

Hope Deferred: Post-Apocalyptic Fiction as Anti-Utopia

Rachele Cinerari

Abstract

This paper explores contemporary post-apocalyptic narratives as cultural metaphors reflecting anxieties about societal collapse, environmental crisis, and the future. It argues these narratives often function as anti-utopias, depicting inevitable catastrophe and fostering fatalism rather than radical alternatives. Using a materialist and sociological approach, the study examines the epistemic role of post-apocalyptic literature, analyzing how these works bridge literary form and socio-political context. Case studies from Italian and international novels reveal a pattern grounded in realism and extra-literary references, warning of ecological and technological dangers but seldom imagining paths to transformation. This tension underscores a cultural crisis of imagination, where the apocalypse is both metaphor and reality, challenging hopeful futures in literature and society. Yet, feminist utopias present alternative visions, imagining new societies beyond collapse and inspiring change.

Keywords

Antiutopia, Kulturwissenschaft, Feminist utopia, Cultural studies, Crisis of imagination

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1. Crystallization of imagination

In recent decades, post-apocalyptic narratives have emerged as one of the dominant cultural metaphors of the contemporary era. From McCarthy's *The Road* to *Mad Max: Fury Road*, from *The Last of Us* to *I Am Legend*, the end of the world is imagined and depicted with a persistent fascination. However, what stands out is that many of these narratives seldom envision a radically different "after." And when they do, it is often a future that is inherently dystopian, marked by poverty, dictatorship, annihilation, or desertification in the wake of societal collapse.¹

Popular contemporary narratives are deeply shaped by visions of a ruined future. The widespread appeal of post-apocalyptic fiction can be better understood when viewed in relation to the specific anxieties of the time periods in which they emerge². While it is true that the realm of fiction is not always directly connected to reality, we maintain that a kind of 'Zeitgeist' – shaping fiction culturally, ethically, and economically – does indeed exist. Everything seems to suggest that we are living in the end times, that the apocalypse *is* now. In such a context, how can one possibly escape it?

«The apocalyptic imagination has a tendency to conceive the world in starkly dualistic terms» (Wallis 2006: 28) and, as clearly underlined by Florian Mussnug «Last man fictions thus naturalize the cultural legacy of religion in modern secular life, placing a consistent emphasis on what we

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² Cf. Doyle 2015; Tate 2017.

may call [...] the post-apocalyptic» (2012: 334). The idea of the last man on Earth – whether he is the one who will preserve the existence of humanity or fail to survive the apocalypse – runs through numerous texts and across multiple literary traditions. Contemporary apocalyptic narratives, particularly those centered on the figure of the “last man,” translate religious, moral, and cultural concepts into a secular and biological framework (Mussgnug 2012), presenting them as if they were natural, inevitable, or biologically determined. The apocalypse, originally a theological event, is reformulated as a natural or scientific phenomenon: viruses, nuclear wars, ecological disasters. What these narratives are primarily concerned with is not the apocalypse itself, but the way in which it is “naturalized.”

As we move closer to the focus of our analysis – namely, the literary domain – we can say that post-apocalyptic narratives operate in a suspended dimension between the obsessive repetition of trauma and the crystallization of an imaginary that seems incapable of thinking about the future beyond catastrophe. The individual, besieged by consumer society, becomes entangled in a viscous discourse that obstructs the reorganization of knowledge and the reimagining of the world. From a materialist perspective, some intellectuals argue that the post-apocalyptic narrative functions as an extension of capitalism and neoliberalism – a narrative device that, rather than inciting action, induces paralysis, the obsessive repetition of trauma, according to Smith, does not stimulate transformation but rather produces an effect of immobility, trapping the imagination in a present with no future³. The lack of a long-term temporality prevents us from imagining a different horizon: catastrophe is not imminent, but immanent. The critical theory related to certain narratives – literary, but also media-related – concerning post-apocalyptic imaginaries deals with the power of the apocalyptic metaphor, whose eschatological value has been particularly challenged by environmental movements⁴. At the same time, it also interrogates the problematic nature of “clichéd optimism” (cf. Berlant 2011).

This paper’s focus will be the analysis of the epistemic value of contemporary post-apocalyptic novels, as well as their relationship with the extra-literary and sociological context, attempting a materialist and sociological analysis. Literary texts will not be treated as mere testimonial documents; instead, their fictional dimension will be considered, striving to maintain a balance between the internal (literary) and external (extra-literary) levels of

³ Cf. Smith 2022.

