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AT THE END OF THE WORD.
CRISIS AND LANGUAGE IN ITALIAN POST-APOCALYPTIC FICTION

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

At the End of the Word. Crisis and Language in Italian Post-Apocalyptic Fiction

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In my dissertation, titled “At the End of the Word. Crisis and Language in Italian Post-Apocalyptic Fiction,” I aim to redefine the transnational genre of post-apocalyptic fiction by reading it through the lens of Italian narrative. My work includes chapters on texts as seemingly disparate as Giovanni Boccaccio’s 14th-century *Decameron* and Robert Kirkman’s *The Walking Dead*, Mary Shelley’s 1826 novel *The Last Man* and Massimo Bontempelli’s novella *Cataclisma*, Michelangelo Antonioni’s film *Il deserto rosso* and Cormac McCarthy’s Pulitzer prize-winning book *The Road*. I demonstrate how Italian narrative has played and still plays an important role in post-apocalyptic fiction, a genre that is deemed almost exclusively Anglo-American but one that actually owes some of its thematic and aesthetic elements to its Italian representatives. By analyzing both Italian and Anglophone texts, I show that a seemingly unlikely detour, such as the one running from the late Middle Ages through early 20th-century Italian Futurism, to the newest, zombie-packed, American TV shows, reveals not only something new about the Italian production of post-apocalyptic fiction, but also about the genre itself.

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Introduction

The Italian Tsunami: Zombies, Post-Modernism, and the Plague.

When a young Guillermo Del Toro went back to his hometown Guadalajara after having watched Lucio Fulci's *Zombi 2* for the first time, he could not wait to tell everybody about it. Making his school friends and family believe that such an incredible film actually existed, however, was harder than expected. A movie like Fulci's was indeed so unsettling, that Del Toro himself could barely accept it as true:

I [...] was in a gigantic movie palace in Mexico that [...] seated three thousand or five thousand people – [...] a relic of the golden era of Mexican cinema [...] – and there were very few people in the audience – a couple of them were drunk, a couple of them were asleep. I saw it, and my mind exploded. I was alone. [...] After the movie ended, I didn't know if I had dreamed it. [...] Such movies surely didn't exist. You know, a movie so deranged, a movie so absolutely out-of-the-blue, [...] so complete and almost arrogant in its declaration of existence. [...] I was floored.

Although *Zombi 2* had been produced and distributed in 1979 as an unauthorized prequel to George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), Fulci did not quite follow the canon that the American director had inaugurated a decade earlier with his seminal *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). The Italian filmmaker's zombies have little to do with the emaciated ghouls that haunt rural Pennsylvania in Romero's first film: as Del Toro points out, while in Romero's movies zombies are "fresh kills," Fulci's creatures are heavily decomposed. The "sensorially overcharged" elements that constitute Fulci's zombies introduce, according to the Mexican director, "the language that we now associate with modern zombies." They are a radical innovation in the aesthetics of the zombie image, and creatures of extremely popular franchises such as AMC's

The Walking Dead or CAPCOM's *Resident Evil* are now much closer to Fulci's "rotting, decaying" zombies than to Romero's "sky-blue" ghouls.

If "zombies could talk, they would probably speak Italian," claimed Allan Bryce (5), who edited a volume on zombie cinema in 1999. In spite of the fact that all the most "grisly zombie pics come from" Italy (5), and notwithstanding the several international filmmakers – such as Quentin Tarantino, Robert Rodriguez, Sam Raimi, Clive Barker, and Del Toro himself – who have confirmed the great influence Italian horror cinema of the late 1970s and early 1980s has on their work, it is still quite uncommon to see the Italian roots of the modern zombie image recognized. Nevertheless, that one of the most representative post-apocalyptic icons – a zombie – had to pass through the gory visions of an Italian director to gain its modern features is as unexpected as it is accurate. Lucio Fulci was the first filmmaker to "fluidly articulate" an image that is nowadays extremely familiar, said Del Toro, and his creatures – although inspired by Caribbean folklore and derivative of Romero's great success – are an absolute revolution. Fulci's zombies are remarkable for their originality, which still heavily influences the genre. Modern apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narrative, we can safely argue, would not look the same, if it weren't for him.¹

Fulci's cinema is therefore an important example of the central role Italian post-apocalyptic narrative has played and still plays in post-apocalyptic fiction, but it is far from being the only one. This genre owes some of its thematic and aesthetic elements precisely to its Italian representatives. Still, a comprehensive study on Italian

¹ The full version of Guillermo Del Toro's interview can be found in the extras of the bluray double-disc edition of *Zombi 2 Blue Underground* published in 2011. In the interview, Del Toro talks about Fulci's film as one of his favorite.

apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction does not exist. Although my research will not fill this gap, it does explore an area often overlooked and it draws connections that go well beyond the brief experience of Italian ‘zombie-exploitation’ cinema, presenting a panorama of Italian apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narrative ranging from the Middle Ages to the present day.

Throughout history, Italians’ relationship with the apocalypse has indeed been productive and often innovative, in and out of the fictional framework. It was the Calabrian monk and theologian Joachim of Fiore, for instance, who – writes Eugene Weber – began a radical renovation of apocalyptic thinking (52) that extended its echo to many centuries past his death. Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202) was the first to suggest that salvation “could come within history, through history, as the church reformed and purified itself and the world around it” (Weber 52). This perspective was revolutionary for the Christian world of the 12th century, which saw God’s plan for humanity as a “pattern of increasing evil, cosmic catastrophe, and new beginnings” (Randolph 77-78). Joachim, instead, “saw history as moving through purifying catastrophes from one stage to a better one” (78). While St. Augustine (345-430) had promoted an allegorical interpretation of the Apocalypse (Weber 45), he interpreted it historically: “For Augustine, the Apocalypse functioned primarily as a guide toward and an opening into heaven. For Joachim, it was the key to the meaning of human history” (Randolph 87). His groundbreaking conception of apocalypse “was to influence or confirm many secular millenarians” all the way to at least the 19th century (Weber 53), and the impact of his thought reverberated in figures as diverse as Dante Alighieri and Carl Jung (Turley 374). Even Giovanni Boccaccio, writes Thomas Turley, “considered him a prophet” (374), and in the structure of his masterpiece, *The Decameron* (c. 1349), one can recognize Joachim’s

apocalyptic philosophy. Boccaccio's collection of novellas follows a typically medieval rationale that – argues Vittore Branca – is based on a progression from *orrido* to excellence (Boccaccio medievale 14), from low to high, from a worse to a better stage – as Joachim himself would have said. In this “gothic architecture”, Boccaccio represents the massive transformation that is happening in front of his very eyes (Branca, Intro 1985 xliv), the passage from an old era to a new one, and the pain, the sorrow, the exuberance of such an epochal renovation. He operates a pioneering secularization of Christian values and creates narrative elements that anticipate of several centuries the structures and the themes of modern apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction.

In **Chapter One**, “*Un orrido cominciamento*: The Decameron as Archetype of Post-Apocalyptic Fiction,” I argue precisely that Boccaccio's medieval masterpiece is the forerunner of modern end-of-the-world narrative, and that its main themes and patterns are the same foundational elements of modern post-apocalyptic fiction. As Boccaccio's work is ultimately a tale of social reconstruction achieved through the complex reestablishment of communication, modern post-apocalyptic narrative tells either stories of social restoration or accounts of the impossibility to recreate society after it has collapsed. I choose Robert Kirkman's graphic novel *The Walking Dead* (2003-present) and its television adaptation (which Frank Darabont developed for AMC in 2010) as my main modern reference. I do so because of its cultural and aesthetic value, because of its popularity and wide recognizability, and for the length and complexity of its content, which virtually includes all the main topoi of contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction.

Post-apocalyptic fiction, as a sub-genre of apocalyptic fiction and as a sub-sub-genre of science fiction and horror, is indeed a widening scenario, the intricacy of

which has increased considerably since apocalypticism took its decided leap from religious texts into speculative fiction – which happened, with a few important exceptions, over the 1880s. At the turn of the 20th century, a secularization much more disenchanted than Boccaccio's was to challenge the Joachite legacy embedded in August Comte's positivism. While some authors would still interpret the apocalypse as the passage from a worse condition to a better one, many others would believe that the world that comes after the catastrophe – after the revolution, after the next scientific discovery, after modernity – is not necessarily better than its antecedent. Perhaps there is not going to be any world, after the apocalypse. Maybe, as post-modern philosophy suggested, the world was gone while we were still counting the years until the next catastrophe.²

In order to make some order out of this very diverse picture, and with the goal to establish key theoretical and structural parameters concerning apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narrative, the first paragraphs of Chapter One provide a historical overview of the genre's development and propose a taxonomy on which to ground the remaining chapters. The first sections aim at a broad definition of the context and widen the scope of my analysis without dwelling – with the exception of Boccaccio's *Decameron* – on the specific case of Italian apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction.

In **Chapter Two**, "Destruction Italian Style: Characters and Characteristics of Italian Apocalyptic Fiction," I finally focus on Italian end-of-the-world narrative, I chronicle the development of the genre in Italy, and I analyze its most prominent representatives. The task is all but simple. Not because of a lack of examples – I reflect on the political charge of early Italian apocalyptic fiction (1860s-1910s), and I present Futurist and Post-Futurist experimental literature as the most influential

² According to Thomas Turley (374), Joachim's influence can be found in August Comte's (1798-187) philosophy as well.

moment of Italian post-apocalyptic narrative –, but because of the increasing difficulty in identifying national idiosyncrasies in such works. My most relevant claims of Chapter Two are therefore about the existence of a super-national hegemonic model of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narrative that determines the aesthetics of the genre at least since the 1950s, and about the presence of an ‘imagination gap’ that has limited the Italian production and reception of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction from the 1920s onward. Ultimately, the main goal of Chapter Two is to determine whether the actual possibility for Italian authors of apocalyptic fiction to ignore the super-national model and to produce aesthetically and ideologically independent works of art exists.

In Chapter Two, I stress the importance of authorship – intended as artistic distinctiveness rather than as biographical instance – because I believe that the authors’ relationship with the hegemonic model is precisely what defines the level of Italianness of their narratives, when it comes to apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction. While many authors become transparent by letting the aesthetic model absorbing their work, some others retain a steady opacity that allows their creative identity always to be prominent over the model. Two of these authors are the protagonists of Chapter Three and Chapter Four: novelist Dante Virgili and film director Michelangelo Antonioni.

In **Chapter Three**, “«As If I Were Never Born»: The Textual Post-Apocalypse of Dante Virgili’s *La distruzione*,” I focus on a work of art that I consider a real hidden gem of contemporary Italian literature and a fine example of end-of-the-world fiction. The book, published in 1970, consists of the violent stream of consciousness of a character obsessed with the world as it was before the end of the black totalitarianisms. The narrator’s apocalypse is not the ultimate nuclear holocaust

that he desperately craves for and often envisions, but rather the end of WWII and the fall of Nazism. When the novel begins, the protagonist – by living a mediocre life working as a proofreader in a local newspaper – is already in his own personal post-apocalypse: he is in a world that he does not like, where he is not comfortable, and – more important – whose language he does not quite speak. He does not understand the others, and the others do not understand him. The unbearable incommunicability of the post-apocalyptic condition overwhelms the protagonist, who can only find some comfort in the memories of the world as it was, or in the delirious visions of the nuclear wasteland that could be.

In Dante Virgili's book, however, destruction is mainly the demolition of language, which he expresses in his disordered and disjointed phrasing. His literally is an 'apocalypse of language,' in which the author – a decadent, late Futurist – deliberately ignores syntactical and grammatical rules, and constantly combines foreign languages. Virgili rarely introduces direct and indirect speech, or flashbacks and flash-forwards; even the page layout and the font size change throughout the pages, while punctuation is barely employed; open parentheses are sometimes never closed, and long sentences finish abruptly. Virgili's novel is a sublime example of 'textual apocalypse,' in which the subject of the plot 'contaminates' the medium at the point of changing its shape: a post-apocalyptic condition cannot be spoken by using a pre-apocalyptic language, as Frank Kermode points out (114) – and therefore Virgili breaks the codes and reshapes them over. The result is not a language actually capable of deciphering the post-apocalyptic condition, but one that on the contrary emphasizes modern man's incapacity to communicate with his surroundings. The same kind of angst is central in large part of Michelangelo Antonioni's filmography.

In **Chapter Four**, “Grayed Out. The Apocalypse of Language in Antonioni’s *Il deserto rosso*,” I analyze the elements of apocalyptic narrative in the pictures the Italian director filmed between 1960 and 1975. All Antonioni’s major films include thematic and linguistic aspects that link them to apocalyptic fiction, and I examine these productions in chronological order. In particular, I focus on *Il deserto rosso* (1964). Antonioni’s ninth feature film shares many crucial elements with other works of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction, and it is structurally and thematically very close to Cormac McCarthy’s novel, *The Road* (2006), which I use as a more recent and more genre-defined referent. *Il deserto rosso* contains all the characteristic motifs of post-apocalyptic narrative, and comparing it to McCarthy’s postmodern novel allows me to point out the innovativeness of Antonioni’s representation of the apocalypse, which is ahead of its time for stylistic and aesthetic devices. As Dante Virgili’s apocalypse, also the one in *Il deserto rosso* is an ‘apocalypse of language’ that focuses on the intimate relation of the self with the external world, and once again the language of the medium – cinema, in this case – mutates in order to express something seemingly out of reach for both the protagonists and the filmmaker.

Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narrative is ultimately about the imagination and representation of reality as it is or as it could be after a cataclysmic transformation. It conveys both the fear of change and the anticipation of a revolution. It is at once conservatism and rebellion, craving for immobility and longing for a conversion. In this dissertation, I explore as many instances as possible and I focus on the Italian examples, because I believe that they have truly contributed in making the genre what it is and in giving to this type of narrative the strength that it has. I study the periods in which Italian apocalyptic narrative has flourished and those in which its

influence has been subtle. I examine the patterns and the topoi of this narrative genre, and I identify the models, the archetypes, and the exceptions. Finally, and most importantly, I look for the ‘apocalypse of language,’ in which the end of the world doesn’t spare the text it is told by: it infects it and makes it crumble. Such an apocalypse can be told only through a new language, because the old one is neither good to understand nor to be understood. It is the apocalypse that I have found in Virgili and in Antonioni, and that – in different degrees – one would uncover in authors such as Ballard, Pasolini, Ferreri, and Tarkovskij. It is the apocalypse made of great nostalgia for what is lost and of a cold angst for what is now. It seems to be far from Boccaccio’s novellas and from his deadly plague, but it is ultimately not: they both start where the end begins.

Chapter One: *Un orrido cominciamiento*.
The Decameron as Archetype of Post-apocalyptic Fiction.

1.1. Introduction: Where Does the End Begin?

The idea that the world might end at one point is as old as the world itself, and it goes well beyond biblical texts and prophecies of the Judeo-Christian tradition (de Martino 8). The cyclical structure of Nature inspires a cyclical perception of time by suggesting that everything will end and that everything, in one form or in another, will start over: this is true each day, each season, for the harvests and every being's life. Any beginning presupposes an end, and any foundational myth forewarns the arrival of one last act; thus, the apocalypse is entailed in any genesis.

The majority of apocalyptic beliefs hide a cyclical structure, even when it does not seem to be the case. The Stoics, for instance, believed in the *ekpyrosis* (ἐκπύρωσις): the conflagration of the world at the end of its cycle (de Martino 215)³. After flames would have destroyed the universe, however, the opposite process would commence, and the *apokatastasis* (ἀποκατάστασις) would restore every corner of the world, starting a whole new cyclical phase (216). Even though – as James Berger observes – the apocalypse is “The End, or resembles the end, or explains the end,” it also implies the paradox of rarely being an actual final act (5). Also the Christian apocalyptic myth, which many have interpreted as linear (de Martino 221), does not cease with the ultimate catastrophe: Berger points out that “the new heaven and earth and New Jerusalem descend” in the New Testament Revelation (6). John's apocalypse, then, is rather the beginning of something new than the end of everything.

³ As Ernesto de Martino reminds us (215), this idea was already crucial in Iranic and Babylonian thoughts.

The point of imagining the collapse of the world – and of picturing it as cyclical – has, in most cases, emerged from the situation of those envisioning it, especially when eschatological or chiliastic significance charges the apocalypse. If a community fantasizes, prophesizes or believes in the finiteness of its present state, it is first of all because of the many examples of cyclical renovation that nature offers, but also because of a strong, inner, and sometimes contradictory desire of witnessing the end and welcoming a new order that improves their condition. In his 1931 classic essay *Apocalypse*, D. H. Lawrence writes: “It is very nice, if you are poor and *not* humble, to bring your grand enemies down to utter destruction and discomfiture, while you yourself rise up to grandeur” (8). The apocalypse, Eugen Weber suggests, can provide “denunciations, thrills, satisfaction,” which is the reason why the rise of apocalyptic beliefs reaches its peak in times of crisis, fear, and persecution (153). If “nature presents a compelling picture of recurrence,” Weber observes, there is no reason for “Man” not to believe that “the world’s fate” is not going to be part of it (38). Many apocalyptic myths involve destruction followed by reconstruction (39) (e.g. in the biblical myth of Noah) with the reborn world rising anew out of the flood, better than its preceding version and populated only by the worthy. Most apocalyptic myths are indeed optimistic (40), presumably because those who conceived them were most likely looking for a comeback. The examples are numerous, ranging from religious texts up to modern political rhetoric. The 18th century Jansenists, who interpreted their own persecution as a clear sign of the incoming apocalypse (81), are just one of several Christian groups that translated their severe distress into end-of-the-world prophecies – as much as the most celebrated biblical prophets’ revelations “echo the imagery of angry exiles” (30-31). The ghost-dance religion of the late 19th century (40), born from a community that was witness of its own vanishing and was

now waiting for the earth to perish and for a paradise to take its place, was the result of the Native Americans' devastating encounter with the colonists. The Australian Euahlayi tribe, whose members fulfilled their own apocalyptic prophecy by gradually adopting white men's customs and dramatically stepping towards extinction, were hoping to keep their ancient rituals alive in order to save the immutable order of the world and to renew its archetypal model (de Martino 374-378)⁴. Finally, the revolutionary ideology of the early day National Socialist party, loaded with millennialist rhetoric and fed by the disquiet atmosphere of post-WWI Germany (Redles 119-142), is extremely similar to the one currently dictating the mantra of ISIS fighters in the Middle East: the end is nigh, the day of the payback is coming, the eschatological war is about to be fought and won (McCants 15, 60-62, 147). Frank Kermode notes that any group or society will view their crisis as the most prominent, faithfully picturing themselves as the worthy ones on the rightful side of the eschatological battle they are set to fight (The Sense of an Ending 94-95).

