APOCALYPTIC FICTION AND CONTEMPORARY THEORY: 'THE REAL' GOING BEYOND POSTMODERNISM, POSTSTRUCTURALISM, AND DECONSTRUCTION

Jaouad Achtitah[i]
Professor of English, PhD,
Ibn Tofail University,
Morocco

Abstract:

Apocalyptic fiction, though it is a twenty-first century genre par excellence, traces back to the religious genealogy of the bible and the historical genealogy of literary tradition and archetype. Both narrative modes, apocalyptic and postapocalyptic, belong to apocalyptic thinking and envision the end of the world, yet they express different historical, environmental, and human catastrophic conditions. At this point, this article tries to unveil the genealogy of apocalyptic thinking and its current environmental concerns, in attempt to prove that this literary genre can have an effect on reality. 'The real' that has always been challenged, questioned, and doubted by postmodernism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction is brought to discussion again by apocalyptic fiction, given the inevitability of environmental threats and catastrophes. Putting aside any speculative allegations, many scholars of language theories and neurobiology prove that 'the real' has to be taken more seriously. On a practical level, three apocalyptic novels, Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, and Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140*, are taken as examples in point, which can enrich the discussion and demonstrate the unrefusable nexus between apocalyptic fiction and tangible reality, which gives birth to the term ecological realism. Therefore, this article is divided into three main sections, following the development of argument. First, there is a tracing back of apocalyptic thinking in religion, literature, and history. After, there is an attempt to establish arguments for 'the real'. Then, there is a discussion of the environmental threats portrayed in fiction, particularly in the three novels, and their tangibility and reality, which is named as ecological realism.

Keywords: apocalyptic fiction, contemporary theory, 'the real', ecological realism, environmental catastrophes

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[i] Correspondence: email jaouad.achtitah@uit.ac.ma

1. Introduction

The word 'apocalypse' as such has a biblical origin before it represents any literary genre. Certainly, the religious discourse was the one to start speaking about the end of the world and the occurrence of the day of judgment, which nowadays is viewed as a religious perspective of apocalypse that envisions another beginning after the end. In opposition, there is the secularist worldview of apocalyptic thinking, arguing that there is nothing but the end. Thanks to these two different versions, the religious and the secularist, currently there are two main streams of apocalyptic thinking: apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic. The two express two different historical scenarios and environmental and human conditions that are basically compressed in literary practice.

Certainly, apocalyptic fiction has stimulated the twenty-first discussions worldwide. Many works of fiction that embrace apocalyptic thinking are inspired by the biblical discourse. Nevertheless, this does not prevent critics from sticking to their field and searching in its archive, tracing this genre to archetype in literary tradition, given the example of Robinson Crusoe. Yet, other critics, whose main concern is environmental threats, argue that the apocalyptic genre truly deals with many dangers in the world, but the Word Wars, the Cold War, and nuclear weapons stand alone. They are the real dangers. Of course, that was just the beginning of the hot debate which takes the environmental threats the center of literary creativity, as we shall see in more detail in the body of this article.

Speaking of dangers as real and life-threatening, it's been essential to resurrect the discussion of 'the real' amid what contemporary theories state. If reality is a social construction whose meaning differs from one to another, so what's the point of analyzing literary works and debating the environmental risks we live by every day? Postmodernism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction, without using them interchangeably, all overlap at the point of the constructed nature of reality, and if we accept this, there will be no need to finish this article. In the second section, impetus felt to argue that 'the real' is there and affects all of us, and it is basically the environmental reality, which puts forward and defines the notion of ecological realism. It is actually a life-death issue, and seeing this through literary works is not a way of entertainment.

Three literary works, Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, and Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140,* provide us with both modes of apocalyptic thinking. They visualize the end the world, and certainly this happens if we continue living like this. Is their vision possible? Is what they say 'real'? These are no simple questions to answer by yes or no. These are ground for a discussion based on analysis and arguments. Therefore, I argue that it is possible to speak of 'the real' through speaking of apocalyptic fiction, and particularly through the analysis of the three novels based on the notion of ecological realism.