⁴ Cf. Friederici 2022.

formal construction – an approach that is also essential for conducting sociological analysis⁵. Particular attention will be paid to referential elements that function as bridges between the literary and extra-literary realms. The interaction between these two levels is not neutral; rather, it actively contributes to constructing a sense of the present – one that can either reinforce a state of immobilism or open up possibilities for interpretation and transformation.

2. Anti-utopia

Post-apocalyptic narrative paradigms have been highly prominent in mass culture for at least the past two decades, representing one of the main drivers in fields such as cinema, but also in literature. They appear to follow a fairly consistent trend across the cultural sector, having achieved considerable success in the Anglophone world – primarily in the United States – before being transposed or adapted in Europe and subsequently within individual national contexts. The Italian landscape offers a clear example of how certain forms, structures, and discourses have been introduced into the European and then national context with slight modifications, mostly related to setting. In Italy specifically, as Marco Malvestio points out, it is «highly significant that mainstream authors never seem to acknowledge Italian science fiction writers among their influences, but rather appear more influenced by Anglo-American authors, if not by cinema itself» (2012: 10).

Given that these are high-consumption forms of artistic and literary production, following the theoretical framework of Fredric Jameson, one can speak of a form of “political unconscious” underlying artistic productions. The role of literary critics is also to attempt to

detect and to reveal – behind such written traces of the political unconscious as the narrative texts of high or mass culture, but also behind those other symptoms or traces which are opinion, ideology, and even philosophical systems – the outlines of some deeper and vaster narrative movement in which the groups of a given collectivity at a certain historical conjuncture anxiously interrogate their fate, and explore it with hope or dread. (Jameson 1982: 282)

This is not a matter of relying on mere “hermeneutics of suspicion” – a tool Rita Felski (2015) has already shown to be insufficient for literary criticism – but rather of pursuing an analysis that considers literary works

⁵ Cf. Sapiro 2014.

also as products of a specific social and cultural hummus as well as market commodities.

What Jameson asserts regarding the analysis of science fiction seems far more fitting to describe the current state of post-apocalyptic narratives, in which the connection between narrative and the future – and the value of these narratives as a form and a kind of knowledge – is not their ability to vividly imagine or sustain visions of the future. Rather, their aim appears to be to repeatedly reveal and describe our inability to truly envision the future. We are distant – not only in chronological terms – from Bloch's vision of the «Prinzip Hoffnung» or from the sense of possibility depicted by Musil in *The Man Without Qualities* (where social critique was also profoundly present) – distant from the capacity to conceive of radical alternatives and genuine otherness. Most contemporary post-apocalyptic literature, «setting forth for the unknown, finds itself irrevocably mired in the all-too-familiar, and thereby becomes unexpectedly transformed into a contemplation of our own absolute limits» (Jameson 1982: 289).

At the beginning of this essay, I stated that many contemporary post-apocalyptic narratives, in my view, possess characteristics that identify them as anti-utopian. It is necessary to clarify what we mean by this term, which can contain various positions and theories. As Lucy Sargisson also observes, certain strands of anti-utopianism are common within conservative political positions (Sargisson 2012: 22), primarily because they conceive of utopianism as something authoritarian and hierarchical, potentially threatening individual freedom – a value held in high regard by conservative thought. Furthermore, the term “utopian” is often used by conservatives to label positions they consider overly idealistic and therefore impractical. However, anti-utopian stances are also employed by intellectuals and academics to assert «the fear that utopia will lead to the end of history, politics and change» (24). Drawing on the thoughts of Karl Popper and John Gray, Sargisson points out that some anti-utopian positions deserve serious consideration, as they oppose the idea of utopia as absolute perfection: «Dreams of perfection informed Hitler's utopia of a pure and noble Germany. [...] Similarly, religious fundamentalism is often informed by a vision of the perfect few [...] Politics and utopia can have a relationship that ends in authoritarianism, totalitarianism or fundamentalism and the death of change. And utopia needs to be approached with great caution» (30-31).