Those who face crisis often seek hope in politics and religion, which for different – and yet at times converging – reasons, offer it. Politics and religion (appear to) propose explanations and even a way out. The trajectory of apocalyptic cults and of millennial beliefs very frequently overlaps with the one of political and social movements, because they all provide a solid platform upon which to build an ideology: an ideology of catastrophe, as Weber suggests (237). Such an ideology may turn into narrative and fiction, but these do not necessarily give answers or propose an

⁴ Ernesto de Martino, quoting Helmut Petri and his article "Der australische Medizinmann", published in *Annali Lateranensi* XVI (1952): 159-317, writes: "L'indigeno – prosegue Petri - «è costretto a vedere ogni giorno come i suoi compagni più giovani e più anziani del clan si distaccano dagli insegnamenti e dalle tradizioni degli antenati per adottare i modi di vita dei bianchi. Egli si rende conto inoltre che la civiltà occidentale non gli porta nessuna salvezza, in quanto non è capace di dargli nessun sostituto per ciò che ha perduto. Egli vede lo stato di disperazione che ne risulta per il suo popolo, il lento ma continuo crollo di ogni impulso alla vita e di ogni volontà di affermazione. Egli vede infine la ininterrotta decadenza fisica della sua razza, che forse è in rapporto causale con la disposizione d'animo generalmente pessimistica. [...] I pallidi spiriti Wundah popoleranno la terra dopo la fine» (375).

agenda, as politics and religion do. Fiction does not intentionally offer comfort, nor automatically reassure anybody on the outcome of the eschatological war.

Apocalyptic fiction acts like a mirror, reflecting a society's fears, uncertainties, and crises. Even when matted by an underlying political message, it ultimately deals with the impossibility of communication and the debilitating awareness of suddenly existing within in a strange new world. Apocalyptic fiction may suggest a direction to be taken, but it will provide no guarantee that this path is going to lead to salvation or redemption

This section of the present work neither seeks to retrace the notion of 'the end of times' in the entirety of its history – if this were even possible – nor to link any instance of apocalyptic fiction to the historic contingency that might have provoked it. Instead, in the following, I argue that Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* is an early example of post-apocalyptic literature – perhaps the first literary archetype of the genre – and I describe the characteristics of post-apocalyptic narrative. By doing so, I define my field of study for the reader: I explain what it means to use the apocalypse as a hermeneutical tool and, therefore, I prepare the ground for the upcoming chapters.

Because of the complexity of apocalyptic literature, be it religious, political, or secular, I deem it worthwhile to first provide some distinctions and a taxonomy to clarify the genres, the subgenres and the patterns. The goal of this chapter is indeed to establish an understanding of what the fictional apocalypse is, what it means, and especially how it has made its way from prophetic texts to comic books. Quoting Boccaccio himself, I can only say that “had I been able to find some suitable alternative path by which to bring you to where I want, other than along this steep

one, I should willingly have done so; but as I could not have explained the reasons underlying what you are about to read unless I broached this matter of the plague, I find myself virtually obliged to write about it” (The Decameron 6).

1.2. Apocalyptic Fiction: Genesis.

Throughout the ages, there has been a great abundance of apocalyptic texts and of end-of-the-world prophecies. At the same time, there does not seem to be any work of apocalyptic fiction until the 19th century. Even Ibn al-Nafīs’ *Theologus Autodidactus*, a 8th century Arabic text that Jacqueline Dutton considers the very first book of science fiction (236), and that is usually deemed as an exception, should still be considered a religious text rather than to a work of fiction. In al-Nafīs’ book, the sun begins an unusual deviation from the north to the south that causes a change in both the climate and the human temperament. These alterations gradually worsen, launching massive migrations, wars, and famine. After an almost complete extinction of men and women, however, things go back to normality and the souls of the dead can start a new life by resuscitating as they were before (63-74). More a theological treatise than a text of fiction, al-Nafīs’ book utilizes images from the Islamic *Last Things*, whose events were real for the 8th century Muslims “in the same sense in which events of past history are real” to us (Meyerhof and Schacht 83). Indeed, besides a few exceptions, until the 17th century the future is “reserved as a topic for prophets, astrologers, and practitioners of deliberative rhetoric” (Alkon 3). Extricating the apocalypse from a religious context proves indeed to be a complex and perhaps unnatural operation that, for many centuries, no one would seem interested in attempting.

More than five hundred years after the death of the Arab physician al-Nafīs and 2,600 miles away from Damascus, things start to change and apocalyptic fiction

makes a little step away from religious texts. Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville is already an ordained Catholic priest when the French Revolution begins, and at the age of 45, he is about to see his own world shred into pieces. As Amy Ransom accounts, not only does “he witness the demise of the Ancien Régime, [...] the application of Enlightenment rationalism and materialism [...] and the increasing secularization of French society,” he is also forced to get married, to swear an oath to the Constitution, and to see France going through the Jacobin Terror into the Napoleonic era (322). Reality is turning upside-down, and he probably perceives it with the anguish of somebody who can no longer understand his own language. Lost and doomed to failure, although living in the middle of the greatest turmoil in European history, he must feel as if he has been left alone, the last man standing on a collapsed planet. In 1805, he commits suicide without having seen his only novel published later the same year: *Le Dernier homme* is, according to many scholars (Alkon, Ransom), the first genuine apocalyptic novel of world literature. Set in a distant future where a combined ecological and demographic disaster is bringing humanity to an end (Ransom 320), Grainville’s novel tells the story of the very last man on Earth, Omegarus, who decides to let himself and the human race die in order to allow the kingdom of God to replace the material Earth. It is a step towards secularization, if compared to al- Nafis’ treaties, while still enclosed into a solid theological framework (Alkon 175). Grainville does not go as far as to remove religious elements from his apocalypse, but he inadvertently triggers the secular change that Mary Shelley will complete.

Grainville’s novel and its immediate, anonymous, and unauthorized 1806 English translation are destined to be much more significant than the French author himself could have possibly imagined. According to Ransom’s reconstruction, *Le*

Dernier homme – published in the United Kingdom as *The Last Man, or, Omegarus and Syderia* – is widely read on either side of the English Channel, and it is destined to influence vastly the romantically predisposed souls of other writers (314-322). It certainly inspires Mary Shelley, who might have even read the original text in French, while visiting Byron's Swiss library (319-320): her *The Last Man* is published in 1826, and the influence of Grainville's book in Shelley's voluminous novel is arguably conspicuous (320). The 1965 edition with its over 300 pages, however, may well disappoint the reader who approaches it expecting a one-man struggle in a post-apocalyptic world. It is only in the very last chapters of Shelley's book that the plague kills all the characters of the story, finally making a 'last man' out of the protagonist. *The Last Man* is not in fact about what happens to Shelley's protagonist Lionel after everyone's death, but rather the long journey to that final moment: the outburst of the plague and its diffusion, the political and social reactions to the slow and yet massive demise of humankind, Lionel's long and intense life.

Apocalyptic fiction is, in Shelley's book, quite different from what it is today, for the simple reason that it has just been born. It does not yet have the level of sophistication that it will acquire with time, as there is no awareness of its language, of its potential, and even of its real themes yet. Shelley, however, takes a very important step with her novel that will change the course of apocalyptic literature towards the kind of narration we are now particularly familiar with: she operates a complete secularization of the plot (Alkon 190). The religious apocalypses described by al-Nafīs (Muslim) and Grainville (Christian) are not integrated into Shelley's social narrative, whose main source may have been Defoe's account of the 1665 plague, as Paul Alkon suggests (190). At the end of the 19th century, Europe is more interested in Positivism and in its limits than in eschatological conflicts, and the

destiny of the world seems linked to the courses of social systems and new political ideologies: it is in this very direction science fiction authors decide to go.

From Shelley's novel onwards, authors have not ceased producing apocalyptic narratives and, reading any list of apocalyptic fiction published between 1826 and 2017, a scholar will have an immediate glimpse of the fascinating diachronic process of increasing complexity the genre undergone throughout the 20th century. It has indeed been a very long road from the scattered examples of apocalyptic fiction of the late 19th century to the present outburst of end-of-the-world narrative. Some known authors (Wells, Doyle, London) of the early 20th century lead the road to the experimentalism of the 1920's. The shocking events of the Great War and the discomfiting lack of confidence that comes from it grows to become the war-filled apocalyptic narrative of the 1930's (e. g. Well's 1933 *The Shape of Things to Come*). WWII indeed comes and goes, leaving the survivors with the terror of the bomb. From that moment onwards – not that people have ever actually doubted it – the possibility of the apocalypse seems as reasonable and as close as it have been for many centuries throughout the Middle Ages of false prophets and true flagellants. Post-war apocalyptic fiction is haunted and penetrated by the nuclear holocaust and by the “other”: the enemy, the alien, the individual that is coming with the only aim to eradicate our true identity and replace it with their own (e.g. Jack Finney's 1955 novel *The Body Snatchers* and its successful film adaptation *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, directed by Don Siegel one year later). It is a great proliferation of sub-subgenres, cross-genres, and variations on the theme, but for more than thirty years, the world

always finishes because of some war⁵. Human decline, over-technologized cities, eco-disasters: they have been elements of this kind of narrative at least since Grainville and they are central in current apocalyptic narrative as well. The other great protagonist, of course, is the epidemic: a matter of everyday life in the so-called Dark Ages, and the cause of the human extinction in Shelley's novel, diseases start contaminating apocalyptic narrative again in the 1990's. These are the years of AIDS: the "others," the tainted ones, are among us, and the contagion is a simple touch away from anybody (e.g. Frank Herbert's 1982 novel *The White Plague* or the virulent zombification of the video game series *Resident Evil*, started in 1996).

The shapes the apocalypse has been given in narratives is only marginally relevant to my thesis: I am much more concerned with the concept of the end of the world than with the metaphor an author decided to use to represent it. Nevertheless, as Rick Worland reminds us, it is deeply instructive in studying science fiction and horror «to consider what we find frightening in given periods» (104) and where in those periods we think the threats may be coming from. We witness deadly plagues (*I am Legend*, 1955), space explosions (*Sunshine*, 2007; *In the Days of the Comet*, 1906), natural catastrophes (*The Day After Tomorrow*, 2004), but also alien invasions (*The War of the Worlds*, 1898), post-atomic vampires (*The Colony*, 2013), cyberpunk nightmares (*The Matrix*, 1999). These are the rhetorical facades covering actual fears of real or presumed threats: the spread of lethal diseases, ecological concerns, the uncanny feeling of technological dependence, the postmodern dread of living a virtual reality. Fandom and scholars subdivide this kind of fiction into different categories

⁵ War is the cause of the apocalypse in about 35% of the works of apocalyptic fiction written or filmed between 1826 and 2017 (I listed 940). The second most common cause is the ecological disaster (13%). Given the incompleteness of the list at my disposal, these data do not have scientific value per se, but I believe that the ratio would be similar also when calculating the percentage based on a more exhaustive list. War is by far the most common cause of the apocalypse in fiction. James Berger suggests that we can imagine the apocalypse primarily because we have seen it already.

and subgenres according to the cause of the apocalypse. In my work, these aspects are marginal. However, for the sake of common ground, and in order to define my field of study transparently, the following section offers a taxonomy of apocalyptic narrative.

1.3. Establishing a Taxonomy: an Interlude

Taking inspiration from Heather Urbanski's "Nightmares Model" (Plagues, Apocalypses and Bug-Eyed Monsters 14), I created my own 'Apocalypses Model' by placing the several types of apocalypse in three larger categories: those caused (directly or indirectly) by humans (column 1), those that arise from the Earth as a natural or supernatural phenomenon (column 2), and those whose cause comes from outside our planet (column 3). Table 1 displays these categories.

Human-made (a)	Earthly (b)	Alien (c)
Disease (1)	Disease (1)	Disease (1)
Eco-disaster (2)	Eco-disaster (2)	–
–	–	Impact event (2)
–	–	Alien creatures (3)
–	Supernatural (3)	Supernatural (4)
Social (3)	–	–
Technology and progress (4)	–	–
–	–	Astronomical abnormality (5)
War (5)	–	War (6)

Table 1. *Apocalypses Model*

The human-made apocalypse is rather common; guilt and recriminations usually play a big role when it comes to the end of our planet. Even before the age of apocalyptic fiction started, that is to say, when apocalyptic literature was not necessarily deemed fiction, the decay of humanity often was the first sign of an incoming Armageddon (Weber 49-50). Early apocalyptic fiction – including the already mentioned *Theologus Autodidactus* and *Le Dernier homme* – frequently proposes a futuristic

landscape where progress – using Eugen Weber’s expression – has advanced side by side with the notion of decadence (19). Blaming humanity for its own suffering is an approach that one can certainly link back to religious motifs, but with the technological advancements of the late 19th century and especially after the display of destructive potential in WWII, self-annihilation is not as absurd as it might have once been.

Humans are the cause of their own social decadence (Table 1: a3) in several classics of apocalyptic fiction – such as Pierre Boulle’s novel *La Planète des Singes* (1963) or the first movie of George Miller’s cult saga *Mad Max* (1979). In fact, it is at least since the myth of Noah and the story of Sodom and Gomorrah that a decadent society ends up razed to the ground.

Humanity is also to blame for its own, uncontrolled technological progress (Table 1: a4). “Progress,” Weber writes, “means advance toward an end; and linear progress suggests endings [...] and, by implication, decline” (22). If the bicycle, “with its recently invented brakes and pneumatic tires, was seen by doomsayers as just another nail in the coffin of civilization,” (22) we cannot be surprised to have so many fictional apocalypses caused by technology. From E. M. Forster’s short story *The Machine Stops* (1909) to the award-winning computer-animated film *WALL-E* (Stanton, 2008), the overabundance of technology always hides a darker side, and hyper-technology is usually a synonym of ecological disaster. The smog of London probably inspired author Richard Jeffries in the description of the toxic swamp growing on the English capital in his 1885 novel *After London*, and it is the blind underestimation of the greenhouse effect to cause the spectacular disaster of Roland Emmerich’s blockbuster *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004). The creation of something more powerful than its own creator is an element of traditional storytelling of golems

and jinna, which has its Romantic version in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and eventually takes the apocalyptic turn in works such as Philip Dick's *The Defenders* (1953). Since the 1950's, however, the golem is radioactive and its destructive potential goes much farther than the borders of the small shtetl of the Yiddish tradition. The uncontrollable consequences of human-generated power have been very much alive since the invention of the atomic bomb and they have come back to public debates every time an incident in a nuclear plant around the planet has made the world hold its breath. Atomic threats and post-atomic landscapes are protagonists in a large portion of apocalyptic narratives produced during the Cold War and after. Progress is security, but it is "the ultimate cultural nightmare" as well (Urbanski 24).

Progress also means biology and medicine (Table 1: **a/b/c** 1): the containment of diseases and their possible outbreak. An invisible menace with horrifying consequence, a disease is often the cause of the apocalypse in fiction. From Mary Shelley's plague in *The Last Man* to the zombie-virus, a contagion has proven to be an effective representation and a valuable trope in Western fiction, as discussed by Susan Sontag in her seminal essay *Illness as Metaphor* (1977). Naturally, the disease needs to be an epidemic in order to reach its apocalyptic 'quota,' and it is striking how it ranges across all three apocalyptic categories. The spread of the disease can be caused by humans (Chris Marker's *La Jetée*, 1962), it can be of natural origin (*Contagion*, directed by Steven Soderbergh in 2011), and it can hit from outside the planet (as in the radio drama *The Peoria Plague*, aired in 1972). In any case, the results are gruesome and they generate – together with a vast number of ghastly sequences – several sub-subgenres. Zombies, for instance, have reached such a wide popularity and appear in such an extensive number of works that they might very well

deserve to constitute a category of their own (not to mention the withstanding debate on their being natural or supernatural)⁶.

Another cross-category apocalyptic item is war (Table 1: a5 and c6). Being an omnipresent element of apocalyptic fiction, war is the primary cause of extinction. A war among humans is common for obvious reasons, but a war against creatures from other planets is not rare either: H. G. Wells' classic *The War of the Worlds*, first published in 1898, is an outstanding example of this.

