privatized disaster relief, private security, pollution remediation, and armament manufacture. And perhaps

adaptationalism, that some hold to be necessary in today's supposedly irreversible conditions, is in part under this shadow, like the oil industry's optimism about finding new oil in a climate-change melted arctic. Post-apocalyptic fiction and film's commercial success makes one suspect that it too is part of disaster capitalism—and in that way also a prime example of today's tight fusion of the two traditions of risk.

4. A Few Final Contextualizations

Post-apocalypse is an artifact of a new phase of capitalism; it also, clearly, accompanies a new phase in colonialism's culture of inequitable overdevelopment. Andre Gunder Frank (1966) argued that what was, in the postwar period, labeled as lack of development in the third world was in fact underdevelopment. L.S. Stavrianos (1981) integrated this into Immanual Wallerstein's world system theory (1974) to argue that first world cultures were correspondingly overdeveloped. Stavrianos interpreted overdevelopment in political-economic terms; Edward Said, in his *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) in particular, saw it in cultural terms; and a wide swathe of discourse has similarly analyzed overdevelopment in environmental terms, as a key part of the developed world's culture of unsustainability. In cultural debates in the U.S. today, these analyses are no longer revelations, but, for advocates and debunkers alike, minimal prerequisites to intellectual/cultural literacy. So to a final contextualization of post-apocalypse: the U.S. culture of post-apocalypse is the latest phase in the U.S. culture of overdevelopment. The 1970's featured corrosive worry about the U.S. slipping back into the third world along with oil crisis and economic woes, and the Reagan era sought to revive economic nationalism externally and started the culture wars internally. Then, in the forefront of globalization, a newly self-proclaimed multicultural U.S. styled itself as the head of the global vanguard. But once again a wave of exuberance has withdrawn; in the wake of 9/11 the U.S. position at the core (or top) of the global system seems not only particularly precarious, but something that ensures vulnerability.

And here again the culture of post-apocalypticism continues as it translates old cultural work. Even as post-apocalyptic scenarios have (exuberantly) become exciting and profitable places for the creative imagination to mine, they represent both anxiety about and a desire to hang on to the U.S.'s preferred position in the world. It is perhaps significant that even the U.S. military has gotten interested, asking a hundred Hollywood volunteers in October of 2011 to "think out of the

box" by helping them imagine possible terrorist plots (BBC). But equally enticing is the fact that doing this within present-day literary resources (and within the growing set of special-effects techniques available to film) is not a construction in a vacuum. It builds on an abundance of existing narrative modes to make these old modes emerge (again) as something that feels cutting-edge, perhaps even avant-garde, albeit (paradoxically) in a mass-cultural way. The bulk of the texts I listed at the opening of the essay are action-adventure dramas, many of which are big-budget films with libertarian heroes, climactic *agons*, speed-intoxicated special effects, and ultimately triumphalist narratives, ones deeply indebted to colonial narrative. Newer incarnations—like *The Walking Dead* (2010–) and *Revolution* (2012–)—integrate serial soap opera into post-apocalypse. The fiction and film, *The Road* (2006, 2009), is rawly powerful because it opposes *agon*, speed and triumphalism; but it finally joins ranks (however minimally) with a smaller set of post-apocalyptic fictions that can be described as 'brave family dramas,' like *AI* (2001) and *Wall-e* (2008), in which the protagonists cozily try to nest in a society that is no more. The impulse for action-adventure was vividly developed in H. Ryder Haggard's late nineteenth-century fiction; the impulse for family dramas' carefully drawn circles goes back to Said's post-colonial analysis of Jane Austen—as constructions of family bonds out of post-apocalyptic post-geographies, rather than colonial geographies.

But far more important is that, even as this post-apocalyptic generic experimentation utilizes colonial western traditions, the very category is, by definition, also colonial-western. It is indebted to the progressive timeline both of western colonialism (to imagining the next step in the grand narrative of the modern West) and the Christian culture that underpinned it (to using a timeline that comes from the *Bible*). Even the avant-garde aura that surrounds post-apocalyptic invention signals a tacit return to a colonial cultural economy, in which the 'first' world stands forever ahead of a 'third' on the timeline of 'progress.' Thus, in depicting post-apocalypse, first world art regains its cutting-edge status as a vanguard movement 'ahead' of third world narratives—a position that 'first world' narrative had only recently lost with the popularity of post-colonial magical realism—and first-world futures can again claim to represent the future of all humankind.

Operationalizing a developed-world-based analysis of global structural uncertainty, responding to transformations of the local, specifically U.S. cultural dynamic of risk, and crafting a narrative form out of both older colonial and more recent U.S. traditions to lay again claim to hegemonic

status in a globalized world, U.S. literary and filmic post-apocalypticism represents a classic case of the newest form of cultural nationalism, something I have elsewhere called "nationalist postnationalism" (1998). As is clear from its trajectory from the 1970s to the present, today's globalization does not mean an erasure of cultural nationalism and its traditions, but instead offers new stimuli to and contexts for (albeit ones more fluid than ever before) their reinvention.

The most ominous thought about this reinvention via the current potlatch of post-apocalyptic fiction and film is that U.S. culture is willing to imagine everything destroyed, rather than lose its place at the forefront of history.

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ABSTRACT

Over the last three decades, post-apocalypse has become a widespread feature of U.S. culture: in literary and popular fiction and film; in genres from science fiction to young adult fiction; on platforms ranging from print to television and even infants' toys. Postapocalypse is in fact a cultural dominant in the U.S. now. It engages an across-the board turn toward social anxiety in a spectrum of cultural discourses, from technology and environmental theory to post-global capitalism. It springs from a peculiar dynamic of risk within U.S. society. And it provides material out of which a new U.S. global-cultural interface has formed.

BIOGRAPHY

Frederick Buell is professor of English at Queens College. His most recent book is *From Apocalypse to Way of Life: Environmental Crisis in the American Century*. He is now working on a study of fossil fuel cultures.