In a recent article published in *The Guardian*, Naomi Klein (2025) offers a clear analysis of the differences between the fascist ideologies of a century ago and those of today: whereas early twentieth-century fascisms envisioned a bright era to be achieved through their struggle, the contemporary situa-

tion is markedly different: «Alive to our era of genuine existential danger – from climate breakdown to nuclear war to sky-rocketing inequality and unregulated AI – but financially and ideologically committed to deepening those threats, contemporary far-right movements lack any credible vision for a hopeful future», she also adds: «we simply have not faced such a powerful apocalyptic strain in government before. The “end of history” swagger of the post-cold war era is rapidly being supplanted by a conviction we are in the actual end of times». And this idea of a world on the brink of destruction, of war looming – unfortunately reinforced by Western policies that continue to invest increasingly in arms and less and less in healthcare, culture, and rights – is, moreover, exploited by capitalist economies in the production and promotion of advertisements for bunkers and shelters. As Richard Seymour reminds us in his recent book, *Disaster Nationalism*: «The apocalypse is no mere fantasy. We are living in it, after all, from deadly viruses to soil erosion, from economic crisis to geopolitical chaos» (Seymour in Klein 2025).

How does all of this fit within literature, and how do these temporal and social interconnections combine? My aim is certainly not to suggest that contemporary post-apocalyptic narratives are intrinsically linked to the current drift of the Western far right. However, it is nonetheless worth noting that this type of apocalyptic narrative – completely devoid of eschatological elements – is something deeply connected to our present time.

The contemporary post-apocalyptic narrative seems to function as a form of anti-utopia, not only by denying the possibility of an alternative future but also by serving as an ideological tool that reinforces the perception of the present as the only possible reality. From a sociological and materialist perspective, anti-utopia is not only a critique of utopian illusions but a narrative mechanism that validates the hegemony of the existing system, making radical change impossible to imagine.

When considering how the climate catastrophe is narrated in the media, we observe that the language is consistently aimed at describing something that will inevitably happen and cannot be otherwise. Studies in ecolinguistics, such as *Beyond Climate Breakdown* by Peter Friederici and *Climate Change and Culture: Apocalypse and Catharsis* by Carien Smith, have noted how apocalyptic narratives produce inaction and emotional – and therefore political – immobilism. If something is perceived as inevitable, no one will attempt to stop it. We live in the worst of all possible worlds, as Bould (2018) states, and yet, «we live in a post-utopian time of pragmatic administration, since we have learned the hard lesson of how noble political utopias end in totalitarian terror» (Žižek 2006). Utopian imagination – the impulse that drives us to envision a world different from the one we

inhabit, that animates the sentiments of political communities, and that motivates societies to think and imagine better worlds – seems to have stalled in the face of present horrors and everyday difficulties. Spending hours in front of our screens, we see no alternative possibilities; we do not perceive the sense of possibility. As Lawrence Buell asserts «Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal» (1995: 3). It has also been employed by some of the most active environmental movements in Europe, such as Extinction Rebellion (XR), who, however, do not limit themselves to narrating an unavoidable catastrophe but actively fight to prevent it. Indeed, they challenge the eschatological metaphor that leads to apathy and inaction.

It seems that the utopian imagination is trapped, like capitalism and industrialism and the human population, in a one-way future consisting only of growth. (Le Guin 1983)

Anti-utopia, as defined by Sargisson, opposes utopian impulses and the ability to imagine alternatives to reality (Sargisson 2012: 22). While it is true that science fiction – and post-apocalyptic novels in particular – have often sought to use fiction to reveal distortions within reality, an examination of some of the recurring themes and characters in this literature reveals that dystopian depictions and imaginations – once valuable and insightful at the beginning of the twentieth century for envisioning the consequences of failing to choose the “right” side of history – have now become empty, ineffective, or worse: dangerous. Mark Bould states that «We already inhabit the worst of all possible worlds – the one that actually exists – so perhaps there is no critique left that dystopia can effect», it could be that the only effect possible for dystopian imaginary is to stick to the idea that no other world is possible: «Perhaps its only function now is anti-utopian» (Bould 2018).

Analyses that interpret literary phenomena as cultural products are often accused of seeking in fiction what is not fictional. However, it should not be forgotten that imaginaries help create reality, and that fictional works are often far from immune to their social and cultural contexts – post-apocalyptic literature being a prime example.

Viewed from a materialist perspective, apocalyptic narratives appear to crystallize an imaginary that is the perfect product of capitalist and neo-liberal cultural constructions: there is no world beyond the one in which we live. It is no coincidence, moreover, that this type of narrative is so frequently the subject of high-budget film productions or highly successful series produced by audiovisual giants such as Netflix.

3. Antiutopia in contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction

Ursula K. Heise has stated that «Contemporary dystopias [...] aspire to unsettle the status quo, but by failing to outline a persuasive alternative, they end up reconfirming it» (Heise 2015).