2. Apocalyptic Fiction: History and Development

Twenty- first- century 'apocalyptic' fiction can be considered an expansive genre with a complex genealogy (Tate 2). Much twenty-first- century fiction is characterized by a certain kind of *pre*-apocalyptic anxiety, narrated by figures who can be readers of the book of Revelation or who believe themselves to be living in the last days; such men and women fear that their societies exist on the brink, for better or worse, of an imminent, radical change (Tate 7-8). Contemporary literature displays a continual fascination with the imaginative possibilities of biblical ways of addressing the end. Indeed, for Paul Fiddes 'eschatology [is] the basic mood' not just of theology but also of 'literary creation' (Tate 15). Iterations of Christian apocalyptic, for example, inform the 'scientific romances' of H. G. Wells, especially *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The War of the Worlds* (1897– 8), both of which are concerned with end-of-the-world scenarios (Tate 16). Nevertheless, Heather Hicks insightfully traces post-apocalyptic fictions of survival to the lineage of the Robinson Crusoe archetype. According to Hicks, they explore the predicament of the shipwrecked lone survivor stranded in an unfamiliar world, who 'goes about salvaging and rebuilding his existence, scrap by scrap'. Typically, post-apocalyptic fiction features 'ragged bands of survivors; demolished urban environments surrounded by depleted countryside; defunct technologies; desperate scavenging; poignant yearning for a lost civilization, often signified by the written word; and extreme violence, including cannibalism, enacted by roving gangs of outlaws'. Yet the travails of the post-apocalyptic castaway play out at a planetary scale: 'the story of a single shipwrecked man has been transformed into the story of a wrecked world' (Kaup 75). Further, a wider range of literary works could be understood in the sense of the apocalypse without complete awareness or intention of the very sense, which means understood us proto-apocalyptic, taking the example of literary work by Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, T. S. Eliot *The Waste Land*, Doris Lessing *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, and Stephen King *Under the Dome*, to name but a few.

Some critics fuse a contemporary reading of disaster, loss and grief in apocalyptic fiction with elements of biblical narrative. They also, in radically different ways, address the possibilities of life after the end. These novels are place in critical conversation both with each other and with the originating biblical narrative (Tate 27). For instance, McCarthy's *The Road* teems with biblical allusion. In one flashback sequence, the most significant female character (mother to the boy, wife to the man) urges her stoic husband to abandon hope by telling him to 'Curse God and die', a very precise allusion to the Book of Job, the only words spoken by the nameless wife of the righteous man of Uz. McCarthy also draws on a distinctively Trinitarian, relational language: the most significant bond is between the father and the son, but the third person of this trinity might be the reason for their continued journey towards the coast (their existence is not simply a matter of survival but because they are 'carrying the fire') a recurrent promise in the narrative (McCarthy 87). The father sometimes makes brutal decisions that might forfeit his ethical integrity, much to the disappointment of his son, but he also 'knew only that the child

was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke' (McCarthy 3). Divinity is invoked in a number of ways including the perhaps blasphemous invocation of 'Christ' and 'God' in desperate situations, as near hopeless prayers for deliverance (McCarthy 116–7). They also encounter a roadside mystic, an elderly man who resembles 'a starved and threadbare buddha' who claims, 'There is no God and we are his prophets' (McCarthy 179, 181). However, his assumed name, Ely, is a contraction of the biblical prophet Elijah and he is treated as a kind of negative seer who, unlike others, did not 'believe in' the future. The novel has been read from a variety of opposing theological perspectives; some critics read it as a contemporary Christian allegory whilst others suggest that it represents a nihilist critique of belief. Hannah Stark, for example, emphasizes affinities between the novel and the Revelation of St John (Tate 19-20). As a second example, if we take *New York 2140* by Kim Stanely Robinson, we find water everywhere and characters try to create a new order in the new word. Likewise, in the biblical account, narrated in Genesis, a great flood is ordained by God who is angered by humanity's propensity for sin ("*I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth [. . .] for it repenteth me that I have made them*" [Genesis 6.7]). Although this story concludes with restoration and the promise of a new beginning, it is a troubling narrative and one that remains a source of inspiration for catastrophe-themed art (Tate 25).

For novelists such as Atwood, McCarthy and Robinson, whose twenty-first-century fiction has imagined apocalyptic or dystopian futures, the recurrent urge to envisage violent historical change as a kind of universal death has, as its corollary, the image of the dying planet. Significantly, the biblical account might be present in a way or another since it is part of the Western culture, history, and imagination, but the contemporary imagination in the twenty-first-century apocalyptic fiction is haunted by the prospect of planetary death, of irreversible environmental disaster (Tate 4). Ice caps will melt, flooding coastal cities; ruined agriculture will perpetuate food shortages, starvation and the displacement of vast numbers of people. As Adam Trexler notes, though critics have been slow to recognize a genre with a rich and urgent recent history, there is now a 'considerable archive' of apocalyptic fiction (Tate 5-6). Also, in contrast to the nuclear holocausts, characteristic of Cold War post-apocalyptic fiction, the contemporary apocalyptic fiction is set in the aftermath of environmental catastrophes such as climate change, mass extinctions, energy crises, resource depletion, pollution and public health disasters such as pandemic diseases and lethal plagues. It describes a shift from one type of man-made planetary destruction, the 'instantaneous apocalypse' of atomic holocausts, to another 'slow apocalypse' of environmental catastrophe. That the genre of post-apocalyptic fiction has attracted writers of international standing demonstrates the urgency of these concerns. Both modes of the narrative (apocalyptic and postapocalyptic) belong to the tragic apocalyptic, warning humans of their imminent self-and-world destruction unless they change course. As Claire Colebrook notes, since the end of the Cold War, crisis awareness has persisted and even strengthened, whereas "*the sudden nuclear annihilation of the cold war [is] perhaps the only potential extinction threat that has abated. Thus, the prominent concerns of the 'burst' of new apocalyptic narratives that*