Any sort of menace can arrive from outer space and science fiction is rich in variations on the theme. More so than aliens, who are the specialty of other subgenres of speculative fiction, it is asteroids and poisonous comets humanity should fear the most. The impact event (Table 1: c2) has been one of the most frequently employed tropes of the apocalyptic genre since its beginnings. Camille Flammarion's *La fin du monde* (1894) is a fascinating novel about a comet colliding with the Earth, while it is once again H. G. Wells who publishes across several issues of *The Daily Chronicle* his *In the Days of the Comet* (1905-1906). Perhaps inspired by these very novels, the Italian author Secondo Lorenzini publishes the novella *Ciò che accadde a noi tutti il 9 settembre 190...* in the May 1906 issue of *La lettura*. Lorenzini tells the story of a piece of the Moon falling down on the Earth, causing its rotation to stop, and consequently triggering a catastrophic change in the world ecosystem. An impact event is the center of more recent narrative, such as the dramatic movie *Melancholia*, directed by Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier in 2011, where a rogue planet is about to collide with the Earth.

⁶ The debate on the nature of zombies is at least as old as Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), and there are several currents of thought opposing one another. It is not of my interest, in this dissertation, to explore the matter any further, and for this reason I decided not to add the category 'zombies' among the possible causes of an apocalypse. The reader may decide, case by case, whether to place zombies under the 'disease' category or under the 'supernatural' category.

In some instances, it is not an actual impact, but some sort of astronomical abnormality (Table 1: **c4**) to put in peril the existence of humankind: this is the case in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Poison Belt*, published in 1913. The creator of Sherlock Holmes is also the literary father of Professor Challenger, who is the protagonist of a series of adventures and of the novel in which the Earth is moving towards a belt of poisonous ether that will cause the death of any breathing creature on the planet. In 2007, British filmmaker Danny Boyle directed *Sunshine*, telling the story of a spaceship crew embarked in a dangerous mission: the sun is dying and, in order to save the Earth from the resulting decay, an enormous atomic bomb must be placed and exploded inside of the sun with the hope of reactivating it.

The danger that can come from alien territories is great, but not necessarily greater than what the imagination of apocalyptic fiction authors can stage right on Earth. As I wrote above, the eco-disaster is often directly linked to human misconduct (Table 1: **a2**), but this is not always the case (**b2**). Although some tales might be symbolically representing human fault, their plots show the overwhelming power of Nature over Man. The eruption of a volcano produces a poisonous gas that kills (almost) everybody in M. P. Shiel's last-man-on-earth novel *The Purple Cloud* (1901). The master of postmodern science fiction, British writer J. G. Ballard, imagines a world tormented by an inexplicable and perpetual wind in his 1962 novel *The Wind from Nowhere*. More recently, speculating on recent interpretations of the Mayan end-of-the-world prophecies, disaster film specialist Roland Emmerich has the planet Earth marvelously destroyed by all the possible natural calamities in his *2012* (distributed three years before the doomsday in order to give all paying and warned spectators time to take due precautions).

The natural disaster is always feared because it is something humanity periodically witnesses and, therefore, saliently imagines. The supernatural disaster, on the other hand, is something that humanity has always feared to witness and, therefore, constantly imagined (Table 1: **b3**). Direct descendent of the most diverse apocalyptic prophecies, the supernatural calamity is sometimes connected to precise mythological characters, of which the Antichrist is the leading proponent. From Robert Hugh Benson's Christian novel *Lord of the World* (1908) to American horror comedy motion picture *This is the End* (2013), the apocalypse has come – as often prophesized in ancient scriptures of several religions – in the form of demons and other monstrosities.

The cause of the apocalypse that authors decide to utilize will characterize their story and help the recipient to understand what it ultimately signifies. Zombies and asteroids, tsunamis and plagues, even the antichrist is representative of something other than itself. It is as important, therefore, to pay attention to all those works in which no cause of the apocalypse is ever specified: all the narratives that start after the “event,” of which we see nothing but the consequences. In Paul Auster's novel *In the Country of Last Things* (1987) and in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), the reader never gets to know how the world ended up in such grim conditions. The apocalypse is no longer the protagonist of these tales: this is the post-apocalypse, and the bad news is that the worst part is yet to come.

1.4. The Great Year Cycle or the Chaldean Reboot.

Apocalypse, post-apocalypse, and dystopia are the three grand moments of the apocalyptic cycle that one sees represented, integrally or more often partially, in all the sub-genres of apocalyptic fiction. Very much like in Chaldean doctrine, according to which the universe is eternal but periodically destroyed and reconstructed, the post-

apocalyptic world of modern apocalyptic fiction eventually constitute a dystopian reality, which will in turn reach such a level of unsustainability that it would cause another apocalyptic event and, in doing so, recommence the cycle.

Although the cyclical return of these moments would seem unstoppable, there are some stories in which the apocalypse actually destroys humanity and, perhaps, life itself, without leaving space for any rebuilding and any room for the next cycle to begin. In these cases the world is reduced to the silence that Paul the Deacon fears in his *Historia Longobardorum* (De Paolo 65), which can neither be imagined nor told, as Simona Micali brilliantly observes (Per salvare il pianeta 186). Picturing a world without anybody in it is not as easy as it might seem, and Carlo Cassola proves this by writing the third novel of his “atomic trilogy”, *Il mondo senza nessuno* (1982), where a human-less nature seems as meaningless and unintelligible as a theater stage without an audience (9). In the case of a final and total destruction, the world usually finishes together with the movie, and after the explosion, there is nothing but the credits. This is what happens in the dramatic comedy *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World*, written and directed by Lorene Scafaria in 2012: the last frame of the film coincides with the impact that destroys the Earth and everything on it. Narratives such as this one – apocalyptic fiction – deal with the events preceding the apocalypse and with the psychological reactions to the awareness of an incoming and inevitable death. Many other movies that also belong to the apocalyptic fiction group focus on the apocalypse per se, on the catastrophic event (whatever its nature): the apocalypse is not the final act of these plots, but rather their second one, as in the Nordic tradition which generates the next human race after Ragnarok (Weber 39). Thus, several apocalyptic narratives finish on the comforting note of reconstruction, hinting at the possible reboot of a new society (Micali, Per salvare il pianeta 186). This is the case, for

instance, with the Spanish movie *Los últimos días* (2013), which tells the story of an unexplainable epidemic of agoraphobia that has made human life impossible. At the very end of the movie, we see that the same disease does not seem to be affecting the members of the new generation, who are free to go out into a vegetation-covered Barcelona and reconquer the world. The last days of the title, therefore, are so just for a part of humanity, not for its entirety (a concept that might imply generational or even eschatological readings of reality).

The re-conquest of the world, the struggle of adapting to the new reality, is the focus of another group of plots: those dealing with the aftermath only. Post-apocalyptic narrative is not directly concerned with the apocalypse per se, but with the complicated life of the survivors. The glimpse into a post-catastrophic world, which Mary Shelley offered in the final pages of her *The Last Man*, but had chosen not to develop, is the core of the already mentioned novel *The Purple Cloud* by M. P. Shiel. It is the story of Adam Jeffson, who returns from an expedition to the North Pole and finds himself to be the last living man on Earth. Shiel understands the great, undeveloped potential of *The Last Man* and writes a story that answers the question readers might have asked themselves when closing Shelley's book: what now? What would I do if I were to be left all by myself in the world?

Perfectly in line with the Chaldean Great Cycle, reconstruction is what usually comes after the apocalypse. In some stories, the reconstruction has already advanced when the narration commences: the plot implies a catastrophic event, it implies its consequences, and it implies the establishment of a society that might be very different and perhaps much worse than the pre-apocalyptic one. This new society is the dystopia, and there is an entire subgenre devoted to it. While the key elements of the post-apocalyptic subgenre are survival and social reconstruction, dystopian

narratives focus on an already established political system by offering a commentary on it. George Orwell's *1984* is a well-known example of dystopian literature, and so is Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451* (1953).

Generally, the dystopian plot is set several generations after the event that caused the development of the society toward its present, fictional state. However, if dystopia is – as defined in the Oxford dictionary – an “imagined place or state in which everything is unpleasant or bad,” then its description perfectly fits not only this remote *locus* from a distant future, but also the pre-apocalyptic society at the edge of collapse. The two extremes of this triangle coincide, because any society that crumbles under the flood is never – neither in religious texts nor in works of fiction – an innocent victim. In the middle – which is, as far as I am concerned, the most fascinating part – there is restless humankind, determined to survive, no matter the devastation surrounding it. This is what post-apocalyptic fiction is and it is the focus of my dissertation. In the following section, I shall define its major characteristics.

1.5. Post-Apocalyptic Society: A Description.

The fictional apocalypse always operates on a large scale and its main victim is society, which re-discovers itself thrown into unfamiliar surroundings. Dennis R. Perry rightfully defines apocalypse as “the breaking up of the predictable universe” (45). In the aftermath, nothing is as it used to be: the apocalypse has changed the world, it has changed our values, and transfigured all the basics of our old society by violating its foundation. The result is in a certain way unintelligible, because it is hard to understand and to accept that Hitchcock's birds, for example, have suddenly become a deadly threat to humans. The rules by which society has governed itself and by which it has been interpreting reality are subject to a necessary re-writing and in spite of what Hitchcock's ornithologist says – in the diner scene that precedes the

famous telephone box sequence – birds are behaving in a different way, which requires humans to adjust their own behavior as well.

Since apocalypse always has totalizing effects and it consequentially demands total response, adjusting to the new condition always concerns society as a whole rather than individuals. Vivian Sobchack observes that science fiction deals with “society and its institutions in conflict with each other or with some alien other,” (30) and this is particularly true for apocalyptic narratives (as much as for post-apocalyptic and dystopian fiction). It is true even in regards to any actual group that creates (now or in history) an apocalypse-based rhetoric, which always concerns their society and the conflict generated from the encounter with opposing institutions or other groups.

The opposing dynamic is indeed crucial: any apocalyptic event is, by nature, revolutionary (or reactionary), because it overturns (actually or ideally) the status quo. Without (for the moment) stepping outside the fictional level, what we have after the end of the world is a number of survivors, who constitute post-apocalyptic society. In post-apocalyptic fiction, the very first concern of survivors is to keep their status of survivors for as long as possible, opposing the changes or adjusting to them. Survival is the primary drive of post-apocalyptic society, and it often overrides all other instincts and moral codes, so that running and hiding become the two basic actions, which develop into two recurring models that characterize apocalyptic narrative in general and post-apocalyptic narrative in particular: the Fortress and the Journey. The Fortress consists of one individual or a group seeking shelter in a building, trying to keep the apocalypse and its threats outside. The Journey, on the other hand, is the movement of one individual or a group from point A to point B, fighting the apocalypse and its threats on the way. An example of Journey is *The Book of Eli* (2010), where the solitary protagonist crosses a post-apocalyptic and dangerous

America with the goal of bringing a book to Alcatraz Island. An example of Fortress is George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), where a small group of survivors tries to keep the ghouls out of the house in which they are hiding.

These and such recurring models can constitute the bulk of a plot, or appear as narrative segments, coexisting in a larger storyline. For instance, although the main model of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* is the Journey, at least one part of the novel follows the Fortress model (in particular, when the protagonists find a fully stocked bunker which provides food and protection). On the other side, Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*: mostly based on the Fortress model (the protagonist armors his house in order to keep the vampires out at night), it presents several Journey 'moments' in the main character's risky missions searching for provisions.

In a longer narrative – say, a comic book series or a television show – one is virtually bound to find both models represented. *The Walking Dead*, both Robert Kirkman's graphic novel and the AMC's show, would be the ideal example of that. Finding shelter, scavenging for food and supplies, trying not to be killed, and kill, if necessary: at a first glance, it would seem that the post-apocalypse is the ideal time for lonely fighters and hardcore toughs. Indeed, it takes guts to survive the end of the world and even more so to live through it, but post-apocalyptic narrative is not about individual heroes, not even in a last-man-on-earth tale. As I anticipated above, it is always about society.

Picturing post-apocalyptic societies, we must be flexible: in a wasteland populated by flesh-eating creatures, the concept of society has changed. In post-apocalyptic narrative, any group of survivors, as small as it might be, is a society as soon as its members establish dynamics of interaction. Every time there is an addition to the group, or if the group gets in contact with another one, the dynamics are

potentially re-established and the society grows or perishes. It goes without saying that, although the creation of social dynamics is immediate, the actual rebuilding of functional social structures is far more complicated. When the protagonists are defending themselves from the apocalyptic threats of the outside world, it is not easy to mind the political, ethical, or aesthetic spheres of existence. Some authors even decide to have their main characters fail any attempt of reconstruction – the gloomy finale of Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* might be hinting at this direction (Sheppard 131) – while others opt for a more optimistic view, as José Saramago does in the final, uplifting pages of his *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* (1995). Sometimes the last man on earth was not the very last one after all (Shiel, Forte), and some other times he was indeed the last of his kind (Matheson). In some cases, the only chance of survival the author grants his characters is leaving the apocalypse behind. Going as far as possible and starting the reconstruction somewhere else seems to be the only chance of survival. This is the case in Kurt Vonnegut's *Galapagos: A Novel* (1985), where nine women and one man (numbers here start echoing) survive the extinction of the human race because of their being trapped on one of the islands of the Ecuadorian archipelago. This is, of course, the case of Boccaccio's *brigata* as well.

In the upcoming sections, I show that the categories of social reconstruction, law of Nature, and human *Ingegno* are crucial in the *Decameron* as much as in contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction, and that defining Boccaccio's masterpiece as an archetype of this kind of narrative is not as much of a stretch as it may seem. Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* and its small screen adaptation, in my opinion the most prominent contemporary prototypes of post-apocalyptic fiction, are the main counterpoints of my analysis.

1.6. A Grim Opening: Why the Plague?

The plague is a crucial – perhaps the most important – element of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*. It is a precious historical document and it is a necessary hermeneutical tool to read Boccaccio's masterpiece.

As James Berger argues (*After the End* xiii), we are able to visualize the apocalypse and its landscape because it has already and actually occurred. Humanity has been witness of apocalypse-like scenarios, and this gives us the power to imagine them in fiction. If this is true, as I believe, the pandemics of plague that devastated Eurasia in the 14th century is most certainly among the events that still feeds our imagination. In 1348, the Black Death strikes Florence and Giovanni Boccaccio is among the many men and women who suffer the immediate consequences of the plague. Such a significant experience enters as a protagonist his *Decameron*, completed between 1349 and 1351 (Branca, *Cronologia* liii) and yet, the author seems sorry to be framing his novellas within the grimmest occurrence:

[...] conosco che la presente opera al vostro iudicio avrà grave e noioso principio, sì come è la dolorosa ricordanza della pestifera mortalità trapassata, universalmente a ciascuno che quella vide o altrimenti conobbe dannosa, la quale essa porta nella sua fronte. (*Decameron* 11)⁷

The long and detailed description of the Florentine plague, based on previous sources (Branca, *Boccaccio medievale* 212-213), has the strength of a historical testimony (De Paolo 62-63) and the intrinsic beauty of a piece of literature. Ugo Foscolo agrees, by claiming that, although it is true that Boccaccio might have followed some models, he did so with the creativity of an inventor⁸ (Foscolo 97). It is also hardly disputable that, in the *Decameron*, the plague does not merely play the role of an anchor that links the

⁷ "I recognize that you will find the opening of this present work abhorrent and distressing; for so is the painful recapitulation of the recent deadly plague, which occasioned hardship and grief to everyone who witnessed it or had some experience of it, and which marks the introduction of my work." (Boccaccio, *The Decameron* 6)

⁸ "[...] avesse imitata la narrazione, l'adoperò da inventore."

novellas of his collection to reality (Branca, Boccaccio medievale 209): the description of the plague, which is the author's focus in his introduction, is at the same time a picture of the society and of its brutal collapse. The epidemic disease is a medieval motif, a social text that renders corruption visible: it is "an exemplum, and emblem of decay" (Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* 58). It is a key Boccaccio hands to his readers in order for them to understand the stories of his collection not only for what they tell, but also for what they represent:

[...] per ciò che, qual fosse la cagione per che le cose che appresso si leggeranno avvenissero, non si poteva senza questa ramemorazion dimostrare, quasi da necessità constretto a scriverle mi conduco. (I, intro. 11)⁹

All that is written, therefore, deserves and is meant to be interpreted, and in turn shall be used to properly read the novellas. Boccaccio's masterful accomplishment is that he employs the plague as a metaphor – without eradicating it from the contingency of his very time. The plague is at once real and ideal; it explicitly features in the book, and then vanishes without actually leaving; it is not part of the novellas, and yet contaminates them by attributing meaning.

The plague – undoubtedly real, concrete, experienced by the vast majority of the first hand readers of the *Decameron* – is also an evident commentary on the condition of politics and society in Boccaccio's time:

E in tanta afflizione e miseria della nostra città era la reverenda autorità delle leggi, così divine come umane, quasi caduta e dissoluta tutta per li ministri ed esecutori di quelle, li quali, sí come gli altri uomini, erano tutti morti o infermi o sí di

⁹ "[...] as I could not have explained the reasons underlying what you are about to read unless I broached this matter of the plague, I find myself virtually obliged to write about it." (The *Decameron* 6)

famigli rimasi stremi, che ufficio alcuno non potean fare: per la qual cosa era a ciascuno licito quanto a grado gli era d'adoperare. (Intro. I, 15)¹⁰

Boccaccio's account is believable, and his powerful metaphor has entered the common imagination with its double validity: as an element of realism, and as a potent tool for social commentary¹¹.