My hypothesis is that there are two distinct approaches in contemporary post-apocalyptic and apocalyptic narrative management: on the one hand, books that adhere exclusively to dystopian post-apocalyptic paradigms, which do not open up possibilities; on the other hand, as we will see in some examples, there are works that problematize the apocalyptic phenomenon as a social and cultural construct, deeply intertwined with and derived from contemporary economic and social structures. It is necessary to distinguish between twentieth-century literary production and contemporary works, even when both employ the post-apocalyptic paradigm.

This article does not aim to divide post-apocalyptic texts into 'progressive' or 'regressive', nor to elaborate a theory on a quality level; it may be more productive to read them as falling along a spectrum of imaginative openness, from works that foreclose alternative futures to those that intentionally or unintentionally expose the limits of contemporary thought. Even works that appear ideologically conservative can reveal the tensions of our historical moment through their formal contradictions. Here, the aim is to read the spread of this narrative paradigm as linked to social phenomena.

The editorial and market dynamics, theoretically reflecting on why authors and writers are drawn to this narrative genre as a tool to interpret contemporary society and the world, exploring how post-apocalyptic works can provide a critical lens for understanding social and existential realities, emphasizing the role of technological tools as a connecting reference between the literary and the extra-literary.

This type of narrative does not simply represent catastrophe but seems to become an integral part of it, structuring an imaginary that reinforces the idea of an inevitable and inescapable collapse. The question, therefore, is not just what these stories tell, but what function they assume in the social context in which they are embedded: what relationship do they establish with the possibility of transformation? Is there room for a post-apocalyptic narrative that does not merely reiterate the end but could open a breach in the horizon of the present?

It should also be remembered that contemporary post-apocalyptic novels operate through representational strategies and employ means of realism. It seems that the greater the resemblance between the post-apocalyptic world and the world we currently inhabit is, the greater the novel's

likelihood of success. Many of these narratives are deeply rooted in, and triggered by, strong references to extra-literary and real-world elements, explicitly declaring their intention to invoke them within the narrative. Survival rarely leads to rebirth or a new form of community: the future is blocked, historical memory is erased, and technology is reduced to ruins. The catastrophe is always triggered by human intervention, whether in the form of climate and environmental disasters, consequence of technological instruments, or the spread of viruses. These narratives exhibit a clear pedagogical intent, aiming to warn readers about the risks of environmental exploitation, the excessive power of technology, etc.

This is the case, in the Italian context, with Bruno Arpaia's novel *Qualcosa là fuori*, which, set within a highly plausible climate crisis scenario and depicting a mass of climate migrants moving from Italy toward northern Europe, operates aesthetically on a slippery boundary between reality and fiction. It relies on a mirroring mechanism with the reader – a reader's response grounded in the recognition of plausibility. As extensively discussed by Amitav Ghosh, the majority of novels dealing with climate crises – labeled by literary critics as "climate fiction" – is «made up mostly of disaster stories set in the future» (Ghosh 2016: 124).

Livio Dalmastro, the main character in Arpaia's novel, former environmental activist, is portrayed as someone who remembers how things unfolded, how they came to find themselves in that climate disaster situation.

He recalled having heard that in 2015, in Paris, for the first time, 195 countries had signed a global climate agreement: to many, it had seemed a turning point, a genuine revolution. However, in reality, the commitments made by each nation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions – already insufficient – were merely voluntary; moreover, there was no authority with the power to enforce them effectively. (Arpaia 2019: 23)⁶

This overt and directly extra-literary reference to the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement exemplifies the narrative device Arpaia employs: a reader's response entirely based on the recognition of real-world referents within the

⁶ Ricordava di aver sentito che nel 2015, a Parigi, per la prima volta 195 paesi avevano sottoscritto un accordo globale sul clima: a molti era sembrata una svolta, una vera e propria rivoluzione; e invece, in realtà, gli impegni presi da ogni nazione a ridurre le emissioni di gas serra, comunque insufficienti, erano soltanto volontari; per di più, non c'era nessun organismo che avesse il potere di farli rispettare davvero. (Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.)

fictional. The following pages constitute a veritable fictionalization of climate reports by the UN and the IPCC – indeed, Arpaia himself cites, among the sources for his novel, a range of scientific documents, essays, and reports, alongside some literary references. As Malvestio (2012) also observes, «the fully recognizable setting (indeed, much of the appeal of these novels relies on this recognizability) highlights the subtle but indissoluble link between nature and culture in a physical place», which must be overtly recognizable.