have appeared since 2000, as Caren Irr observes, have been themes of environmental, technological, and/or epidemiological catastrophe" (Kaup 71).

The practice of apocalyptic storytelling offers epistemological insurance: by using stories about the end of the world, or of some aspect of the world, to structure temporal experience, apocalyptic narratives smooth out the complexities of historical change and allow one to know the world and one's place in that world. It is, to adapt Fredric Jameson's famous *bon mot*, easier to talk about the end than to engage with the complexities of historical reality. The apocalyptic mode of futurist narrative can thus be defined in terms of both its method and its intention, as a mode of narrative that produces a stabilizing understanding of historical experience by imposing a rigid system of periodization onto the past and future (Pitetti 444). The apocalyptic tradition is sometimes highly misanthropic; the earth, it suggests, would be in better condition if *Homo sapiens* were no longer around (Tate 132). Apocalyptic narratives bring structure to history by modelling within themselves the closed and comprehensible structure they impute to the world at large (Kaup 77).

Post-apocalyptic narratives deny the possibility of any kind of final end, often explicitly interrogating and critiquing the apocalyptic model of history; they seek to narrate futures that are different from the present without employing the reductive idea that such futures are separated from the present by an absolute break or unbridgeable rupture. Postapocalyptic narratives remain tied to apocalyptic discourse in that they push back against this traditional mode of futurist speculation, opening up spaces of ambiguity in apocalypse's seamless accounts of straightforward transition from present to future. They depart from this model of speculative narrative by using stories about world-shattering calamities not to structure temporal experience but to emphasize the ambiguity of that experience and the need for active historical subjects to take responsibility for directing and shaping indeterminate and open-ended historical processes (Pitetti 444). Postapocalyptic narratives do justice to history by pointing beyond themselves to a world that is more dynamic and complex than their own textual frames can adequately contain. These stories invite readers to confront the full complexity of historical existence, rather than setting out to frame and domesticate that complexity. It is about the ways in which different kinds of stories teach their readers to understand history and humanity's relationship to it, the kinds of engagements and commitment they encourage, and the politics they enable (Pitetti 451).

Concomitantly, the post-apocalyptic is 'oddly hopeful' because it looks forward towards a new future opening up after the horror of destruction, yet the future is once again uncertain (Kaup 69). The subjects of the post-apocalyptic novel convey an intense need for new modes of survival and the reproduction of the social unit and order. The post-apocalyptic novel typically devotes its narrative energy not only to the horror of destruction but also to the slow crawl out of the wreckage and toward signs of survival (Kaup 68). In contrast, a striking characteristic of the twenty-first-century post-apocalyptic fiction is the disappearance, or permanent destruction, of large modern systems (the state and government, the market economy, industry, urban civilization,

mass communication, mass transportation, the military and so on). McCarthy's *The Road* is emblematic of this point. The two survivor-protagonists traverse the post-apocalyptic landscape by walking on former state roads; the road is there, but the state has vanished: "*there's not any more states*" (Kaup 73; McCarthy 43). The two protagonists in McCarthy's *The Road* live in constant terror of being captured by road agents, who keep other humans as livestock to be eaten (Kaup 76-77). Therefore, in the absence of political and legal institutions, some regress to a Hobbesian 'natural state of war', where individuals fight each other to the death. They band together in marauding gangs of warlords engaging in slavery and cannibalism. Lawless existence is lived in continual fear and danger of violent death. One characteristic feature of contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction is extreme physical violence. The most stressful aspect of the post-apocalyptic world is insecurity. For the survivors, worse than the chance of death from starvation or exposure is the risk of violent death, enslavement and rape at the hands of murderous marauders who have degenerated to savages. Based on this background, post-apocalyptic fiction retains the moral fervor of apocalyptic thinking that divides humans into 'bad guys' who are damned and 'good guys' who have been saved. Irr points out the intense interest of twenty-first-century post-apocalyptic fiction, as it is seen in Robinson's *New York 2140*, specifically in the last Chapter titled "The Comedy of the Commons," in which 'collective life' and efforts of characters are united to re-found the social unit and order via creating 'new sustainable' groups that are eco-centered rather than ego-centered. The strong emphasis on values stems from the apocalyptic in both its utopian and tragic forms (Kaup 77).