When, six hundred years later, authors of speculative fiction would imagine the end of the world, they would remember Boccaccio's lesson very well (Zani and Meaux 100-101). In apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction, public institutions are indeed the first to disappear when the apocalypse hits. Particularly in post-apocalyptic fiction, which is the narrative of a destroyed society and of its journey towards a possible (but far from certain) reconstruction, governmental authorities are usually fading, if not abandoned already¹².

This is the case in the television show *The Walking Dead* (2010-present), in which social institutions do not have an active role and the direct references to their failure are several. AMC's *The Walking Dead*, based on the successful comic book series with the same title, arguably is the most popular work of apocalyptic fiction of the present decade¹³. In the first season of the show, Rick Grimes – the protagonist who wakes up in a hospital without any idea that the dead are already walking the

¹⁰ “Now with our city in such a sorry state, the laws of God and men had lost their authority and fallen into disrespect in the absence of magistrates to see them enforced, for they, like everyone else, had either succumbed to the plague or lay sick, or else had been deprived of their minions to the points where they were powerless.” (The Decameron 9)

¹¹ Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* reconfirms about three centuries later all of Boccaccio's images, and in Defoe's second hand description the apocalypse stops society, too. (126-127).

¹² In the mentioned Portuguese novel *Ensaio sobre a cegueira*, the government is represented by the soldiers that keep contaminated people under quarantine, and by the anachronistic and useless set of rules they blindly and obtusely seek to enforce (Saramago 42-43). Very soon, the system fails, the soldiers disappear, and so do any remaining institution.

¹³ According to Parrot Analytics, *The Walking Dead* was the second most popular TV show on the planet in 2016, when running its sixth season. According to Business Insider, “Parrot analyzed not only ratings data (where available) but also peer-to-peer sharing, social media chatter, and other factors to estimate viewer demand for various shows. These combined measurements determine each show's "demand expressions" per day. Though the formula is opaque, the ranking appears to be one of the best ways to compare shows across platforms and measure how popular they really are” (Lubin). As reported by IndieWire, AMC's *The Walking Dead* was “the No. 1 show of the year among adults 18-49” in the United States for the second year in a row in 2015-2016 (Schneider).

streets – leaps to the conclusion that reaching the closest big city is the safest option he has. “Atlanta sounds like a good deal,” he says (*Days Gone Bye*): of course, he could not be any more wrong, as Atlanta turns out to look very much like Boccaccio’s Florence, where a plague-like disease is turning people into zombies. When Rick enters the city, he is confident to find an organized structure responding to the zombie-emergency ‘from above’. Instead, the only institutional representative he encounters is the dead body of a soldier eaten by crows on a tank. It is not random that both Rick and the camera indulge on this uninviting spectacle: it is the symbol of a defeated and collapsed establishment. The soldier is being dismembered on a tank, which used to be the embodiment of military power and national security: it used to be a moving stronghold, steered by soldiers, whose one assigned task was to defend and attack, before it has now been reduced to nothing more than a metallic sarcophagus in which the protagonist sees the end of his journey and of his hopes.

Of course, the social organization (with social codes and laws) is just the first layer to crumble away in reaction to the apocalypse. Already in Boccaccio, the plague disintegrates the social fabric by rendering all interpersonal contact and communication potentially life-threatening. The plague deprioritizes the common interests of the city. Human relationships are in peril and even the intimate bonds tremble:

E lasciamo stare che l’uno cittadino l’altro schifasse, e quasi niuno vicino avesse dell’altro cura, e i parenti insieme rade volte o non mai si visitassero e di lontano; era con sí fatto spavento questa tribolazione entrata ne’ petti degli uomini e delle donne, che l’un fratello l’altro abbandonava, e il zio il nipote, e la sorella il fratello, e spesso volte la donna il suo marito; e, che maggior cosa è quasi non credibile, li padri e le

madri i figliuoli, quasi loro non fossero, di visitare e di servire schifavano. (I, intro. 16)¹⁴

Family is the nuclear center of society, and yet the plague is capable of the scission of its parts¹⁵. The apocalypse inherently averts relationships and prevents communication: communication between the institutional and the social level will decay first, eventually followed by communication between the people. Without human contact, interpersonal relations and without concern for one another (Defoe 151), society becomes impossible and its reconstruction even more so. As it happens in the *Decameron*, the apocalypse threatens the unity of the familiar bonds also in *The Walking Dead*. At the beginning of the first season, Rick is separated from his family: he does not know where they are or if they live, and he has no access to means of communication (telephones do not work, the walkie-talkie Rick has and the radio at the camp where his family is are set on different channels). His wife and his son even believe that he is already dead and thus are not looking for him. At the end of the first episode (the pilot of the show, its ‘introduction’, if one would borrow Boccaccio’s term), Rick finds himself inside the aforementioned tank – a symbol of defeated social order – surrounded by zombies. At that point in the story – as far as the viewer is concerned – he represents the only remaining hope of a shredded world; but he is a shuddering flame within a storm. Downtown Atlanta is as hopeless as Boccaccio’s Florence, and the zombies are the manifest representation of crumbled and barren humanity. Rick seems to feel and comprehend that. The camera stays on his face: he

¹⁴ “One citizen avoided the next, there was scarcely a man who would take care of his neighbor, kinsmen would seldom if ever call on each other, and even then would keep their distance – but this was not all: men and women alike were possessed by such a visceral terror of this scourge that a man would desert his own brother, uncle would forsake his nephew, sister her brother, and often a wife her husband. What is more, believe it or not, mothers and fathers would avoid visiting and tending their children, they would virtually disown them.” (The *Decameron* 10)

¹⁵ Boccaccio’s words resonate in Shiel’s *The Purple Cloud*, written almost six hundred years after the *Decameron*: the protagonist of the novel, only survivor of the apocalypse, reads on one of the last newspapers ever published a description of the final days of humanity that sounds like an effective summary of Boccaccio’s introduction: “The guides of the nation have fled; the father stabs his child, and the wife her husband, for a morsel of food;” (325)

has a gun, and he is ready to use it against himself. If the city has fallen, suicide might be the only option left. With the city as the *locus* of civilization – or, at least, that is what he used to think – there does not seem to be any way to fix the rotting world in which he has awoken. At least not from within, Giovanni Boccaccio must have concluded when the death roamed Florence.

In the middle of the tremendous plague, Boccaccio sees no other choice for his *brigata* but to leave Florence for the countryside: to get as far away as possible from the plague and its annihilating power is his solution. The city is not only the plague's realm. It is its synonym. By leaving Florence, the ten wealthy and healthy youngsters that will form the *brigata* have the chance not merely to escape the contagion, but to reestablish the basics of a new social structure. In *The Walking Dead*, instead, Rick does not see such an opportunity: surrounded by zombies and cut off from any potential source of help, he surrenders, ready to die. In that very moment, a radio crackles and we witness how human communication breaks through. Somebody has been watching Rick and he is about to offer him a way out of the tank and eventually out of the city. A social bond has been re-established, communication begins anew.

1.7. “The city belongs to the dead.”

Three times every year, the Romans of the early regal period – probably continuing an ancient Etruscan ritual (Plutarch 57-58) – would roll back a stone and open a hole they called *mundus*, which was believed to be a portal to the underworld (Warde Fowler 24-27). In those three days, the dead walked among the living and all cultural, administrative, and social activities were suspended (de Martino 212-213). This recurrence signified, as anthropologist Ernesto de Martino suggests, the ritual repetition of a social fall into chaos (213): it was – other than a rite strictly linked to the harvest and the cult of agricultural deities (11) – a cathartic ceremony that would

simulate the collapse of society and, by doing so, exorcize the fear of this frightening prospect (213). The world finishes, the ghosts walk among the living, Rome stops: public fights, enlistments, political speeches (*comitia*), and any administrative activity – unless strictly necessary – is suspended for one day (214). After the *nefastus dies* is over, the hole is closed again and life goes back to normal. The city, as the stronghold, carrier, and representative of civic values and codes, reestablishes the illusion of being eternally immune to obliteration and ruin. The reason for this ritual is to remind the citizens and keep up their awareness of the cyclical nature of the universe and, therefore, of the precarious *fortuna* to which all, including the city and its administration, are subject. The city is at once the quintessential representation of society and the collection of all its dysfunctions, so that apocalyptic fiction has often chosen to stage the collapse of humanity within its walls.

The city is, as Italian essayist Francesco Saba Sardi observes, the rational response to the inextricability of the forest (*silva*): it is the human apotropaic act against the terrifying and uncontrollable wilderness (19-21). In spite of all efforts to the contrary, however, there will necessarily be a moment in which the city is overwhelmed: either by a breach in its perimeter and by the sudden invasion of the reclaiming and ever-growing *silva*, or by the overgrowing of its own internal, heavy structures. Strong oppositions characterize apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narrative, and city/country is among the most common. Susan Sontag mentions the well-known metaphor of a city as an organism affected by an illness that is nothing but civil disorder, and that is opposed to the serene, healthy, and even healing countryside (76). In apocalyptic fiction, the city is usually the main stage of the catastrophic event (e.g. the frozen and flooded New York of Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow*), while in dystopian narrative it is often the highly dense and overbuilt representation of an

exhausted system (the famous Mega-City One of the *Judge Dredd* comic book series is a perfect example). In post-apocalyptic fiction, however, the city is an empty, ghostly *simulacrum* of the pre-apocalyptic world: it can either be covered in luxuriant and often exotic vegetation, or be a scavenged and dusty wasteland. In some stories, nature has completely reabsorbed the city: it is sufficient to mention again the English capital turned into a toxic swamp in the already cited *After London*, or the same city completely submerged under mesmerizing waters in *The Drowned World*, by J. G. Ballard (1962). No less often, post-apocalyptic narrative presents the city as the dangerous and unworthy by-product of a defeated world, lacking any real kind of comfort for the roaming survivors: as the epicenter of the apocalyptic event, the city now represents all the antonyms of the values it once embodied, and it falls into a peripheral narrative role. “The city belongs to the dead,” Rick Grimes warns his fellow-survivors in *The Walking Dead* (Wildfire), and that is to say, the reconstruction of whatever is going to be must begin elsewhere. In fact, the rebuilding of society has, at that point, already been begun in the outskirts of Atlanta, where the small group with whom Rick’s wife and son are travelling has set their camp. Outside of the infested city, in the middle of the wilderness and close to a source of fresh water, Rick rejoins his family, reconstituting the familiar (and social) bond that the apocalypse had temporarily broken. It is outside of the city that the new group establishes itself as an active and productive agent, taking its first steps towards social reconstruction and, by doing so, echoing (aware of it or not) the dynamics of reaction to the catastrophe that have been known for centuries.

Historical accounts, such as Defoe’s or Boccaccio’s, testify that the re-scaffolding of a crumbled city does not easily start from within, but more often so from the outside. If the plague is infesting a city, it is natural that it is safe to part with

it – as clearly documented in Defoe’s historical novel (13). This is therefore what Boccaccio imagines for his ten young men and women, namely to leave Florence for the *contado*. The members of the *brigata* need to detoxify their systems from the rotting influence of the city and to “preserve their own health and virtue” (Hastings 7). They are very similar to the protagonists of *The Walking Dead*, who require a clean and safe start. In order to achieve that, they must set foot outside of the city walls which – formerly meant to exclude the wilderness – are now limiting an unproductive space. No new beginnings, no new generation or creations will be possible in the plague-stricken city, not even the one hundred tales that would constitute the *Decameron* could have possibly risen from within it.

Boccaccio imbues the countryside with beauty and fertility:

Era il detto luogo sopra una piccolo montagnetta, da ogni parte lontano alquanto alle nostre strade, di varii albuscelli e piante tutte verdi di fronde ripiene piacevoli a riguardare; in sul colmo della quale era un palagio con bello e gran cortile nel mezzo, e con logge e con sale e con camere, tutte ciascuna verso di sé bellissima e di liete dipinture raguardevole e ornata, con pratelli da torno e con giardini maravigliosi e con pozzi d’acque freschissime e con volte di preziosi vini [...]. (I, intro. 27)¹⁶

The country is the ideal – even idyllic – place the characters of the *cornice* move to, bearing the great responsibility of rebuilding society upon the values of which they are now carriers and protectors. As Vittore Branca writes,

Questi dieci giovani che al centro della bufera spaventosa non hanno rinunciato ad alimentare la fiamma dello spirito, che credono fortemente nel dovere, nella gentilezza, nell’amore, proprio mentre tutte le leggi morali e civili cedono inesorabilmente, possono rappresentare veramente l’umanità e la possono in certo senso giudicare, perché ne hanno salvato i valori supremi: sono gli eletti a ritirarsi e

¹⁶ “The place was set back a little from every main road and occupied a knoll; its variegated shrubs and leafy greenery were a pleasure to the eye. Perched atop the knoll was a mansion built round a lovely spacious courtyard; it comprised loggias, public rooms, and bedroom, each one of which was exquisitely decorated with charming paintings. The house was ringed with splendid gardens and meadows, there were wells of the freshest water and cellars filled with the choicest of wines [...].” (The Decameron 19-20)

a raccogliersi nella villa fiesolana, come in un'arca di salvezza durante il nuovo diluvio. (Nuovi studi 39)

The flood will not last forever: like the 'simulated' apocalypse of the Roman *mundus*, also the real (and yet fictional) plague of Boccaccio's book will cease, and the youngsters of the *brigata* will be able to return to the city whose spirit they contributed in saving. I argue that the plague-stricken Florence of the *Decameron* is then the literary model many cities of post-apocalyptic narrative are built upon: they share the same characteristics, the same symbols, the same crucial need to be abandoned and re-planned.

The rebooting of society starts outside of the city, which is true in the *Decameron* in particular as well as in post-apocalyptic literature in general. Nonetheless, in order to achieve the heroic accomplishment of rescuing society, which Boccaccio will award with civic crowns of oak leaves (IX, intro. 743), leaving the city will be a precondition, never to be sufficient on its own. There is a specific set of 'to dos' to complete in order to save the world after its fall and decay.

1.8. "Chaos was the law of nature. Order Was the Dream of Man." Post-Apocalyptic Reconstitution and the New Law.

1.8.1. Rules of Reconstruction and Leadership

Three things are indispensable when beginning the reconstruction of society in post-apocalyptic narratives: rules, a leader, and stability have to be established. These key elements of post-apocalyptic fiction are, too, at the structural core of the *Decameron*. Boccaccio's Pampinea – the eldest woman of the group – sets the rules on the very first day: her precise instructions define the political organization of the group/new society and the formal structure of the literary work:

[...] per ciò che le cose che sono senza modo non possono lungamente durare, io, che cominciatrice fui de' ragionamenti da' quali questa così bella compagnia è stata

fatta, pensando al continuar della nostra letizia, estimo che di necessità sia convenire esser tra noi alcuno principale, il quale noi onoriamo e ubidiamo come maggiore, nel quale ogni pensiero stea di doverci a lietamente vivere disporre. E acciò che ciascun provi il peso della sollecitudine insieme col piacere della maggioranza e, per conseguente da una parte e dall'altra tratti, non possa chi nol pruova invidia avere alcuna, dico che a ciascuno per un giorno s'attribuisca e il peso e l'onore; e chi il primo di noi essere debba nella elezion di noi tutti sia: di quegli che seguiranno, come l'ora del vespro s'avvicinerà, quegli o quella che a colui o a colei piacerà che quel giorno avrà avuto la signoria; e questo cotale, secondo il suo arbitrio, del tempo che la sua signoria dee bastare, del luogo e del modo nel quale a vivere abbiamo ordini e disponga. (I, intro. 28)¹⁷

Immediately afterwards, Filomena – approved by her fellows – crowns Pampinea with laurel leaves, making her the first ‘queen’ of the *brigata*: the group’s first leader (I, intro. 29). She is the one who had the idea to leave the city, she is the one who set the rules, and she is the one who proposes to spend their time productively by telling stories to each other:

Qui è bello fresco stare [...] e puote ciascuno, secondo che all'animo gli è più di piacere, diletto pigliare. Ma se in questo il mio parer si seguisse, non giucando, [...] ma novellando [...] questa calda parte del giorno trapasseremo. (I, intro. 31)¹⁸

The societies in modern post-apocalyptic narratives follow the leader-based model of Boccaccio’s *brigata*, but the rotation of command and sovereignty is not always as democratic and the leaders not necessarily as virtuous and fair as in the *Decameron*.