Qualcosa là fuori articulates a temporal architecture in which the present is continuously mediated through memory. The narrative time is structured around recollection, where the ‘present’ of the story coincides with the act of remembering a past collapse, one that has already become irreversible. This temporal layering produces a recursive structure: the narration folds back upon itself, suspending any projection toward the future.

In this context, the characters merely function as witnesses to loss. Livio Dalmastro embodies the archetype of the solitary survivor, it is presented as that one ‘Last Man’ whose consciousness bears the weight of collective failure, the only one who’s able to trace the origins of the collapse: «No one could remember exactly when it all began [...] Livio Dalmastro, however, remembered» (13)⁷. He is the one who warned his friends about the risks of climate change, about their responsibility in trying to avoid it, and he is often described as the one who knows things, who is aware of facts that the other characters ignore. Yet his individuality does not open a path to redemption; rather, it marks the impossibility of collective agency and action. The focus on a single, isolated consciousness thus becomes a narrative device that personalizes and simultaneously limits the scope of ecological catastrophe.

This structure of the book – strictly divided between the time of narration (the time of consequences) and the time of memory (the lost world) – creates a narrative closure. The past is endlessly revisited, the present endlessly narrated, and the future endlessly deferred. The rupture, therefore, seems to lie not in the event itself but in the impossibility of narrating beyond it.

In *Sirene* (2007) by Laura Pugno, humanity is forced to live sheltered from the light, which has become a carrier of a lethal virus. By constructing underwater refuges, humanity has found a species to exploit: the mermaids. The novel contains many references to contemporary reality, and at one point, for example, a clear allusion emerges to the situation of migrants who try and hope to reach the European coasts from the Mediterranean:

⁷ «Nessuno ricordava più con esattezza quando era cominciato tutto [...] Livio Dalmastro, invece, ricordava».

Perhaps, Samuel thought, they came from the Outer Territories, the free zones where desperate people crowded, trying to reach the coast of Underwater. With the Black Cancer, the city was surrounded by quarantine camps. It was not the refugees from the Outer Territories who carried the epidemic, but the authorities knew that a scapegoat is always needed. The ocean reflected the sun onto the inhabitants of Underwater like a huge mirror, yet thousands of people pressed against the borders, were locked inside electrified fences, and waited, hoping to see the sea one day. (Pugno 2007: 32)⁸

The scene not only describes a dystopic post-catastrophic world, but also clearly reminds to present-day systems of exclusion and bordering. In Pugno's novel, the planet is already lost; the catastrophe is not something to be avoided, but something that has already taken place. And although the mermaids may appear to some characters as a last hope for humanity, the narrative undermines any suggestion of salvation and throughout the novel, there is a persistent animalistic description of mermaids, who are contemptuously compared to cows and other animals⁹, structuring the narrative around a strong contrast between positive humanity and negative animality, but most of all reinforcing the idea of them being meat, to be used, to be eaten, to be raped. Samuel, the protagonist, commits crimes and acts violently and rapes mermaids, and although towards the end of

⁸ Forse, pensava Samuel, i suoi venivano dai Territori esterni, le zone libere dove si accalcavano i disperati che cercavano di raggiungere la costa di Underwater. Col cancro nero, la città era circondata da campi di quarantena. Non erano i fuoriusciti dai Territori esterni a portare con sé l'epidemia, ma le autorità sapevano che un capro espiatorio serve sempre. L'oceano rifletteva il sole addosso agli abitanti di Underwater come un enorme specchio, eppure migliaia di persone premevano sui confini, si facevano chiudere nei recinti elettrificati e aspettavano, nella speranza di vedere un giorno il mare.

⁹ «The females were beasts for milk and meat, and at the same time they were, voiceless, legless women [...] their light green arms with webbed hands, their breasts always large and heavy with dark green, hard nipples, from which a sweetish milk flowed when they were in heat. [...] Mermaid meat was in high demand. [...] beautiful mermaids with cow-like snouts and breasts full of milk» (Le femmine erano bestie da latte e da carne e insieme erano donne, prive di parola, prive di gambe, [...] le braccia verde chiaro con le mani palmate, il seno sempre grande e pesante con i capezzoli verde cupo, durissimi, da cui nell'estro usciva un latte dolciastro. [...]). La carne di sirena era molto richiesta. [...] bellissime sirene dal muso di vacca, dai seni pieni di latte) (Pugno 2007: 13-14, 156).

the novel there is a hint at the possible continuation of Samuel's (and human beings in general) life only possible through an apparent flow into the hybrid body of the mermaid. However, this is only hinted at and never realized. There is no reparation or utopia on the horizon. The world of *Sirene* offers no escape route, no way out into the light, only the submerged remnants of a civilization turned in on itself.