What if we step back and ask the question: What if the apocalypse will not be some sudden, violent, catastrophic event but is rather an already-happening, slowly- burning, utterly indeterminate, multicausal, and complexly systemic psychological event? (Tate 48). Indeed, as Frederick Buell has shown, environmental apocalypticism is in the making. The founding works of the post-war environmental movement in the 1960s and 1970s by Rachel Carson, Paul Ehrlich and the Club of Rome employed apocalyptic rhetoric to conceptualize the environmental crisis as an 'imminent, world-ending catastrophe'. According to Buell, the conservative debunking of environmentalism as 'no future' doomsterism has led to important transformations in environmentalist discourse. More sober than their predecessors, contemporary eco-apocalyptic fiction depicts a slowed catastrophe, exploring crisis as an ongoing phenomenon and "*as a place in which people presently dwell*" (Kaup 71-72). However, as it is one of the essential arguments of this paper, all that is mentioned earlier about apocalyptic fiction and its reference to the imminent environmental issues and catastrophes cannot attain its objective unless we establish the ground for going out of the text to into the world.

3. Recovery of the Real

After decades of debate over the social and linguistic construction of everything, the problem of the real that postmodernism and poststructuralism had dismissed as naive is

back on the intellectual agenda. Examining the complex relationships between postmodernism, poststructuralism, and Derrida's deconstruction goes beyond the scope of this research; rather, the focus is that that postmodernism overlaps with poststructuralism and deconstruction in emphasizing the corrosive effects of language and other systems of signification on referentiality and the real falsely assumed to be outside the world of the text and linguistic constructions (Kaup 1, 3). The arrival of poststructuralism in the 1960s delegitimized naive concepts of the real, of individualism and anthropocentric humanism, and it led to some disabling generalizations that turn large areas of reality (art, religion, everyday practice, lived experience, embodied understanding, embedded action, hybrid, ecological networks of humans and non-humans) into marionettes of abstract constructions. Also, the rise of deconstruction led to a devaluation and reevaluation of how things are given in the mode of self-experience. As Richard Kearney writes, 'textuality swallowed the body and turned it into *écriture*'. For instance, in his influential critique of Edmond Husserl's version of phenomenology, Derrida sought to expose in it the metaphysics of self-presence. Deconstructing phenomenology, Derrida goes beyond phenomenology, exemplifying the linguistic turn that displaced phenomenology's original focus on what is immanent to consciousness (Kaup 253). Postmodernism, thereafter, comes as a practice, Linda Hutcheon argues, "*to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life. What is unthinkingly experienced as natural is in fact cultural, made by us, not given to us*" (2). As Roland Barthes states, "*a note of warning that everything we are about to read must be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel*" (qtd in Hutcheon 40). However, Bruno Latour argues that if the default response to literary works is to reduce them to puppets dominated by the same predictable roster of omnipotent abstract forces ('society, knowledge, power-slash-discourse', what is the point of analyzing them in the first place? (Kaup 2).

Based on Patrick Murphy's book *Ecocritical Explorations in Literary and Cultural Studies*, the return to referentiality, to 'the real', has been addressed both in opposition to postmodernism and poststructuralist theories and as corrective to them. In the same vein, in 2000, the British critic, Laurence Coupe, insisted on moving out of the realm of purely textual studies into the realm of material culture and nature. He goes on to emphasize that "*green studies does not challenge the notion that human beings make sense of the world through language, but rather the self-serving inference that nature is nothing more than a linguistic construct.*" Coupe approvingly quotes Kate Soper who observes that "*it is not language which has a hole in its ozone layer; and it is the real thing that continues to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of the signifier*" (qtd in Murphy 5). Next, Rey Chow points out in her critique of poststructuralism a reformulation of referentiality, of 'the real', while no representation may accurately capture the plenitude of the world, no representation can avoid reference to it, either direct or indirect, because materiality comprises an inseparable and indissoluble component of human existence and cognition. As a result, Chow, in part quoting Johannes Fabian, argues that we ought "*to acknowledge the inevitability of reference even in the most avant-garde of theoretical undertakings*" (qtd in Murphy 6-7).