In *The Walking Dead*, both the TV show and the graphic novel, there are several types

¹⁷ “But anything that’s going to last must have prescribed limits, and it seems to me – and I’m the one who first opened the discussion out of which this nice company has originated – it seems to me that, if we want to prolong our enjoyment, we shall have to appoint one of our member as our leader, someone to honour and obey as our sovereign; that person’s entire concern will have to assure us of happy days. Now to ensure that each one of us experiences both the cares and the privileges of office, weighing the one against the other and finding therefore no occasion for envy, I suggest that the burden and the honour be bestowed upon each of us for a day. Let all of us choose the first one, and let the subsequent ones be decided each evening at six by whoever has exercised sovereignty for that day. The sovereign shall decide upon the duration of his or her office, and shall establish how and where we are to dispose of our time.” (The *Decameron* 20)

¹⁸ “It’s lovely and cool here [...] and you can all amuse yourselves as the fancy takes you. But [...] if you follow my advice, we shall spend this sultry part of the day not playing games but telling stories [...]” (The *Decameron* 22-23)

of society and many kinds of leaders. Negan, at the head of the Savivors, is most certainly a despotic one, who controls his subordinates with extreme violence and fear. Nevertheless, his main goal, exactly like the one of Boccaccio's *brigata*, is to "bring civilization back to this world," (What Comes After) and it is by using an argument very much similar to Pampinea's, when he claims in Kirkman's comic book: "We survive, we provide security for others, [...] and we can't do that without rules. The rules are what makes everything work." And then, right before calmly burning another man's face with a bar of incandescent metal: "No matter how small, or insignificant, the rules are to be followed." His group, either fanatic or frightened, answers at once: "The rules keep us alive" (What Comes After #18). It is particularly interesting, in this regard, to follow Rick's parable in the leadership of his group: sometimes he is a commander, some other times a rough manager, occasionally he even acts as a tyrant. In the second part of the second season of the show, some events have heavily overwhelmed Rick and his sense of responsibility towards the rest of the group has brought him to extreme actions. In a famous monologue that closes the season, he says to his fellow survivors who have questioned his guidance:

Maybe you people are better off without me. Go ahead. I say there's a place for us, but maybe it's just another pipe dream. Maybe I'm fooling myself again. Why don't you go and find out yourself? Send me a postcard! Go on, there's the door. You can do better? Let's see how far you get. No takers? Fine. But get one thing straight. You're staying, this isn't a democracy anymore. (Beside the Dying Fire)

Rick would eventually refine his group-management approach, but in the course of the development of his character – that is to say, in the course of his adjusting to the post-apocalyptic reality – he will be able to come up with some harsh rules. During his 'dictator phase', for instance, he will establish a sort of martial law that punishes murder by immediate death: "We have to make the statement once and for all-- We do

not kill,” he shouts from the pages of the graphic novel to a petrified crowd. “We do not tolerate it,” he continues, “We will not allow it. This is our rule--our pledge. You kill, you die. No exceptions” (Safety Behind Bars).

Rules seem indeed necessary for a society to be functional, but after the apocalypse, a substantial transformation might be making the pre-event categories obsolete. Therefore, it is not simple to determine by what principles the new society will draft its law. The first concern of a survivor, as discussed above, is always to keep himself alive: this primarily instinctive drive stresses the selfish and egocentric nature of the post-apocalyptic world, where everyone is in for himself. As described above, this is true already in Boccaccio’s text and particularly in his description of the corrosion of social and personal bonds caused by the plague (Decameron I, intro. 16). Even when social contact is re-established, however, it is not possible to take up where the discourse left off, because the foundations have drastically changed so much that the building must be planned in a different shape.

According to Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), outside of a positive government, in what he refers to as a ‘state of nature’ and we could call ‘post-apocalypse,’ no rights aprioristically exist and there is therefore no such thing as an immoral act. Taking away the sovereign and the enforcement he offers, and eliminating the mechanisms that provide morality and rights, the British philosopher writes in his *Leviathan*, will essentially reveal the artificiality of the system: “Good and bad, right and wrong, and so forth become mere words. Your ownership of anything, up to your own life, only extends as far as it is defended by force of arms” (Walker 84-85). A serious problem of Hobbes’ state of nature is that everyone in it is morally entitled to be judge, jury and executor against anyone who threatens his rights to life, liberty, and property (85). In this perspective, *The Walking Dead* – together with the vast majority

of works of post-apocalyptic fiction – seems set in an extra-positivist reality where there is no such thing as a high principle and in which the only drive is the immediate, personal survival. However, I argue that although the apocalypse destroys the set of established rights of the pre-event world (cf. Hobbes' positive government) by emptying such rights of contingency and significance, it does at the same time provide new circumstances and new meaning upon which to reinstate the coming society.

Post-apocalyptic fiction, although often realistic, is not the scientific account of a state of emergency, but the literary metaphor of a massive social transformation (or of the social fear that such a transformation might occur). Therefore, one should refrain from charging the analysis of post-apocalyptic narrative with moral or ethical qualifiers: as *good* and *bad* are merely words in Hobbes' state of nature, so are *right* and *wrong* nothing but eschatological perspectives in the study of post-apocalyptic fiction. There is always a pre-apocalyptic reality (although frequently just in a purely implied form) that deems the principles in force in the post-apocalyptic world absurd. Echoing John Locke (1632-1704) one may claim that in the state of nature, in spite of Hobbes' arguments, there is indeed a set of rights in play (Walker 90). I agree with this view precisely, but I believe that this set of rights is not necessarily based on a universal and stable matrix: it is instead construed upon the new ground that the apocalypse has reshaped. Technically, all the moral principles of the pre-apocalyptic society could be destroyed and replaced by their very antonyms (which is exactly what, in a certain way, happens in Boccaccio's Florence and in Kirkman's Atlanta, where the dead have replaced the living). However, that is rarely the case: as much as even an extreme avant-garde must always come back with the very same vernacular that it went out to destroy, the post-apocalyptic society is only a variation on and never the complete negation of the pre-apocalyptic world. The alternative to this

would be either silence, as Kermode suggests (118), or – to our pre-apocalyptic eyes – unintelligibility. The reinvention of the world cannot be total, because that would cause – first of all – a lack of words to express it and, secondly, a lack of parameters for the recipient to comprehend it. The post-apocalyptic reality is, instead, always built not only on the ruins of the collapsed one, but using its pieces, reinterpreting its elements in a new, different shape. The members of Boccaccio's *brigata* are, therefore, the protectors of civic values (Branca, *Nuovi studi* 39), but not of the exact same society that collapsed before their eyes. Their mission is not to restore the balance of that collapsed world and of its old order, but to build a new world that is going to be, in their perspective, improved. That is what Boccaccio has in mind when he calls for a drastic change to replace the obsolete establishment. "Boccaccio is certainly no revolutionary," claims Robert Hastings, but "this does not necessarily involve a tacit surrender of principle, for Boccaccio's re-evaluation of moral criteria calls for a radical reorganization of the ethical substrata on which that society is based." This reorganization "would be pursued within the existing framework of society" but it "would ultimately correct its current abuses and make it more humane, just and fair" (35-36).

"Just and fair" – one must wonder – according to whom? Any major change in society implies at least two general factions, one for and another against the transformation. Our personal position can rightfully be on either side, both of which correspond to the two opponents of the eschatological conflict. It is history, or narrative that is to determine the victorious bloc, where victorious is not automatically equal to either right or fair: the winning side simply constitutes the next establishment, with its load of new or renewed values and its production, amendments or reaffirmation of rules and principles. In post-apocalyptic fiction, the winning side is

always the one with a more profound and better understanding of the post-apocalyptic world, simply because that is the new scenario that determines the principles on which to build any new rule. Failing to grasp the post-event world means failing to adjust to it – and those who do not understand the new law and do not follow it, are destined to perish.

1.8.2. Stability and Anti-Sociality

As discussed above, stability – the third required ‘ingredient’ in post-apocalyptic reconstruction – is achieved by a leader (or by leaders) who enforce a determined set of rules. Stability, however, also passes through the comprehension of the new scene: understanding post-apocalyptic reality and its principles is a prerequisite to *live* in it stably and productively. The youngsters of Boccaccio’s *brigata* share a common view of the world: they agree to escape Florence and they determine the foundation of a new society based, among other factors, on narrative. The rotation of sovereigns ensures variety, justice and balance within their society, the functionality of which depends on the maintenance of order and consistency. The internal stability of the group seems perfectly safe, but there are dangers lurking that could attack and affect the society from the outside. At the very end of the Second Day, Neifile suggests to move to another place, even further from Florence:

Se noi vogliam tor via che gente nuova non ci sopravenga, reputo oportuno di mutarci di qui e andarne altrove; e il dove ho già pensato e provveduto. (II, concl. 219)¹⁹

Rick in *The Walking Dead* would certainly agree with Neifile. In the third episode of the first season of the show, zombies enter the protagonist’s camp, inflicting death

¹⁹ “[...] if we want to avoid strangers calling on us, I think we might do well to change our residence: and I’ve already thought where that might be and made arrangements.” (The Decameron 166)

and creating temporary social disruption: after the attack, the group separates and each one of the two factions takes a different direction. Just as the *brigata*'s first residence is too close to Florence, this camp is too close to Atlanta, where "the food is over" (Tell It to the Frogs) and from which Rick and the others must expect to see more uninvited guests invading their camp. Most of the members of Rick's group will follow him on a journey that will take them to various fortresses: a high-tech lab, a farm, a prison, and so on. Also Neifile and her fellow-storytellers leave their first 'camp' for a much safer residence. The new palace that Neifile offers to her group is a real fortress, with which Rick himself would have been very pleased:

La reina adunque con lento passo, accompagnata e seguita dalle sue donne e dai tre giovani, alla guida del canto di forse venti usignoli e altri uccelli, per una vietta non troppo usata ma piena di verdi erbette e di fiori, [...] prese il cammino verso l'occidente, e [...] a un bellissimo e ricco palagio, il quale alquanto rilevato dal piano sopra un poggetto era posto, gli ebbe condotti. Nel quale entrati e per tutto andati, e avendo le gran sale, le pulite e ornate camere compiutamente ripiene di ciò che a camera s'appartiene, sommamente il commendarono [...]. Poi, abbasso discesi e veduta l'ampissima e lieta corte di quello, le volte piene d'ottimi vini e la freddissima acqua e in gran copia che quivi surgea, più ancora il lodarono. (III, intro. 223)²⁰

Wine, big rooms and birds are certainly the icing on the cake, but the fresh water would doubtlessly impress and win over Rick and his group the most. Running water is available at the first camp outside of Atlanta and again – in the shape of a little stream – right outside the prison: water is life, it is purity, and it is a symbol of progression and stability. It satisfies immediate necessities, and it allows for social

²⁰ "The queen, then, wended her way westwards at a gentle pace, accompanied by her suite of ladies and the three young men; guided by the songs of a good score of nightingales and sundry other birds, they proceeded along a fairly unfrequented grassy path strewn with flowers [...]. [S]he brought them [...] to a most splendid and sumptuous mansion overlooking the plain from a slight eminence. In they went and explored the entire house; the spacious public rooms, the clean, dainty, beautifully appointed bedrooms won their complete approval [...]. Downstairs they took in the vast and cheery courtyard, the cellars stocked with the best of wines, the abundant spring of ice-cold water, and their praise knew no bounds." (The Decameron 168)

development (farming, for instance). The second thing Rick's fellows would appreciate in Neifile's palace are the walls:

[...] fattosi aprire un giardino che di costa era al palagio, in quello, che tutto era da torno murato, se n'entrarono; (III, intro. 224)²¹

The garden is rich with plants and fruit, and there is water once again:

Nel mezzo [...] era una fonte di marmo bianchissimo e con maravigliosi intagli: iv'entro [...] per una figura [...] gittava tanta acqua [...]. La qual poi, quella dico che soprabondava al pieno della fonte, per occulta via del pratello usciva e, per canaletti assai belli e artificiosamente fatti fuor di quello divenuta palese, tutto lo 'ntorniava; e quindi per canaletti simili quasi per ogni parte del giardini discorrea, raccogliendosi ultimament in una parte del bel giardino avea l'uscita, e quindi verso il piani discendendo chiarissima [...] con grandissima forza [...] due mulina volgea. (III, intro. 224-225)²²

This seems the ideal place for the *brigata* to continue the re-constitutive mission, and it is by following the same principle that Rick and his group move from place to place, always stepping towards a more complex stage of social reconstruction. Coming from the small camp in season one to the citadel of season six and seven, the priority has switched from short-term survival and medium-term reconstruction, to long-term diplomacy between their group and others (Sheppard 129). Understanding the developing parable of Rick and his fellow-survivors will essentially mean comprehending the difficulties arising from the interactions with other groups and others individuals. Neifile (in Boccaccio) is very well aware of the potential threat posed by 'others,' which is why she suggests moving to a more remote location.

²¹ "After this, they had a garden opened to them which lay adjacent to the house; it was a walled garden [...]" (The Decameron 169)

²² "At the centre [...] there was a fountain of gleaming white marble with superbly sculpted reliefs; and in the middle there stood a [...] statue through which a jet of water [...]. The surplus water in the fountain was drawn off by a conduit concealed beneath the lawn, to re-emerge in the most beautiful and ingenious water-courses that encircled it; thence the water criss-crossed the garden in a network of similar channels and ultimately was collected at a point where it flowed out to descend to the plain in a crystal stream; before it reached the plain, however, it applied its immense power to turning a pair of mill-wheel [...]" (The Decameron 169-170)

The complex relationship between the main group and ‘the others’ is a trope of post-apocalyptic fiction that is crucial in *The Walking Dead* and that is already central in the *Decameron*. The little (and yet self-sufficient) *brigata*, still at the beginning of the reconstruction process, is indeed too weak to take the risk of accepting newcomers. Moreover – and this is a familiar concept for all of those who appreciate any kind of post-apocalyptic fiction – it is generally very risky to welcome new people during times of hunger, violence, and instability. Any addition to the group is very often enough to disrupt the rebuilding in progress, especially so in the case of the *brigata*: the internal order of Boccaccio’s group is based on the rules set by Pampinea and, as discussed above, they determine not only the political regime of their society, but the narrative structure of the book as well. Granting someone else access to one’s group could mean creating a situation of unbalance which would paradoxically threaten Boccaccio’s title of the narrative itself: in a group of ten with each of them acting as a sovereign of the group over the course of ten days (deka ‘ten’, hemera ‘day’), there simply is no room for an eleventh member of the *brigata*. In modern post-apocalyptic fiction, not all the characters are as smart and cautious as Neifile is, and it often happens that the reconstructive acts of a group are violently interrupted by the interference of an element belonging to the vast category of the anti-social.

The protagonists of *The Walking Dead* soon learn that letting strangers in their group or trusting outsiders can easily lead to tremendous disasters (CITE). Many indeed are the characters whose behavior creates instability. Merle demonstrates a racist attitude and world-view that put the lives of other members of his group at risk. Bob is an alcoholic and almost gets himself and other people killed because of his addiction. Hershel keeps zombies in his barn, hoping for a cure to be finally found. None of these characters seems to be able to read/interpret the post-apocalyptic reality

correctly. They all live in a world where being racist, having a drinking problem, and especially storing the undead in one's barn are not just very bad ideas: they are outdated concepts. Their actions are obsolete, they are wrong in relation to the new parameters, and they constantly put the new society on the line. Merle's racism, for instance, is not wrong per se – that is according to the values of the reader, – but because of the drastic change in the foundations of reality, for which – as Rick puts it, “Things are different now. There are no niggers anymore. And trash fools either. Only dark meat and white meat” (Guts). Merle's behavior is not wrong because it is unjust and he is not punished because his words and his actions are targeting a black man: his behavior is wrong because it is manifestly irrational and endangering, when analyzed through the lens of the new world. A new moral code determines guidelines that not all the characters are willing or able to follow. Also in Boccaccio's masterpiece, anti-social characters are those who are not capable of keeping up with the times. Boccaccio, however, does not draw the profiles of these characters from a dystopic future: the disruptive protagonists of several novellas are inspired from the very reality of his own time, making the *Decameron* the wonderful social commentary that it is.

The plague is indeed the macroscopic event that Boccaccio adopts as an evident partition, but it is in spite of it that his world is going through massive changes. The late Middle Ages are rapidly moving towards the era of merchants, bourgeoisies, and humanists (Branca, Intro 1985 xv). These are years of socio-economical, cultural, and even linguistic transformation (xxxix): a turning point that Boccaccio must represent in his – borrowing Vittore Branca's expression – gothic architecture (xliv-xlv). As Branca observes, the *Decameron* is a completely medieval piece of literature, written by a completely medieval author who, however, has the

capability of reading the reality with the greatest lucidity and who is able to describe the world in the unveiling of its new order (xlv). As Kurt Vonnegut will do many years later (Tally xii-xiii), Boccaccio describes a post-apocalyptic world using pre-apocalyptic eyes, yet trying to employ post-apocalyptic elements. There is an important, fluid continuity between the Middle Ages and Humanism, and the *Decameron*, shaped and formed by medieval society and education (Hastings 1-2) and yet humanist in feelings, belongs to this very line (Branca, Boccaccio medievale 185). The plague is the metaphor of a change that is imminent before everybody's eyes, and it is in response to this turmoil that the *brigata* leaves Florence with the purpose of commencing the journey from vice to virtue that constitutes the essence of the book (Boccaccio medievale 14).