The novel, as Antonello (2021: 10) observes, «explicitly enacts a critique of a development model based on the techno-capitalist exploitation of the planet and human and animal life, which leads to an ecologically imploded world». What makes *Sirene* especially striking within the landscape of Italian post-apocalyptic fiction is not only its stark ecological critique, but its denial of imaginative futurity.

This deliberate closing off of future possibilities performs a kind of narrative exhaustion: a literature of warning that risks reinforcing the very paralysis it seeks to contest. In this, also *Sirene* aligns with what Amitav Ghosh (2016) has called «a crisis of imagination» – the inability to envision meaningful transformation in the face of overwhelming ecological collapse. And yet, in bearing witness to this impasse, *Sirene* also compels readers to confront the ideological machinery – economic, political, ecological – that brought it about. It is not just a speculative fiction; it is a mirror, cold and unrelenting, that reflects the violent undercurrents of our present world. But as Carla Benedetti recently stated in her book *La letteratura ci salverà dall'estinzione*:¹⁰ «knowing is not enough [...] [We will also need to] move something else, probably something fossilized by the same thinking patterns that have led to the type of development and society that is now leading us to catastrophe. [...] we will need to draw on other human energies that have been deactivated, and we will also need to ignite our imagination» (16). Describing, imagining, and telling stories of a post-apocalyptic future is not sufficient. This flattening of narrative into a form of overt realism generates a reader's response that, however, is not an imaginative effort, not an attempt to create empathy between the present human and the (near) future human. The structure of these books reveals how narrative form can convey ideological positions. For example, repetition, cyclical temporality and restricted focalization can mirror the impossibility of imagining systemic change. These stylistic choices emphasize that the crisis of imagination operates not only at the thematic level, but also within the texture of the narrative itself. Indeed, these texts seem

¹⁰ «Literature will save us from extinction».

to offer no space for a genuine sense of the future: Although these texts are set in the future, the futures they look at are already doomed and offer no possibility for meaningful transformation. When the future (of their future) is suggested – in both cases only at the very end of the books – it is a future that is irreparably lost.

The Italian case is particularly interesting – especially when focusing on writers published by major publishing houses, as is the case here – because these are novels written by authors who do not primarily work in the science fiction or dystopian genres, but whose venture into post-apocalyptic fiction seems to respond to another call: the need to experiment with this type of novel and its social specifics¹¹.

The cyclical temporality that oscillates between present and past – frequently erasing the future as a conceivable or inhabitable space –, tends to retreat into repetition, memory, and nostalgia, rather than opening up imaginative pathways toward alternative forms of life. An especially revealing example of this temporal dynamic and imaginative crisis comes from a different social and publishing context: it is the case of *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel, a widely acclaimed bestseller later adapted into a successful HBO miniseries. Although the novel employs a multiple temporal structure that moves between the pre-pandemic world and the resultant post-collapse, this mobility does not translate into imaginative expansion. Rather, the narrative temporality remains trapped in a recursive loop, continually referencing the “before” as a point of orientation, a kind of emotional and cultural lodestar. The post-pandemic world is not imagined as radically different, but as a diminished echo of what once was. This is especially clear in the novel’s final pages, where Clark, one of the protagonists, gazes into the distance at what appears to be a small settlement, interpreting it as a sign of recovery: «If there are again towns with streetlights, if there are symphonies and newspapers, then what else might this awakening world contain?» (St. John Mandel 2014: 332). Many scholars read this moment as emblematic of hope, a symbol of «rejuvenation and a new beginning» (Mukherjee 2024: 236). However, I contend that such an interpretation risks overlooking what is critically absent: a confrontation with the structures and logics of the pre-collapse world that made the collapse inevitable. What appears to be hope may instead be a form of narrative and ideological regression – a desire to restore rather than reimagine. The implicit assumption that recovery means returning

¹¹ Cf. Micali 2021.

to streetlights, symphonies, and newspapers suggests a nostalgia for the very systems of hyper-technologization, extractive capitalism, and systemic inequality that precipitated the collapse in the first place. In this light, the novel's imagined future is not an alternative, but a reinstatement of the present in slightly altered form. *Station Eleven* – like the other narratives we have briefly examined – also reproduces another recurring trait of post-apocalyptic fiction: the strict dichotomy between a human “we” (often reduced to an individual “I,” especially in Last-Man narratives) and a non-human “they”. This binary worldview positions nature, non-human animals, and even the Earth itself as external, alien, or threatening entities to be survived or mastered rather than lived with. Such a framing reinforces the anthropocentric logic that underpins ecological devastation, treating the world as a passive backdrop to human drama rather than as an interconnected, dynamic system in which humans are embedded.