In 1999, American critic Leonard Scigaj developed the most sustained theoretical challenge to emphases on pure textuality and Derridean *différance*. Observing that the origin of language itself is to be found in nature, both in the physical production of the sounds and signs that embody language and in the sensuous engagement of human beings in a world larger than themselves, which they sought to explain, Scigaj develops a theory of "*référance*," a neologism that labels an experience:

> *référance* turns the reader's gaze toward an apprehension of the cyclic processes of wild nature after a self-reflexive recognition of the limits (the *sous rature*) of language. After this two-stage process, a third moment often occurs, the moment of atonement with nature, where we confide our trust in (*sen référer*) nature's rhythms and cycles, where reading nature becomes our text. (qtd in Murphy 5)

Scigaj bases this definition on his claim that within climate fiction "*language is often foregrounded only to reveal its limitations, and this is accomplished in such a way that the reader's gaze is thrust beyond language back into the less limited natural world that language refers to, the inhabited place where humans must live in harmony with ecological cycles*" (qtd in Murphy 5-6). Here, responsibility and referentiality are perceived as coterminous. Ecocriticism, then, sets itself against any conception of criticism as disinterested, aestheticist, or purely intertextual (Murphy 6).

Other critics and scholars from different disciplines could not go beyond 'the real'. Nobel Laureate Gerald Edelman comments on theories of language from a neurobiological perspective:

> *Cognitive models are created by human beings, and in this sense, they are idealized - that is, they are abstractions. But they depend on the formation of images as a result of sensory experience and they also depend on kinesthetic experience - the relation of the body to space [….] The important thing to grasp is that idealized cognitive models involve conceptual embodiment and that conceptual embodiment occurs through bodily activities prior to language.* (qtd in Murphy 8; emphasis in original)

Further, another concern emerges in regard to Native American cultural studies and literature, which takes us back to the issue of referentiality, which is the various reductionist interpretations of Derrida's privileging of text over speech leading to the creation of a hierarchy of literacy over orality. Keith Basso, an anthropologist, demonstrates the integrated relationship between oral stories and relationship to place in Western Apache. The autumn 2001 issue of *Orion Afield*, for example, is devoted to the topic of "Saving Stories" and contains an article titled "Can Stories Save a River?" It relates how a group of writers and academics used a book of stories to encourage a local community to clean up a polluted stream (Murphy 10, 13).

4. Ecological Realism and Apocalyptic Fiction: Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, and Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140*

As a crisis narrative positing the end of an entire world, apocalyptic thinking asks about the very condition of what constitutes world (non-material ideas and values, as well as facts and material objects). Because it envisions destruction at a planetary or cosmic scale, apocalyptic narrative shares the ontological bent of new ecological realisms after poststructuralism. It offers a contextual or systems vision of the real, concentrating on organized contexts in which things appear, rather than isolated things and parts. Apocalypse is a way the entire world is. Apocalyptic thinking highlights the Heideggerian point of the primordiality of being over knowledge: to exist is to be -always already- in a world. Apocalyptic thinking lays bare the constitutive principles of the meaningful world as the space in which humans dwell and understand things, including its social, political and economic structures (Kaup 52). The revival of apocalyptic thinking in twentieth and twenty-first-century literature and culture is premised on a realism that one might, to capture resonances with new realist theory, term a speculative-realist impulse. I am here referring to the cognitive function of realism as imparting truthful knowledge about the world (Kaup 60). This is a context-based approach to realism, positing that reality is about mapping worlds rather than about making a collection of everything there is. Ecological realism represents a promising escape from the intellectual impasse that results from the postmodern insight into the social and linguistic construction of the world that humans inhabit. If it is universalized, radical constructivism leads to unacceptable consequences, denying the distinctive status of non-linguistic phenomena and undermining the notion of the real as such: 'there is nothing outside the text' (Kaup 51). Importantly, this research paper is about a new realism that is ecological. To clarify the difference, 'old realism' is reductionist materialism, premised on the exclusion of mental and social phenomena from reality. Separating what is unreal from what is 'real' defines 'old realism'. Instead of determining whether things are real or constructed, new realism asks: Where are things real? How do things become real that might initially have been constructed or unconstructed? (Kaup 19). New realism affirms the entanglement of the constructed and the real. Many things are born as constructs and then acquire efficacy to produce real-world effects: they become real. Outside of raw facts such as hurricanes or earthquakes, this is also true of speed bumps, a physical artefact, and of race, a social artefact. New realism therefore posits an inclusive rather than an exclusive relation between constructs and facts. This point is set forth by Bruno Latour's concept of the factish, which describes a unique class of actants (Kaup 31).

Apocalyptic thinking is inherently ontological: it is about the world as a whole. What is at stake in apocalyptic upheaval is more than the ruin of things or the death of individuals: it is the annihilation of the world as such. In envisioning the destruction of the world, apocalyptic thinking reveals the core essence of the world (Kaup 6). Therefore, the decisive point is whether or not mental and social phenomena are considered part of the domain of the real (Kaup 17). As the effects of climate change have become ever more

dramatic around the globe, the postmodern sensibility of debunking social constructions and fabricated beliefs has come to seem out of touch. As it is well stated, "*it's not language that has a hole in its ozone layer*" (qtd in Kaup 21). Quentin Meillassoux declares that "*we are in consciousness or language as in a transparent cage. Everything is outside, yet it is impossible to get out,*" but this is an outdated view.