Still, Boccaccio is well aware that not all are willing to acknowledge the change. Boccaccio understands that many are blind to the social transformation already in force and, lacking his sensibility towards the new, are prisoners of a dying world. Although the coming society is built with the pieces of the crumbling one, many seem unable to notice the change and to adjust to it. Those who cannot read the new world, those who can neither understand nor speak its language, are condemned to be silenced within the unproductive space in which they will eventually be enclosed. The Tuscan author is sure of the obsolescence of these characters' parameters and values. Boccaccio realizes that the social and moral codes of medieval society are not taking into proper consideration the natural forces, which are conditioning human behavior more than many can perceive or accept (Hastings 10-13), and are the base on which the coming society is putting down its root. The law of Nature is at the foundation of Boccaccio's vision of the world and his categorical exhortation to follow it lies at the very heart of the moral message of the *Decameron*

(29). Whenever “a hiatus occurs between social convention and natural human needs Boccaccio advocates a rejection of artificial criteria and an adherence to the natural pattern of life,” writes Hastings (29). Therefore, the *Decameron*’s anti-social characters – those who are unable to read the new world and to keep up with its pace – are the ones who oppose to the law of Nature: the miser and the greedy, the indiscreet and the disgraceful, the selfish and the jealous, possessive parents, husbands and wives. All those who think it is in their right to overcome Nature, and Love, while Love and Nature are, as Hastings observes, the moral base of the *Decameron* as well as the moral base of the new social order that Boccaccio perceives and describes. Those who blindly oppose this order are destined not only to fail and fall behind, but even to pose a danger to others and themselves alike. Examples are numerous: Ferondo, Tancredi, Guglielmo Rossiglione; certainly Filippo Balducci, from the famous introduction to the Fourth Day. As Boccaccio himself warns his readers:

[...] alle cui leggi, cioè della natura, voler contrastare troppo gran forze bisognano, e spesse volte non solamente invano ma con grandissimo danno del faticante d’adoperano. (IV, intro. 336)²³

1.8.3. Law of Nature and Ingenuity

Seven centuries after the *Decameron*, Nature still plays a very important role in apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction. It is sufficient to think about any major Hollywood rendition of the end of the world, and the image of an overwhelming, powerful, and disruptive Nature would come to mind. Nature can endanger human life, Nature can reclaim a space (as discussed above), Nature is the environment surrounding the survivors after the apocalypse has passed. By changing its

²³ “to defy the laws of Nature requires no little strength and those who try will often do so not merely to no purpose but even to their own sever detriment.” (The *Decameron* 255)

relationship with the human sphere, Nature can transform its essence, but it rarely does so swiftly in apocalyptic fiction: signs that can be read and understood in advance usually announce the incoming cataclysm. It is an ancient formula, according to which the apocalypse is preceded by very specific signs (cf. Weber's *Apocalypses*); also the motif that those able to read and understand these signs will often go ignored or mistrusted is part of the old tradition. If we acknowledge that the prophet was the leading voice of the oldest apocalyptic texts, clairvoyants and messiahs must, in the reality of positivism and post-positivism, share their spot with derided scientists and mistreated scholars²⁴.

Post-apocalyptic fiction, unlike apocalyptic fiction, deals with a situation that is already – in a way – stabilized: there are no longer signs to read, only new rules to follow. In spite of this relative stability, not everybody is able to cope with the novel reality and to understand what is supposed to be done and how to do it – and they are the anti-social characters of the previous section. On the opposite side of the spectrum, there are those characters who are instead capable of reading the world, of interpreting its new rules and of adjusting their pre-apocalyptic structure to the modes of current reality. Consider characters such as Daryl Dixon from *The Walking Dead*, who seems perfectly at ease when killing zombies and hunting squirrels in post-apocalyptic Georgia. There are no zombies in the *Decameron*, and the skills by which Boccaccio judges his characters have nothing to do with shooting straight or scavenging food.

²⁴ Sometimes even with farmers, as in the case of Nat Hocken of Daphne du Maurier's *The Birds* (1953). In this novella, which would serve as a loose inspiration for Alfred Hitchcock's movie *The Birds*, the protagonist is the only one – because of his being in tight contact with nature – to notice the peculiar behavior of birds, and to take precautions in time, after having vainly reported the danger to his skeptical and scornful community. It goes without saying that the majority of those who do not heed Nat's warning will not have to struggle with a post-apocalyptic world, because they will not make it that far.

In the Decameron, the apocalypse is left behind, but its transforming influence haunts the youngsters of the *brigata* and taints their narratives so that – for all the anti-social characters that appear in the novellas – there are as many others whose actions help to mend the fabric of the newly-woven society. As it should be clear by now, there are those who do not attempt “to go against nature” and those who do not “impose unnatural standards of conduct on men and women in the name of a ‘higher’ social code or moral law that fails to take nature into account, and that consequently contradicts or runs counter to the natural laws on which it is superimposed” (Hastings 11). While the anti-social characters are doomed to fail, “because they are trying to make us go against our own selves, to deny our own very nature” (11), the social characters will triumph, overcoming even the most forbidding scenarios – such as a plague-stricken world – armed with their sensibility and their intelligence. As in J. G. Ballard’s post-apocalyptic novels, the human-nature relationship profoundly changes as it demands new reactions and new psychological adjustments to Man (Curtoni 17), so in Boccaccio’s text the characters must transform together with the society, leaving defeated all those who did not want to or manage to jump on the bandwagon. It is with their ingenuity – Boccaccio’s only antidote to the apocalypse – that his characters will be able to adjust their personae to the new world, gracefully or hardly, successfully in the end. Boccaccio, as Valerio Ferme claims, “forces his contemporaries and future readers to focus on the role of the *ingegno* in the handling of human events,” (250) and it is ingenuity in the form of *beffa* that he seems to favor. From ser Ciappelletto’s hypocritical confession (I, 1) to Melchidesech’s great wisdom (I, 3) and Chichibio’s perfect timing (VI, 4), from the *industria* of the Third Day and the *beffe* and the counter-*beffe* of the Seventh and Eighth Day, to the farces of the

Ninth Day: human ingenuity colors the grey city with the vibrant tones of the country, and it saves it.

Ingenuity, of course, does not belong to the characters only, but to the authors as well. In reinventing a literary genre, and in breaking the ground of vernacular literature, Giovanni Boccaccio is projecting his own art towards the coming age. By understanding the ongoing change before anybody else, Boccaccio creates a stronghold that survives the threats of the apocalypse, that speaks the language of the world to come, and that safely carries its words through the long journey away from silence. There is no explosion, at the end of the *Decameron*, because Boccaccio's apocalypse comes with all its tragic potential but with its own antidote as well.

1.9. Conclusions

The apocalypse disassembles society into several, disconnected units. The individual emerging from it is similar to Paleolithic man: the *homo faber* that Francesco Saba Sardi mentions (27), whose main concern is the construction of objects and therefore the protection of its practical and pragmatic sphere. But no human, not even our prehistoric ancestor, could possibly be – as argues Saba Sardi – only *faber*. Any *homo faber* must also be *homo ludens*, and *homo mythologicus* (27). The visceral need to express one's own perspective of the world and then to reinvent it through art and narrative lies at the heart of the formation of human societies. The world is not what it is: it takes on the shape we assign to it in our narratives and, at the end of the process, its representation is perhaps more real than reality itself, as French philosopher Jean Baudrillard claimed in *Le crime parfait* (The Perfect Crime).

Giovanni Boccaccio sensed the changes taking place in his world, and he had ten young men and women go to a safe, fertile fortress to express their being *ludentes* and *mythologici*, to create the world out of a playful narrative, and where to rescue

civilization from itself. The *Decameron* is the archetype of modern post-apocalyptic fiction, because it describes precisely the struggle of the post-event society that needs to re-constitute itself on its own ruins by passing the immediate, necessary, and insufficient practicality of the *homo faber*. Boccaccio's lesson to look with suspicion at the artificial constructs of men, as well as his secularization of the end of the world – his claim that it is civic rather than godly – and his faith in human resilience: all these elements do not merely survive in post-apocalyptic narrative, they constitute its structural essence.

The apocalypse does not necessarily destroy the planet, but it shreds the universe of those unable to speak the language of the new world. The majority of those undergoing the apocalypse does not survive the apocalypse, because the new language is too hard to process, it sounds too weird and foreign, and because they do not really want to mingle with it. They simply will not understand it, and so they fail. And clearly, most people cannot survive the end of the world, simply because, if they did survive, it would have not been an apocalypse in the first place.

Adjusting to the post-event reality is the first step to be taken against the frightening risk of cultural inexistence (de Martino 219), and it is a historical necessity that not every community is either willing or capable of such an effort. The desire to be operative and productive in the world clashes with the impossibility of cultural survival (221), when the apocalyptic event breaks the system of values on which a community bases its codification of reality.

However, not everything is lost. As long as narrative survives, as long the world can be told, there are some others with the right and needed skills to survive or outrun the proverbial plague. Those who can grasp the new reality, and who can describe it while it is unfolding, are able to build upon it by following the (new) law

of Nature. Eventually, they will even succeed in switching their expressive code into the new one. To speak the new language means to remove the dread of silence. To break the silence, by telling stories for instance, is to pave the path towards reconstruction. Everything can go very badly rather abruptly and at any moment, and the greyness of the dust can suffocate any remaining hope in a blink of an eye. But as long as there is another page to flip, there will be a voice to hear, and the hope for communication. Giovanni Boccaccio's epic is the multifaceted story of a community that is not prisoner of its outdated reality, and it expresses all the thrill, all the horror, and all the excitement of being eye-witness of the end of the world. This, above all, makes the *Decameron* the archetype of post-apocalyptic fiction.

Chapter Two: Destruction Italian Style.

Characters and Characteristics of Italian Apocalyptic Fiction.

2.1. Introduction: What Is Italian About the Apocalypse, After All?

We can trace Italian apocalyptic fiction to at least the 1860s, but whether such works of narrative own particular characteristics through which one can determine their being specifically Italian is far from certain. After all, what distinguishes an Italian post-apocalyptic novel from a French or American one? The answer, I argue, is nothing. At least up to a certain degree.

Indeed, apocalyptic narrative is transnational by definition (if not by imposition, as in the case of most Italian apocalyptic cinema of the 1980s) and it is much easier to identify the common elements on which its plots revolve than the peculiarities – if there were any – of different national productions. The general patterns, most of which I describe in the previous chapter, define the genre and its narrative limits cross-culturally. Any national apocalyptic fiction is therefore not a subgenre within a larger group (namely, it is not a subgenre of apocalyptic fiction) with its own characteristics and its own modes of expression: it is rather a point placed in a vast continuum. Such a universal continuum tends to reject (or absorb) the local specificities that are likely to disappear or, at least, become unperceivable, in the transnational space.

There exists a hegemonic model of apocalyptic narrative, on which apocalyptic fiction is conventionally fabricated. Today, a strong American iconography determines such a model, which is capable of influencing other national narratives by aesthetically defining what constitutes ‘apocalypse’ in the first place. The model is not exported as ‘American’ and it does not explicitly deny other national portraits of the apocalypse, but – in most cases – it results in derivative works

of fiction. The authors of such works do their best to preserve the proximity of their visual or literary productions to the ‘original’ model and, by doing so, they – intentionally or not – give up on their national idiosyncrasies. Of course, this is not always the case: behind the transnational elements of a plot, it is still possible to distinguish peculiar features that are national or merely authorial.

In apocalyptic fiction – and perhaps in genre fiction in general –, the tangible presence of the author is the one element that can indeed breach the otherwise impermeable model. Only when the authorship is – in some form – louder than the transnational elements, a work of apocalyptic fiction acquires a specific national identity (the identity of its author and of the historical, social, personal and artistic drives that he carries).

This does not mean that an Italian apocalyptic novel, written in Italian by an Italian novelist, loses its Italianness only because employing the transnational elements of the genre. It simply means that an Italian work of apocalyptic fiction that fluctuates within the range of the transnational elements without ever having the recipients perceive some sort of discrepancy in the utterance of the model cannot be truly distinguished from other national productions, because its transnational features prevails on the national ones.

Apocalyptic fiction does not deny per se national identity, but – using Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan’s terminology on globalization – it tends towards super-nationalism by assuming the characteristics of a hegemonic national model (89). When this is not the case, namely when Italian authors characterize their works of apocalyptic fiction with their own creative identities by surpassing the transnationalism of their narrative, they indeed employ trends that, although not exclusive of Italian science fiction, are crucial of it: radical pessimism, politicization,

and formal experimentalism being the most prominent (Micali, Apocalissi d.p. 58). It is by these specific tendencies that it is possible to group the most relevant Italian authors of apocalyptic fiction and identify Italian features that would finally allow us to distinguish one national expression from another.

In the following pages, I argue that the contemporary difficulty for Italian authors to create a clearly national apocalyptic fiction is partly due to a gap in the imagination that results from the rural iconography of the Fascist regime, which determined a delay in the development of the Italian sci-fi imagery. The American rhetoric of the ‘apocalypse management’ successively and successfully filled such a gap, by creating and indirectly imposing the aforementioned model, which has been the hegemonic one from the 1950s onward. Since the end of World War II, I claim, the Italianness of apocalyptic narrative primarily lays on the degree of transparency of its national representation: either the national identity is a transparent filter through which a super-nation model emerges, or the super-national model is a translucent screen under which the authorial identity is protagonist.

I start my argument by reflecting on the strong political character of early Italian apocalyptic fiction (1860s-1910s), and by presenting the highly post-apocalyptic drive of Futurist and Post-Futurist experimental literature (in particular, Massimo Bontempelli’s *Cataclisma*, 1924). I then explain the formation of the ‘imagination gap’ and its repercussions on Italian contemporary apocalyptic fiction (using the case of Lucio Fulci’s *Zombi 2* as an emblematic example). Finally, in order to point out the virtual impossibility of ignoring the super-national hegemonic model, and therefore the necessity to either adopt it or adapt to it, I briefly analyze the works

of Italian authors of apocalyptic fiction who approach the super-national model with different degrees of ‘transparency.’

2.2. Illusion of Universality and Political Potential of the Apocalyptic Plot: a Foreword.

Apocalyptic texts possess extraordinary political potential, because they describe the world in fairly simple terms by giving the illusion that everything is reduced to a choice between only two possibilities. They present the world eschatologically through one of these possible perspectives, with the pretension (or, simply, the impression) that it coincides with a universal point-of-view.

The eschatological beliefs of the Judeo-Christian tradition provide indeed an ‘illusion of universalism’ by giving the false impression that a work of apocalyptic fiction is aperspectival, while at best it generalizes a point-of-view up to a (fictional) world scale. Looking back at them from today, the apocalyptic texts and beliefs that are at the origin of apocalyptic fiction have an aura of ‘universality’ that encourages the modern reader to ignore (probably with an excess of superficiality) their precise cultural derivation. From a modern perspective, apocalyptic mythology ‘feels’ indeed inclusive, rather than exclusive. The eschatological structure of religious apocalypses does not exclude one part of the whole (Them): it includes it by assigning it the crucial antagonist role in the end-of-the-world scenario of which the victorious side (Us) must be the protagonist but not the only character. The apocalyptic text, in cases such as this, is in fact universal: it involves everyone. The point-of-view through which the apocalyptic event is narrated, however, is far from being collective.

The narration of the apocalypse coincides – I believe with no exceptions – with the secular stance of a very precise group, with its historical connotations and with its specific national and/or religious identity. In the progression from

prophetic/political texts to speculative fiction, the original agenda often gets lost together with its original interpreters. Consequently, the anti-Christian persecution under the Roman emperor Domitian might become irrelevant when secularly reinterpreting John's Revelations into a text of contemporary speculative fiction. The actors of the original conflict and their actual political drive disappear. The substance of the eschatological dichotomy, however, remains: there is still 'Us' and there is still 'Them' in modern apocalyptic narrative as much as there was in its political and religious precursors. The question, therefore, has always been, *mutatis mutandis*, "who is who?"

When a work of apocalyptic fiction considers religious or simply moral elements, the continuity with the traditional schemata is easy to follow. The secularization of such models, on the other hand, diversifies the profiles of the two eschatological parties, the identification of which consequently requires a little more effort. In Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, as discussed above, the winning side of the eschatological battle consists not of a particular religious membership, but of those who are able to understand the ongoing changes in the author's time. 'Them,' instead, are the prisoners of artificial and outdated social roles rather than the infidels that the holy texts condemn to failure. Like most apocalyptic religious prophecies, Giovanni Boccaccio's predictions are optimistic: the future is here, and although it comes with great pain, a new and better society already waits for 'Us' on the other side of this steep hill. A clear, secular eschatological dichotomy simply replaces the religious/political one. This model is successful, but it still leaves room for its opposite: a secular eschatology with a pessimistic outcome.

Although apocalyptic fiction, in line with its political and religious lineage, always seems to call for strong antitheses, it does not necessarily promote a winning

party. If there is still an eschatological battle, it might be hiding under several layers of pessimism, and the impression is that the consequences of the apocalypse are to be bad for everyone involved. The 19th century secularization of the apocalyptic plot, as shown in the dramatic finale of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, does not separate the world in two, but rather it unites everyone under the same gloomy destiny. The difference with the religious prophecies is primarily that the point-of-view – the focus of the narration – reflects now the crumbling side rather than the chosen ones'. This displacement, once again apparently, hints at a universal apocalypse and, of course, complicates the question: who is 'Them' and who is 'Us' if the world seems to end for everybody?

The answer does not really change: 'Us' is still who is writing and 'Them' is someone else. The fact that 'Us' might be losing does not make any substantial difference and, more important, it does not imply the non-existence of 'Them'. Even if there appears to be no 'Them' within a plot where everyone is killed by the apocalypse, there still is an inferred alterity, which might – for instance – exist outside of the narrative and within the social reality of the author (e.g. a different generation, an alternative political system, etc.), or be represented by the non-human (Nature, for instance). The perceived universality that modern fiction draws from traditional models therefore only suggests the possibility for the narrative perspective not to be identified with a particular faction (e.g. nation-state, group, etc.), but it rarely or never actually means it. The point-of-view still exists and it still determines – in one direction or the other – the shape of the fictional apocalypse and its implied meaning. The apocalypse therefore shows once again, in the early 19th century, when the first examples of modern apocalyptic fiction are attempted, its great political potential: the chance to project the point-of-view of a relatively small group to the universal level.

Apocalyptic narrative – and therefore political apocalyptic rhetoric – is a way to spread a project of reality by imagining its conservation or its radical change.