4. Is there Utopia beyond Catastrophe?

As stated by Bruno Latour, to emphasize the times we live in as the Anthropocene means «to claim that human agency has become the main geological force shaping the face of the earth, is to immediately raise the question of ‘responsibility’, or as Donna Haraway is fond of saying, ‘response ability’» (Latour 2014: 38). What if the apocalypse was not the end, but the beginning of a new relationship between species? What if the real horror was not the end of the world, but the repetition of its injustices in new forms?

Today [...] we all accept silently that global capitalism is here to stay. On the other hand, we are obsessed with cosmic catastrophes; the whole life of earth disintegrating because of some virus, because of a meteorite hitting the earth and so on. So the paradox is this: it is much easier to imagine the end of all life on earth than a much more modest radical change in capitalism. Which means that we should reinvent utopia. (Žižek 2003)¹²

Of course, it is paradoxical to describe such a transformation as “modest”, since envisioning an alternative to capitalism would imply a

¹² This quote comes from a 2003 speech at the University of Buenos Aires, as featured in the 2006 documentary *Žižek!*, directed by Astra Taylor (03:34:03 – 04:21:01).

radical reconfiguration of our social, economic, and ontological coordinates. However, what is important here is that utopia could be a mean to fight the pervasive atmosphere of capitalist realism (Fisher 2009: 20) we are living in.

In this sense, one of the paths that can help us significantly strengthen and deepen the reflection could be the (eco)feminist utopian reading lens, which combines feminist critique with ecological issues; which does not only involve environmental issues, but also social structures, health rights, kinships. Something different from what we saw in the previous examples happens in novel and literary works whose authors are aware that the «ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities and species is the same ideology that sanctions the oppression of nature» (Gaard 1993: 1) and the fact that we live in a world structured by and on unequal power relationships, and this is what is leading us directly to the end of the world as we know it.

Ecofeminism explores the interconnections between gender oppression and environmental exploitation, revealing how the exploitation of nature and women is rooted in a common patriarchal and capitalist system¹³. The ecological crisis is not only an environmental issue but also a matter of social and gender justice. Ecofeminist theories and (literary) practices offer a vision of post-apocalyptic rebirth in which the end of the patriarchal and capitalist oppressive system offers the possibility of new forms of relationship between humanity and nature. Ecofeminism, therefore, not only denounces domination but also promotes practices of care and resistance that can contribute to building a fairer and more sustainable world. It not only critiques oppressive structures but also invites us to stay with the trouble (Haraway 2016), offering a vision of resistance, creation, and transformation, where daily practices of care, solidarity, and ecological justice become essential in imagining new worlds starting now, because the best «way of conceiving a sustainable, just, and lovable future» should be that to start living it, making it by living it already, since «There is no way *there* but *here* and now» (Keller 1996: 30).

At least in the last 20 years utopian feminist literary works have played a crucial role «as a form of imagining and enacting political change» (Wånggren 2024: 315). Their statement as clear political literary works does not weaken their imaginative and utopian effort, as we

¹³ Cf. Shiva 1988; Warren 2000.

previously saw, but it fights to keep imagination, theory, and political struggle all together. Utopian feminist works combining with ecofeminist prospectives form proper literary genealogies, «specific literary tradition, seen in continuities and intertextual references that spur new utopian visions» (327), basing on feminist world-building in literature as a mode of speculative engagement with political change and with practical ways of imaging a new world where we can live without destroying the planet, without subaltern species and groups of people, without basing everything on the same patterns of domination that characterize our present societies.

In utopian feminist literary works «Those who survive in these narratives are connected beings, part of caring communities, or, in ecofeminist terms, ‘selves in relation’» (Bedford 2014: 85), the “ecological Self” as Plumwood (1993: 159) defines it, is a self that overcomes individuality and strives for kinship.