According to Alva Noë's enactivist account of the mind, "*We are not locked up in a prison of our own ideas and sensations. The phenomenon of consciousness, like that of life itself, is a world-involving dynamic process. We are already at home in the environment. We are out of our heads*" (qtd in Kaup 32). As Manuel DeLanda elucidates this point: '*the "virtual is not opposed to the real but to the actual . . . Indeed, the virtual must be defined as strictly a part of the real object– as though the object had one part of itself in the virtual into which it is plunged as though into an objective dimension*"' (Kaup 38; emphasis in original). This allows us to conclude that we are not outside observers of the world. Nor are we simply located at particular places *in* the world; rather, we are part *of* the world in its ongoing intra-activity' (Kaup 38-39). Similarly, intra-action also explains human embodiment:

> *All bodies, not merely 'human' bodies, come to matter through the world's iterative intra-activity– its performativity. This is true not only of the surface or contours of the body but also of the body in the fullness of its physicality, including the very 'atoms' of its being. Bodies are not objects with inherent boundaries and properties; they are material-discursive phenomena. 'Human' bodies are not inherently different from 'nonhuman' ones.* (qtd in Kaup 39-40)

What makes new realisms not only contextual but also ecological is that they reconnect the human cultural world with the natural environment, both living and non-living.

Latour discards the classic, scientific, anatomizing method of isolated parts, modelling a new realism that takes into account interactions between internals and externals, parts and wholes, which is 'a realism of relations'. His actor-network theory is therefore ontological, not epistemological. It is about the enacting of worlds, bringing forth worlds by doing (Kaup 98). As he explains, tracing an actor-network means following an actor or actant (who can be either human or non-human) and mapping the resulting heterogeneous network of connections he or she is making. An actant is defined as someone who makes someone do something and as what is made to act by many others. Emerging as it does from the society pole of the modern nature/society divide, actor-network theory centrally features the reconceptualization of the core characteristic of the social and the agency of the free human subject. Whereas anthropocentric modern humanism attributes agency (as well as speech) exclusively to humans, viewing nature as passive and mute, actor-network theory flattens the asymmetry between humans and non-humans (both things and animals). Latour writes that a superficially helpful but misleading way of introducing actor-network theory would be to say that it is 'sociology

extended to non-humans'. Like humans, non-humans can be actants, that is to say, beings endowed with the capacity to transform reality (Kaup 94-95).

Indeed, Robinson's *New York 2140* (2017) gestures towards an acknowledgement of possible agency of the water, while continuing to reiterate an instrumental relationship with the environment that focuses on processes of appropriation, distribution and production. Ultimately, there are implications for the implied readers' agency, and for their possibilities to take meaningful action to interact with, and make changes in, their relationship with the water. But examining also how nonhuman entities are imbued with possessing agency in policy documents and literary narratives foregrounds how such human agency takes shape (materially and discursively) within complex networks (Ameel 1327-28). Robinson's starting point is in part similar to that of Vision 2020 in that the novel presents a tentative resolution to the social, economic and ecological tensions converging on the New York waterfront in the early twenty-first century. Innovative is how the novel takes the flood, the dominant literary strategy for locating climate change, as a hyperbolic figure to address these concerns (Ameel 1334).

Speaking of which, *New York 2140* is an episodically apocalyptic novel in which the voices of the different characters have different status, use different registers, and introduce the reader to different aspects of the intertidal. A narrative connection is created by the voice of 'a citizen', a character with privileged insights into the lives of the others, which suggests he can be equated with the narrator. 'A citizen' provides evaluative as well as contextualizing interludes, backgrounds in terms of the events' history, as well as the financial, ecological and scientific feasibility of various courses of action. What pulls these various characters together spatially is that they are all living in the same building, the Metropolitan Life. But the water takes central stage, and its special status, also in legal terms, is foregrounded, to the extent that it is the intertidal's specific properties that enable (and in part, force) the protagonists to act, livelihoods to be amassed, and the plot to develop (Ameel 1335). In the last pages of the novel, agency is again given, for a moment, to the water itself, as the narrative voice of 'the citizen', gestures towards turn-of-the twenty- first century philosophy on material agency: "*Remember not to forget, if your head has not already exploded, the nonhuman actors in these actor networks. Possibly the New York estuary was the prime actor in all that has been told here […] But again, enough with the philosophy!*" (Robinson 603). In an interview with the novelist, he states: "*I'm a realist […] You've got to shoot ahead of the target: if you want to write about right now, you write about the year 2040. All the issues will be in play, and you can begin to tweak them*" (Heise and Robinson 25). He also argues that "*If you write science fiction, you're doing a bizarre form of realism that is about right now and how it feels. Literature's always about how it feels. It's not a science or social science. It's a question of trying to properly evoke and reflect certain emotions*" (Heise and Robinson 25). Next, Robinson asserts that "*A story that is interesting has to have some real content, not just rehash the old plots and the old knowledge; and there again realism comes in, where you're not just making it up*" (Heise and Robinson 27).