One, of course, should be careful not to read the shadow of political propaganda between the lines of every apocalyptic novel, but it is a fact that politics is crucial among the very first apocalyptic narratives. In Shelley's *The Last Man*, politics are as central as the plague itself and, naturally, the author laments the decline of her own political ideals, not of politics in general. Twenty years earlier, Grainville himself provides his political opinion, by translating into narrative his personal dismay for the fall of the Ancien Régime. Italians, in this regard, are no exception. In the 1860s, modern apocalyptic fiction arrives in Italy as the perfect vehicle for the allegory of the radical revolution that the Nation is undergoing.

2.3. Post-Risorgimento, Post-Unification, Post-Positivism: Italian *Storie Future* and Political Identity.

Three of the very first examples of modern Italian apocalyptic narrative already contain at least one of the characteristics that Micali points out as typical of Italian science fiction: politicization (Apocalissi d.p. 58). Ippolito Nievo's *Storia filosofica dei secoli futuri* (1860), Antonio Ghislanzoni's *Abrakadabra* (1884), and Giustino Ferri's *La fine del secolo XX* (1906) are most of all political statements reflecting the social changes of their authors' time and projecting them into a future that they want concluded by an apocalypse. Indebted to the French and English models of the same century, these three novels are inherently Italian for the historical and political discourse they hold from their first page to their very last one.

Nievo writes his short novel in line with his literary production, making a nationalistic and anti-clerical claim out of it. As Micali observes, Nievo's book rejects the Eurocentric and pan-Christian vision of Shelley's model, recounting instead the

completion of the Risorgimento process, the greatness of Italy reborn, and its role as world leader of freedom and democracy (Apocalissi d.p. 52).²⁵ The Garibaldian writer lives a moment of utter national turmoil and he is very well aware of the revolutionary scope of the Italian Unification: Nievo knows that an insurrection of this sort is an event capable of turning reality upside down as much as an apocalypse could. By following such a conviction, he creates a story that begins in his own time and finishes centuries later with another kind of revolution:

L'introduzione delle lingue articolate, la formazione delle famiglie, il trovato della navigazione, l'agricoltura, lo stabilimento delle città, il dogma dell'eguaglianza umana, l'invenzione della polvere e della stampa, il trionfo della libertà di coscienza, l'applicazione del vapore e dell'elettrico, l'assetto definitivo della nazionalità, la concordia democratica universale, e la sanzione sociale del diritto di vivere bene avevano condotto l'umanità di metamorfosi in metamorfosi a non riconoscersi più nella sua forma originale. Ma la rivoluzione, di cui parliamo ora, sorpassa pel miracolo della causa e per la grandiosità degli effetti qualunque altra opera abbia mai adescato l'immaginazione umana (65-66).

In a paragraph, Nievo summarizes every social and technological revolutions that he believes changed – or could change – the world. A revolution does not merely modify the field of its practical application; it deeply changes humanity: a revolution imposes a metamorphosis, after which humans are not the same as they were before. Finally, a revolution is always prologue and even essence of the coming and necessary apocalypse. In the case of Nievo, the last epochal change is the invention of little mechanical men that are capable of replacing their creators in any kind of labor. The peak of human social and technological evolution, Micali claims, coincides with the beginning of its decline – as much as it happens in Shelley's *The Last Man*

²⁵ “Il compimento del processo risorgimentale e la rinascita della grandezza dell'Italia, che guida la conversione mondiale agli ideali di libertà e democrazia.”

(Apocalissi d.p. 52). Idleness is the cause of a new plague that, together with the predominant boredom and the consequent increase in suicides, condemns humanity to extinction (74):

I medici lo denominarono la peste apatica, e sembra infatti ch'egli riconosca origine dall'indolenza relativa cui son condannati ora gli organi umani dopo tanti anni e tanti secoli di soverchia e conclusiva fatica. Questo contagio putrido e spaventevole, il raffreddamento sensibilissimo della superficie terrestre, e l'aumento graduale della noia e del suicidio per causa di essa sono i tre pericoli cui andiamo incontro, e nell'uno dei quali una volta o l'altra l'umanità finirà col soccombere.

Although the apocalypse arrives just at the end of Nievo's book, it is clear that this ultimate revolution is a final act only, perhaps, for humanity. As Nievo's narrator explains, men and women must endure metamorphic adjustments after each revolution, but this implies also the possibility of failing such a change. All the social and technological transformations that he lists did not (or would not) come easily and without resistance. Survival to this last change means to become something other than human, and it still refers to the very revolution of which Nievo himself is part in the 1860s: the long road towards a unified Italy and towards – a far more complicated mission – a unified Italian people. For the incoming 'apocalypse' to be 'survived,' the inhabitants of the annexed territories will have to change as much as to forget their past identities and to recognize themselves only into their new ones, as Italians.

During the very same years, Antonio Ghislanzoni, far more well-known as Giuseppe Verdi's librettist than as a novelist, conceives his *Abrakadabra – Storia dell'avvenire*. Between 1863 and 1865, he designs the novel and writes part of it, publishing the first sections of the book on the appendix of the periodical *Pungolo* (Villa 12-13). A finished version of the novel is published in 1865, while the definitive edition comes out only in 1884. Ghislanzoni's novel, although never as

popular as the lyrics he wrote for Verdi's *Aida*, is another important example of the apocalypse used as a metaphor to comment on the state of the coming or newborn Italian nation. Ghislanzoni, however, is more pessimistic than Nievo: the future he imagines has all the troubles of the present and of the past, so much that humanity seems doomed to repeat the same mistakes over and over (Micali, *Apocalissi* d.p. 53). In the introduction to the 1865 edition of the novel (which does no longer open the book when it comes out in 1884), Ghislanzoni immediately offers this interpretative tool to the reader:

Mi propongo di esprimere in forma di romanzo la *rotazione dell'universo morale e materiale*.

Per comprendere questa rotazione degli elementi cosmici, bisogna conoscere il passato, il presente e l'avvenire. Supponendo che i miei lettori sieno abbastanza versati nella storia delle due prime epoche, io li condurrò arditamente negli spazii del futuro, percorrendo i grandiosi avvenimenti che precedono e producono il sessantesimo cataclisma del globo terrestre. (Ghislanzoni, *Introduzione* [1865] 217)

The cataclysm that closes the novel indeed destroys humanity, but it leaves two flying creatures – half-human and half-bird – alive and ready to repopulate the Earth.

Exactly like in Nievo, the end of the world is just the end of one of its possible modalities. The revolution arrives and, as universal as it might seem, it destroys only one part of the whole: the rotation therefore continues, although with a form of life that has mutated so much that one could no longer recognize it as human. Once again, Ghislanzoni seems to claim, a metamorphosis is what takes to survive the end of the world. His finale, the tone of which is more similar to the endings of post-modern science fiction (e.g. Vonnegut, Ballard, Calvino) than to the Anglophone models from his own century, is at once an optimistic hint at the reliance of humankind and a melancholic comment on the meaninglessness of social, political and even technological progress.

The advancement and the consequent decline of society are the protagonists of Ferri's *Storia del secolo XX* as well. While Nievo and Ghislanzoni write from 'within' the Risorgimento, Ferri – who is one generation younger – fully experiences the outcome of unification. His political horizon is, therefore, different. One step more modern, he looks at progressive ideas such as feminism and socialism by reflecting on them within a globalized context. With a Rome once again *caput mundi*, playing a role that in reality will be the United States', Ferri imagines (at once going back at the 19th century and anticipating the 21st century conflicts between the Western world and the Middle East) a dramatic Euro-Asian conflict. Like Ghislanzoni's, also Ferri's novel, set in 1998 Rome, implies the cyclical structure of time by depicting the present of the story as merely the last one of several moments of an eternal rotation:

Roma, la quinta Roma, rientrata nella solennità del silenzio notturno, pareva assorta nel sogno di tutte le sue grandezze, inesausta e inesauribile vicenda di glorie epiche e di tragiche espiazioni.

La potenza pagana, la maestà cristiana, il risorgimento nazionale, il periodo socialistico e ora, da dieci anni, questa splendida menzogna, questa superba illusione di aver rinnovato il mondo col nuovo evangelo [...]! (7)

In the long plot, the author portrays a futurist Rome, whose fascinating characters are nothing but the literary transposition of the men and women who kept the elegant Roman sitting rooms of the early 20th century busy. The author hides a social landscape with which he is particularly familiar under a series of impressive inventions – a video-call device he names *biotelo* (9-10), a high-speed train-system (66), and even something similar to the internet (49). Eventually, he projects the protagonists of his own time, who debate the limits of Positivism and the possibilities of Spiritism while sipping tea in crowded cafés, and who discuss science and literature while commenting on the ongoing political transformations, into a future

world that looks like science fiction but feels like D'Annunzio's Decadent Rome. The apocalypse punctually arrives at the end of the story, when Christianity and the Western world die together with the Pope, who is slashed by the axes of Asian soldiers in St. Peter's Square. It is the end of a world, and the beginning of another one: another Rome, which could continue Ferri's list and that establishes itself by recoloring the ruins of its predecessors with its own, new tonality (334-335):

Dopo i sacerdoti, il principe fanciullo, sul suo elefante, seguiva il corteo, in mezzo a uno stato maggiore di rayah e di generali coperti di gemme. I soldati restavano schierati, e dietro i soldati si accalcavano i cittadini romani, muti e tristi dell'ultimo oltraggio che infliggeva a Roma umiliata la tracotanza dei conquistatori.

I cancelli di San Pietro erano sempre chiusi. Il vecchio bramino si presentò all'ingresso centrale e sollevò la mano imperiosamente. La sua voce, che doveva pronunciare certamente il comando di aprire, si perdeva nella vastità della piazza.

Il vecchio si volse verso la corte del principe come per domandar aiuto materiale: cinque o sei uomini armati di scure si avvicinavano; l'idolo pareva barcollasse in aria sulle spalle dei portatori presso il limitare dell'atrio.

Anche Ria di Valchiusa [...] si penzolò dalla finestra vaticana per vedere.

– Fra noi cinque non c'è forse alcun seguace della vecchia religione, ella disse, ma in questo momento, dite, non augurereste anche voi un miracolo che punisse i profanatori?

Florio Giorgi esclamò:

– Eccolo il miracolo, miracolo di grandezza d'animo e di fermezza sovrumana.

E mostrò ai compagni dietro i ferri del cancello centrale un uomo solo, in veste bianca talare che si avanzava incontro al corteo barbarico.

– Gregorio XIX?

– Che cosa porta nella mani?

– Una croce [...].

Il cancello fu aperto e Gregorio XIX si piantò sulla soglia innalzando il simbolo del cristianesimo incontro all'idolo gangetico e al suo decrepito settatore.

I due vecchi si apostrofarono; [...] il pontefice romano stringendo la croce che alzava sugli invasori appariva compreso di una maestosa e calma sicurezza di sé.

– Scellerati! gridò Diomede Monti.

Gli uomini armati di scure avevano colpito Gregorio XIX che cadde stringendo fra le braccia la croce, e il corteo s'incanalò nel cancello rimasto aperto. Disparvero a poco a poco sotto l'arco le baiadere, l'idolo, i bramini, poi l'elefante condotto da due palafrenieri col piccolo principe nel suo tabernacolo, i risplendenti rajah...

In quel momento il sole già alto sull'orizzonte circonfuse d'oro la gialla facciata della basilica profanata.

Era il sole del primo giorno del secolo XXI.

What the reader perceives by going through these three novels is not merely the metaphorical representation of a grand change in society – as the Unification of the nation and its successive dialogue with other European entities certainly were – but the testimony of a dying world and its disappearance into the merciless wheel of time. By depicting a future apocalypse, the three authors are at once describing the ongoing changes of their own time and anticipating the unavoidable collapse of the very system that is just now approaching them. Nievo and Ghislanzoni seem to know that the apocalyptic transformation that the national unification will impose is just another moment of a cyclical movement. Ferri, who writes from the very capital of the unified nation of which the other two witnessed the creation, experiences instead the *fin de siècle* atmosphere, and his novel consequently overflows with a pre-modernist sense of decadence. The several layers of Rome offer tangible proof of the many apocalypses the city has endured and of the several socio-political identities it has embodied, and Ferri perfectly describes them. The Italy of Nievo and Ghislanzoni is going through social and political unification, while Ferri's Italy is marching towards the aesthetics of modernism and the tragedy of the Great War. At the beginning of the 20th century, the question of Italian national identity is part of a larger, existential issue that will soon occupy the avant-gardes and that, precisely in Italy, will unleash the destructive effects of the apocalypse on the literary text.

2.4. A Flood of Senses: Massimo Bontempelli's Post-Futurist Apocalypse.

The Futurist movement is, according to Simona Micali, a fundamental step in the history of Italian apocalyptic fiction (Apocalissi d.p. 55).

Per completare il quadro dell'apocalisse fantascientifica primonovecentesca, non va dimenticato che l'evento apocalittico e il caos della crisi sacrificale sono passaggi obbligati nella sintassi narrativa del racconto futurista, naturalmente percorso da una vocazione cosmica e mitopoietica: solo dalla violenta distruzione del vecchio mondo potrà nascere uno nuovo, giacché è necessaria una *tabula rasa* perché il fanciullo divino futurista possa ridisegnare l'ordine del cosmo.

An artistic movement based on the aesthetics of dynamism and of modernity – and opposed to the traditional establishment of the arts – is ideally bearing all the conceptual elements of apocalyptic fiction. The examples, Micali observes, are numerous (55):

Per citare alcuni esempi di genere molto diverso, eppure tutti in qualche modo riconducibili a un immaginario mitologico-fantascientifico, potremmo menzionare l'allegorica distruzione di Paralisi e Podagra in *Uccidiamo il chiaro di Luna!* (1909), in cui la Luna e l'Oceano ingaggiano una battaglia cosmica capeggiando fazioni avverse, o la battaglia del gigante robot Gazurmah contro il Sole su cui si chiude *Mafarka il futurista* (1909) di Marinetti; oppure la raccolta *La morte della donna* (1925) e il romanzo *L'uomo senza sesso* (1927) di Fillia, futurista di seconda generazione, che immagina un mondo futuro depurato dalle differenze sessuali, sociali, ideologiche, ossia un compiuto livellamento dell'individualità umana; o ancora il 'Ciclo delle macchine' (1923-1927) di Ruggero Vasari, altro futurista di seconda generazione, che invece rovescia l'utopia meccanica del primo futurismo e ci racconta l'apocalisse del mondo delle macchine per la rinascita di quello dello spirito.

These years and these works are crucial, because Italian apocalyptic fiction is no longer tailored to other national models. The works of Nievo, Ghislanzoni, and Ferri have strong national identities, which are however built on the examples of Shelley, Wells, or Grainville. The futurist writers, instead, are establishing a completely new

canon by performing an ideological, aesthetic, and even textual apocalypse. For the first – but not for the last – time, the apocalypse leaves the iconographic sphere of the plot and it involves literature in its formal aspects.

The extreme delivery of futurist literature does not easily match the needs of the average genre-fiction reader, and the provocative aspect of the early Futurist literary statements will therefore not shape – neither in Italy nor abroad – successive examples of apocalyptic literature. However, some of the next authors receive, understand and apply at least part of the Futurist message: the apocalypse is not only a socio-political rupture with the past establishment (as depicted in the political novels of the 19th century and as the Futurist movement claimed in its manifestoes and proved in the layout of its works), it is also and perhaps primarily the expression of a perceptual revolution. The ‘new’ is different from the ‘old’ not merely in how it looks, but in the perception of it, so that things are no different per se, but because of a renewed sensorial notion of them. In 1921, Marinetti delivers a speech in Paris presenting what he calls *Tattilismo*, a new form of art and a new form of world-perception that aims at enhancing the human sensorial experience:

Nelle mie osservazioni attente e antitradizionali di tutti i fenomeni erotici e sentimentali che uniscono i due sessi, e dei fenomeni non meno complessi dell’amicizia, ho compreso che gli esseri umani si parlano colla bocca e cogli occhi, ma non giungono ad una vera sincerità, data l’insensibilità della pelle, che è tuttora una mediocre conduttrice del pensiero.

Mentre gli occhi e le voci si comunicano le loro essenze, i tatti di due individui non si comunicano quasi nulla nei loro urti, intrecci o sfregamenti.

Da ciò, la necessità di trasformare la stretta di mano, il bacio e l’accoppiamento in trasmissioni continue del pensiero. (137)

Although driven by different aesthetic imperatives, Marinetti’s statements are not too different from what Boccaccio implies while depicting the epochal change of his time

in the *Decameron*. Both Marinetti and Boccaccio ask their peers to abandon the artificiality of an obsolete establishment, and to let Love and modernity lead their actions:

La Vita ha sempre ragione! I paradisi artificiali coi quali pretendete di assassinarla sono vani. Cessate di sognare un ritorno assurdo alla vita selvaggia. Guardatevi dal condannare le forze superiori della Società e le meraviglie della velocità. Guarite piuttosto la malattia del dopo-guerra, dando all'umanità nuove gioie nutrienti. Invece di distruggere le agglomerazioni umane, bisogna perfezionarle. Intensificate le comunicazioni e le fusioni degli esseri umani. Distruggete le distanze e le barriere che li separano nell'amore e nell'amicizia. Date la pienezza e la bellezza totale a queste due manifestazioni essenziali della vita: l'Amore e l'Amicizia. (180)

What Marinetti advocates is a change in perspective through which to modify the experience.²⁶ It is perhaps with the suggestive propositions of French Symbolism in mind, and perhaps Marinetti's very synesthetic prescription, that Massimo Bontempelli, three years after Marinetti's manifesto, writes a novella focused on the possibility of creating the apocalypse out of the human senses.