In *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood, we see the protagonist abandons his self-absorption and the toxic influences of capitalist society in favor of caring relationships and community – as a matter of fact «Snowman poses a possibility for a new ecofeminist iteration on a traditionally individualistic science fiction trope: the “Last Man” protagonist» (Bedford 2014: 87). Moreover, in Atwood’s novel the survival of the human beings as we know them are not crucial for the survival of nature and other beings – the utopia of a new world with new beings, composed and created not to act violence towards each other can only be seen as dystopic from an anthropocentric perspective, one that centers around the human ego.

Literature, theory, and utopian practice thus converge in a political and poetic gesture: imagining – and beginning to live – a world where survival is no longer based on competition and domination, but on mutual responsibility, shared vulnerability, and an ecology of affection. In *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Ursula K. Le Guin explored precisely this possibility through the construction of a world – the planet Gethen – where the distinction between genders is abolished. In this context, Le Guin radically deconstructs the foundations of patriarchy and gender hierarchy, showing how a social organization not based on binary difference can generate new forms of coexistence and understanding. Although set in a science fiction context, the narrative functions as a profound and poetic critique of dominant models of identity, power, and relation.

Another dystopian-utopian reflection is found in *Macht* (2016) by Karen Duve, in which the author imagines a future Germany governed

by an ecofascist regime that violently enforces “ethical” environmental norms, such as banning meat consumption or pet ownership. In this setting, Duve stages the story of a middle-aged man stripped of his privileges and forced to confront the material and emotional implications of a system that upends speciesist and sexist logics of domination. The novel stands as an ironic and bitter critique not only of patriarchal culture but also of the potential authoritarian turns of environmentalism lacking empathy and intersectionality. Yet within its folds, space opens for transformation: the protagonist, stripped of his certainties, begins to question his relationships, power, and responsibility.

Together with Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and many others, these works help outline literary genealogies where post-apocalyptic narrative becomes a space of political negotiation, and an ethical and ontological laboratory. In these narratives, the “end of the world” is never total nor final: it is the prelude to a radical redefinition of the living, to the construction of new forms of community and interdependence that challenge the logics of anthropocentrism, patriarchy, and capitalism. Central to this transformation is the concept of kinship – multispecies alliances and relationships no longer grounded in blood or contract, but in situated and affective reciprocity. As Donna Haraway shows, survival is no longer played out in the myth of human purity or autonomy, but in the capacity to *stay with the trouble*, that is, to live within ruins and generate shared forms of existence from them.

The metaphor of compost, central to Haraway’s thought, thus becomes key to reading these narratives: it is not about dreaming of an abstract palingenesis, but about “worlding” with what remains – mixing species, memories, relations, and waste. «We are all compost» (Haraway 2016): not isolated individuals, but living mixtures made of humans and nonhumans, affective, historical, and material relations. From this perspective, the post-apocalyptic is not a desert after catastrophe, but fertile ground, humus from which new forms of life and meaning can emerge.

Simona Micali underlines that in this kind of novels «Last Man Fiction [...] is thus converted into an attempt at New Man Fiction – or perhaps, with a more suggestive formula, into an attempt at Posthuman Fiction» (Micali 2021: 8). The “Last Man Novel” thus transforms in these feminist post-apocalyptic utopias into a posthuman narrative, where subjectivity is redefined through practices of care, diffuse responsibility, and co-belonging. The human is no longer the center or the goal of history but part of a network of relations that includes animals, plants, technologies, organic and inorganic matter. As it is also argued by Rosi

Braidotti (2013), the posthuman does not represent the end of the human, but the possibility of overcoming its historical limits – patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism – to open up to a collective, situated, and relational subjectivity. Literature, theory, and utopian practice thus converge in a political and poetic gesture: imagining – and beginning to live – a world where survival is no longer founded on competition and domination, but on unexpected kinship, the ontology of compost, and an ecology of affection and shared responsibility.

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The Author

Rachele Cinerari

Rachele Cinerari is a research fellow in Literary Criticism and Comparative Literature at the University of Chieti. Her research interests include literature as a form of knowledge, the relationship between literature and science, editorial dynamics, and early 20th-century literary magazines. She is the author of *Analogie e incognite. La matematica come forma di conoscenza in Paul Valéry, Robert Musil, Hermann Broch, Virginia Woolf* (Peter Lang, 2025) and *Valéry's Abweichungen. Paul Valéry nella critica letteraria tedesca* (Segni&Parole, 2025).

Email: rachele.cinerari@unich.it

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