New York 2140 offers a vision of Earth and its systems on the road to the anthropocide, the hydro-catastrophe, the geo-revolution, a human-engineered breakdown in the balance of the planet's systems so severe that there will be no return from extinction for the majority of its species. Indeed, utopian theorist Ruth Levitas categorizes *New York 2140* as "*a dystopia rather than a utopia,*" justifying this position by writing that dystopias "share with utopias the method of depicting an alternative society, but constitute a warning of what may happen if we go on as we are, rather than a projection of a desired future (Kabo 257). Likewise, "*the world's becoming a big science fiction novel that we're all co-writing together. In many ways, if you want to do realism that's truly realistic right now, you're driven to science fiction. You've got a very rapidly changing culture where the future seems to impinge on the present more than ever before. So scenario-building and talking about various futures that might come to pass becomes both interesting and useful at the same time*" (Heise and Robinson 30). Read in this way, *New York 2140* is as classic a cli-fi text as the fledgling genre can produce, as Rebecca Evans argues, a critical response that praised its "*status as an entertaining yet educational genre by emphasizing its capacity for realistic (plausible, soberly related, and scientifically grounded) extrapolation into the future*" (Kabo 257).

Indeed, just as Robinson made use of empirical forecasting and mapping tools to flood his New York, *New York 2140* is a convincing representation, via reasoned extrapolation into the near future, of the survival strategies of neoliberal capitalism. Specifically, a visitor to Robinson's future New York, which is controlled by anonymous corporations, private security forces, hedge funds, corrupt politicians, and heavily leveraged banking conglomerates, can be forgiven for assuming that it is simply the New York of our present, but a little wetter (Kabo 260). In effect, Robinson projects forward the insights of today's ecologists, geographers, and environmental historians who are reemphasizing the functions of nature in and of the city (Abott 1135). Robinson is a guarded optimist who wants readers to imagine both the possibilities of utopian change and the difficulties of achieving it. Another way of reading Robinson's novel might be as a kind of speculative companion piece to the sort of harsh realism that Dawson and others lend to the injustices being carved out in the present (Adams 534).

Further, Latour's term "Factish" is fundamental in this discussion, in the sense that what we construct becomes real, giving the example of race. He argues that "*it is because it is constructed that [the factish] is so very real, so autonomous, so independent of our own hands*" (qtd in Kaup 101). In this way, Latour asserts that we are no longer engaged in stale discussions over the 'social construction' of everything. Nor are we in a sterile debate over realism versus constructivism, adjudicating a false dichotomy (Is it real? Is it constructed?) for the purpose of explaining away naive beliefs and putting in their place the facts of science (and other objects of modern critique). Instead, we are facing a different and more interesting question, the question of affordance: What are the successful practices that are required for artefacts, scientific or not, to become real? What happens when scientific factishes enter history and acquire autonomous modes of existence? (Kaup 101). In this regard, Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* is exemplary, given that

hybrids are beings that shift their mode of existence: from dependent or passive to independent. More precisely, this study reads the make-up of hybrids (half object and half subject) as a dynamic process of transformation from object to subject. Hybrids that begin as artefacts (like Atwood's artificial species) pass from being constructed (literally, made by humans) to becoming 'real' (Kaup 96).

In her novel, on introducing himself to the Crakers, Jimmy renames himself Snowman to mark the irreversible discontinuity between his lost former life in human society and his new existence as the last human on earth among artificial species and the ruins of the modern techno-capitalist world. *"He no longer wanted to be Jimmy […] He needed to exist only in the present, without guilt, without expectation. As the Crakers did"* (Atwood 349; Kaup 109). Also, Snowman's clumsy helplessness and his dependence on the Crakers for part of his food vividly portrays the deposition of humans from their status of masters of nature. Unlike Jimmy's pre-apocalyptic world, Snowman's post-apocalyptic world is organized by an 'ecological' ontology: no member of this world is allowed to forget that the first principle of ecology is the mutual dependence of beings within a larger network, in which facts and factishes overlap, and through feedback cycles and other flows. Humans can no longer submit nature to their will. Atwood's apocalyptic ontology, which pivots on revolutionary breaks that unmake the world to remake it as another that is radically different, thus dramatically enacts an ontological transformation that Latour's theory can only describe abstractly (Kaup 110).

From a phenomenological perspective, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela argue that self-world interconnection, given that the self is phenomenon of the world, goes beyond the Scylla of representationalism on the one hand and the Charybdis of solipsism/idealism on the other (Kaup 258-59). Indeed, Emmanuel Levinas asserts that "the realm of art is already a form of the non-real in the real" (Clark 88). In this context, MacCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel, *The Road*, presents how characters become determined by their experience in that world. The wife who commits suicides symbolizes what Eugin Isin calls *"the neurotic citizen,"* *"the neurotic citizen who is left in a constant state of apprehension and fear and is, in the end, unable to cope with the trials and tribulations of an altered everyday life"* (Campbell 137, 149-50). Moreover, *The Road*'s post-apocalyptic showcases Sigmund Freud's idea of the uncanny that reveals striking structural similarities. Freud used the term 'uncanny' (literally 'un-homely') to refer to a situation that is strangely familiar, or to which onlookers feel attracted, but by which they are repulsed (Campbell 137-38).

To clarify more, language, upon which many theories are based, in *The Road* is a phenomenon of the world. The dialogs between the two protagonists, the man and the boy, indicate that the loss of language is already well underway; their conversations are often simply reserved to matters of survival or the present situation and rarely involve abstract concepts or everyday elements of the old world. The man's thoughts starkly illuminate this loss of language: the *"names of things [are] slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat"* (McCarthy 88–89). As animals, plants, and humans go extinct, they are lost from memory because there is no longer a reliable system

of recording or cataloging their existence, and thus no way to transmit a full knowledge of them. When the man finds a can of Coke, he simply tells the boy that it is "a treat" rather than explaining the phenomenon of the brand "Coca Cola" (McCarthy 23). The boy will only ever see the can of Coke as "a treat" and therefore every other aspect of this item and its history (the Coca Cola brand, issues of sugar consumption and obesity, recycling programs for the cans, and even the concept of carbonated beverages) will be lost forever, for what does it matter if the can ends up in a recycling bin or a river when the environment is already beyond saving? (Lodoen 88). Besides, since the boy did not live in a pre-apocalyptic world, in his actual world, therefore, no fish has ever swum, no life has ever existed that could have provided a referent to the inescapable traces of life that the novel dramatizes (Muller 93). The boy's words reflect an ignorance about life that we as readers cannot possibly comprehend or intuit. As such, the boy's frequent questions about specific living things: Do you think there could be fish in the lake?" (McCarthy 17), "*What is it, Papa?*" (McCarthy 34), are on some level always asking the same thing: what is something that is alive? A question, to which there is no response, for whatever we say, our words would be hollow for him, mere "*blah, blah, blah,*" to cite Greta Thunberg's memorable phrase (Muller 96-97).

5. Conclusion

To conclude, apocalyptic fiction, with its two modes (apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic), and its different thematic strategies, reaches one final conclusion that the natural environment is the agent, the character, or the force (name it as you wish) that has the final life-decision, and it is real. Once the world is at stake, and your own life is at stake, 'the real' is what matters. So, in Robinson's words, "*Enough with the philosophy!*" (603). In other words, postmodernism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction, as language-based theories as some critics tend to name them, are respectively limited in the notion of '*écriture*', which means that environmental reality is irrelevant to their discussions. As it is already seen, through the apocalyptic novels, Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, McCarthy's *The Road*, and Robinson's *New York 2140*, the human condition determined by the environmental dangers is a tangible matter. The scenarios given by these literary works are very probable, or even inevitable, if humans continue what they call development in this pace. That is to say, there is nothing that can prevent us from arguing that the novels, in a way or another, though works of art, depict a version of history, of the future, based on the current environmental conditions, which means they link the present with the future in a certain dialectic continuity in which human and non-human factors interact. Therefore, humans are not the ones who decide about the destiny of the planet or the universe. It is the planet itself that decides, and no genre can say this as honestly and realistically as apocalyptic fiction does.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

About the Author

Jaouad Achtitah (PhD) is a professor of English at Ibn Tofail University in Morocco. His research interests focus on ecological psychology, affect studies, and environmental criticism and literature. He participated in many national and international seminars. He edited the book of Proceedings of the 1st National Environmental Humanities Conference: Perspectives from Morocco (Faculty of Humanities, Oujda, Morocco, 2022), and his research appears in book chapters including Current Issues in Environmental Discourse (Faculty of Humanities, Meknes, Morocco, 2021), Eco-Anxiety and Pandemic Distress: Psychological Perspectives on Resilience and Interconnectedness (Oxford University Press, 2023), Ecofeminism and Allied Issues (Cambridge Publishing Scholars, 2024), and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Environmental Identity and Portrayal (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2026).

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