On July 1924, Bontempelli publishes a short novella titled *Cataclisma* in the pages of the monthly magazine "Il Secolo XX" (de Turris and Gallo, *Le aeronavi* 348). Bontempelli describes a futurist *protometropoli* and its implosion through expressionistic images and rhetorical synesthesia, and he eventually charges his

²⁶ "Educazione del tatto. 1. Bisognerà tenere inguantate le mani per molti giorni, durante i quali il cervello si sforzerà di condensare in esse i desideri di sensazioni tattili diverse. 2. Nuotare sott'acqua, nel mare, cercando di distinguere tattilisticamente le correnti intrecciate e le diverse temperature. 3. Enumerare e riconoscere ogni sera, in un'oscurità assoluta, tutti gli oggetti che sono nella camera da letto. Appunto col dedicarmi a questo esercizio nel sotterra-neo buio di una trincea di Gorizia, nel 1917, io feci i miei primi esperimenti tattili. [...] Il Tattilismo creato da me è un'arte nettamente separata dalle arti plastiche. Non ha nulla a che fare, nulla da guadagnare e tutto da perdere con la pittura o la scultura. Bisogna evitare quanto più sia possibile, nelle tavole tattili, la varietà dei colori, che si presta ad impressioni plastiche. I pittori e gli scultori, che tendono naturalmente a subordinare i valori tattili ai valori visuali, potranno difficilmente creare delle tavole tattili significative. Il Tattilismo mi sembra particolarmente riservato ai giovani poeti, ai pianisti, ai dattilografi, e a tutti i temperamenti erotici raffinati e potenti. Il Tattilismo, nondimeno, deve evitare non solo la collaborazione delle arti plastiche, ma anche l'erotomania morbosa. Deve avere per scopo le armonie tattili, semplicemente, e collaborare indirettamente a perfezionare le comunicazioni spirituali fra gli esseri umani, attraverso l'epidermide. La distinzione dei cinque sensi è arbitraria e un giorno si potranno certamente scoprire e catalogare numerosi altri sensi. Il Tattilismo favorirà questa scoperta." (Marinetti 141-142). Marinetti read this manifesto at the Théâtre de l'Œuvre in Paris and at the Modern Art World Exposition in Geneva, Switzerland. The text was published in January 1921 on *Comœdia*. On Marinetti and *Tattilismo*, see Tomasello, Dario. "Se i sensi m'ingannano. Marinetti e il Tattilismo futurista."

protagonist with such an overwhelming sensory overload that annihilation is inevitable. According to Bontempelli, the senses and the apocalypse indeed share a crucial link: if the apocalypse is the collapse of the world as we perceive it (phenomenon), then our physical reception of it can be the real protagonist of a narration dealing with its end.

Cataclisma is a very short novella. Told in the first person, it is the story of a man who finds himself far away from his home, in a big city. This city – the *protometropoli* – immediately crushes the protagonist with a wild stream of noise. The character cannot perceive anything, but the noise (816):

Perché non percepivo più che il rumore, e non altro che il rumore mi parvero l'atmosfera in cui passavo, il suolo che sorvolavo, i mezzi che mi travolgevano.

The noise totalizes his experience, but it is not easy to identify its source (816):

Rumore senza definizione. Solo a tratti, con prodigiosi sforzi di ricordo delle passate esperienze, riuscivo in qualche fulmineo istante ad afferrare un connotato antico di quei suoni: ruote su selciati, fischi di sirene, titoli di giornali, campane di veicoli, urli d'uomini, appelli di cani, pietre, porte, vetri, metalli, stritolamenti e scoppi.

It is with the greatest effort that he manages to recognize familiar images within the overwhelming noise they produce all at once. The world seems to contain the same elements to which the narrator is accustomed, but his perception of these very elements is not as natural as it should be. At this point in the story, the protagonist goes to sleep (he suspends the active perception, one could argue). When he wakes up, it is night already. He then reaches a very high balcony, from which he can see the entire city (817):

I quartieri della città apparivano squadrate masse di tenebra dura, ma dappertutto rotte di linee angoli rettangoli frecce e volumi di luci rosse e turchine; e i pezzi di tenebra e i pezzi di luce non sconfinavano uno nell'altro, ma rimanevano contigue forme, geometriche e rigide.

It is an expressionist design where the space does not exist as itself, but as the external representation of the protagonist's perception of reality. Bontempelli's first-person narrator is – suggests Fulvia Airolti Namer – the spectator, the actor, and – most important – the creator of the world surrounding him (31). It is Bontempelli himself who defines imagination as the act of modifying the external world according to one's internal rhythm (qtd. in Tempesti 2). Namely, the writer cannot and should not represent reality objectively, but deeply subjectively. The protagonist of *Cataclisma*, who the reader initially sees lost in a tempest of noise, is at this point in the novella surrounded by the lights of the city and of the sky. If noise had characterized the day – and if consequently hearing had been the sense through which the protagonist had perceived the world–, it is now the time for him to use his sight. Powerful lights have replaced the stars, and the sky is now an enormous stage where an incredible spectacle is being performed. The protagonist soon realizes what he has in front: “Ma questo – dico io – è tutta pubblicità” (818). It is the picture of presentday Times Square in New York City and of the overwhelming, bright, pulsing advertisements that close down on the viewer. The blinding lights fill the space and annihilate anything else: any other sound, any other light. This is exactly what the protagonist of *Cataclisma* feels and it is what he fears. While the advertisement in front of his eyes ‘shouts with the light’ – “grida con la luce” (818), the acoustic dimension overlaps the visual one and the already exhausted senses of the protagonist make another step towards the aforementioned sensorial overload.

At the same time, on the largest advertising space ever conceived, luminous figures suggesting products of various nature move from East to West. Or one should better say, from former East to former West:

Ora, in mezzo alle altre infinite costellazioni minori, un gran rettangolo aveva dipinto di giallo il luogo ove un tempo era oriente; e in corsa si allungavano da destra a sinistra, come per lo svolgersi d'un rotolo, parole accese che raccontavano sillabando le virtù d'un olio da lubrificare motori. Così sviluppandosi, il gigantesco papiro raggiungeva ove un tempo fu occidente. (818-819)

Even the cardinal points are no longer reliable. The space where the protagonist of *Cataclisma* is does not offer him any consistent way to be read. Moreover, he starts wondering what would happen if all these lights fell down on the city. An uneasiness about the over-perception of the world and an uncomfortable feeling of the uncanny merge into an ominous sense of imminent danger.

His fears are soon realized: it is not clear why, not even to him, but the lights literally start flowing down on the city (820):

O fosse forza della mia demiurgia, o fosse forza della sua paura, quello ch'io venivo descrivendo accadeva. Tutte le luci [...] si confondevano e precipitavano [...] e il fiume sgorgava sempre più tumido sulle tenebre quadre dei palazzi e dei quartieri. In breve un'onda immensa copriva l'intera città [...]: luci sconfinite gorgogliavano, si raggiungevano, incanalate a torrenti segavano l'aria, si cumulavano in laghi che in breve fecero un mare: oceano che sempre più s'elevava sommergendo le cose.

The protagonist suspects he himself might be the creator – demiurge – of what he is now witnessing. He begins to fear that his misperception of space might be causing its collapse. By not understanding reality, he destroys it. He determines the apocalypse.

Meanwhile, a liquid cataclysm of light begins. The apocalypse is happening in front of his eyes or, at least, he perceives it is. His senses have been 'out of tune' since his arrival into the chaotic noise of the city, and the over-perception of reality seems

to be reaching such a stage of totality that it is equivalent to its opposite. When the ocean of light has covered everything and it raises up on the very body of the protagonist, he can see it, but he cannot feel it (821):

E la marea toccava i miei piedi. La vedevo, e non sentivo, salire per il mio corpo. [...] La marea ribollendo m'abbracciò tutto: mi era alla gola. Sentii che non c'era più niente sotto i miei piedi. Mi buttai. Il mondo non eravamo più che io e quell'inondazione infinita, silenziosa come un sepolcro, fatta d'onde di luce sotto il cielo sudato.

At this point, it seems that the protagonist's sight is the only working sense. As for the rest, he is completely submerged in a gigantic isolation tank. The overwhelming noise and the totalizing light result in a sensorial overload that is equal to nothingness.

The protagonist of *Cataclisma* does not belong to the city he is visiting, and this makes him unable to comprehend it fully. As it happens even in the most trivial zombie-movie, the character of apocalyptic fiction arrives to a world he knows little or nothing about, and he must adapt fast to the new situation: the problem is that he might not be able to understand this new world and its new rules, its new cardinal points. He might not have what it takes to perceive it and comprehend it. This is what happens to the protagonist of this novella, who can no longer tell where the North is, and who can longer recognize the source of still familiar noises. Since the apocalypse is the collapse of the world as one perceives it (the world as phenomenon), then the physical perception of it can very well be at the border between the apocalypse and its

aftermath. The apocalypse destroys the world by destroying the human perception of it.²⁷

Towards the end of *Cataclisma*, the protagonist is experiencing a perceptive drama of this very sort. The finale of Bontempelli's novella, however, is not as tragic as it could have been. His character swims back where he had departed from:

“raggiunti dopo qualche tempo nuovamente le rive dei miei paesi e della mia vita d'ogni giorno” (821). The *protometropoli* that he saw collapsing under a cataclysm of light might still be there, or might be actually submerged. Whether the apocalypse was caused by his perception of things or not is not important. Of course there are multiple interpretations that a reader could apply to this big city destroyed by its own advertisement – in the same way as one can interpret zombies in several ways. What I find more interesting, however, is the idea of one's impossibility of functionally interacting with a new condition. The difficulty of communication, the unfeasibility of coping with reality. The Futurist lesson to the world is that the apocalypse, as a subject, can in some circumstances leave the realm of the plot and contaminate the form of the text, breaking it, subverting its rules, remolding its shape. By doing this, it

²⁷ There are direct references to the human senses in several works of apocalyptic fiction. In a classic novel of apocalyptic literature, M. P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901), the end of the world comes through a poisonous gas that is colorful and that has a very peculiar smell: “I could not doubt,” says the last survivor of this groundbreaking tale; “an actual aroma like peach-blossom was in the algid air about me!” (58). Interestingly enough, the apocalypse is induced by some sort of poisonous cloud as well in the Muslim apocalypse as certain Islamist groups envision it. The prophecy claims: “God will send a perfumed breeze by which everyone who has in their heart even a mustard grain of faith will die” (McCants 171). Even in the finale of the biblical archetype of apocalyptic literature – that is Noah's myth rather than John's apocalypse – the sense of smell is protagonist: “The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done” (Genesis 8:21). The senses are certainly at the center of Saramago's *Blindness*. In this novel, the apocalypse has the shape of an unexplainable contagion that turns everybody blind. Not only the sight, but also the sense of smell, hearing, and touch are crucial in Saramago's narrative, which is – primarily – a reflection on how much one's perception of things transfigures a reality that might have not changed at all. Marinetti already argues the same concept in his 1921 manifesto, by inviting people to re-discover their surroundings through a simulated blindness, and a similar idea is the core of the 2011 feature film *Perfect Sense*. Directed by David Mackenzie, it is the story of a strange epidemic that makes people lose their senses, one by one. In the last scene, the characters know that they are about to lose their sight, about to find themselves completely isolated from anything and anybody else. The apocalypse makes the senses obsolete, as it happens in H. G. Wells's novel *In the Days of the Comet* (1906), where the passage of a comet produces a mutation in the human experience of the world, therefore changing it, without changing it at all.

expresses not only an anti-traditional aesthetics, but also the existential, human struggle of leaving through epochal changes. The linguistic revolution that Futurism begins has a strong influence on the way the apocalyptic metaphor will be intended and reinterpreted in the following decades, and in many ways, it anticipates of half a century at least the apocalypse of post-modern literature and cinema. Although the American model will redesign the iconography of the apocalypse in the second half of the 20th century, it is still the conceptual apocalypse theorized by Futurism and by many successive avant-gardes that articulates the philosophical understanding of the end of the world in narrative.

In the 1930s and in the 1940s, Italian science fiction will not be as productive (Micali, *Apocalissi* d.p. 55). With the end of the futurist movement, the first, truly Italian moment of production of apocalyptic fiction concludes. After World War II, after Hiroshima, and especially after the new economic and political world order, apocalyptic imagery necessarily follows, in Italy, the direction indicated by the American model.

2.5. Trans-Cultural Colonization or the Super-National Model: Imagining National Identity at the End of the World.

Up to the 1920s, Italians find it easy to imagine the apocalypse happening on their own national soil, and although they depict social transformations in a fashion that is perhaps borrowed from Anglophone models, they fill their representations of the end of the world with a strong national identity. Their apocalypses are not only set in Italy, they are about Italy.

Things change during the Fascist regime and, after the end of World War II, the themes, the politics, and even the geography of Italian science fiction shift towards the United States (Micali, *Apocalissi* d.p. 56). It is substantially a problem of

imagination, which derives from a by-product of the Fascist propaganda and results in the totalizing (semi-self) imposition of the American national model on the Italian one. In other words, the Fascist regime proposed an aesthetic framework inside which apocalyptic science fiction could not be truly imagined as Italian. At the same time, all major Italian publishing houses refused the possibility of a successful Italian science fiction production, as Gianfranco de Turris points out.²⁸ From the 1950s on, Italians – both as consumers and as authors of science fiction – start to denationalize (or, at least, to de-Italianize) the apocalypse, for they are incapable (or unwilling) to imagine it taking place in an Italian scenario. Since then, Italians have deemed a science fictional universe with Italian toponyms and sociocultural references implausible (Micali, *Apocalissi* d.p. 51). The archetype of apocalyptic fiction that the *Decameron* had offered, with its agenda of social reconstruction and its uplifting finale counteracting the grim beginning, ironically comes back to Italian authors through the works of American storytellers. Italians respond either through a full – and at times well-crafted – compliance with the new hegemonic model, or with some authorial reactions of commentary and opposition that often enhance the source-iconography and constitute the basis for a relapse of the original model.

2.5.1. Made Somewhere Else: A Problem of Imagi(Nation).

Already in 1924, Bontempelli, whose Futurist taste certainly places him on the tail end of the most Italian among the avant-gardes, pushes his character to a metropolis across the ocean. At the end of *Cataclisma*, Bontempelli's protagonist escapes the collapsing *protometropoli* and reaches the familiar shores he had

²⁸ Gianfranco de Turris's article "Il fascismo ostile alla fantascienza? No, erano gli editori a essere in ritardo" was published on the webpage of *Il Giornale* on August 19, 2014. The author describes the Italian publishing houses' resistance towards science fiction in order to exonerate Fascism. However, he never actually explains the reason why such companies took the decision not to publish science fiction. I believe that the explanation is in the 'imagination gap' that I describe in 2.5.1., and that Fascism is therefore 'guilty,' although perhaps not directly.

originally left, returning home and – by doing so – saving himself from the apocalypse. Throughout the entire novella, there are no specific references to the nationality of the protagonist or the geographical locations of the story. Therefore, *Cataclisma* already denies a specific national belonging. One might argue that the large city whose lights crumble on the protagonist is Manhattan, but it might as well be any European metropolis. The transnationalism of Bontempelli's novella is indeed among its best qualities: the universality of its message is, together with its theme and with the author's linguistic choices, what makes it modern. The protagonist of the story and his failure to adjust to the big city, provoked – I can argue – by a dramatic lack of imagination, are modern as well.

Cataclisma happens nowhere, and it could therefore be set in any place.

However, the cataclysm hits a city that has the main feature of the modern metropolis. German sociologist Georg Simmel writes about in his *Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben* (1903): it intensifies the nervous stimulation of the individual with “the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli” (48). As described above, it is precisely the incapacity of the protagonist to properly process the load of stimuli the metropolis imposes that determines the apocalypse. I argued that his failure shows the inability of his senses to read the new reality, and I can continue to claim, by borrowing Simmel's words, that the protagonist of *Cataclisma* is unable to accommodate himself “in the adjustment to external forces” the modern city discharges on him (47). As the modern, metropolitan man “could have not breathed” within the restricting barriers of a small town (54), Bontempelli's protagonist, who is a mere visitor in the big city, is lost and psychically overwhelmed by the “super-individual contents” of metropolitan life (47). He cannot use his senses to perceive the metropolis, because he is in the first place unable to imagine himself as a productive

and “sophisticated character of metropolitan psychic life” (48). In fact, Bontempelli’s protagonist comes from a different place, which – given the recurring antithetical dichotomies that characterize apocalyptic fiction – must be either the rural world or the traditional, pre-modern dimension that in the 1920s seems incompatible with the elements of science fiction and the urban landscapes protagonists of apocalyptic narrative. Bontempelli’s narrator never declares his origin, but it is not a stretch to identify the rural shores where he eventually goes back to safety as Italy – or as an Italian-like setting.²⁹ It seems then that, just sixty years after the *Unificazione*, Italians must cross the ocean in order to witness the apocalypse. As discussed above, things were different no more than two generation prior. What changed?

In the 1860s, it is not merely possible, but even easy to project the mutating Italy into a future that Nievo and Ghislanzoni feel tangible. The *Risorgimento* has Italy as its only protagonist, and the belief is that a landscape made of layers and layers of history can still be the stage of modernity. The entirety of the new nation is at the center of a vision that does not exclude the most rural areas, whose role is as important as the larger cities’. The apocalypse can very well happen in Italy, then, as anyone in those years can testify. It is happening before everybody’s eyes, even in realities that are far from being metropolitan. It is therefore admissible to imagine the end of the world: it is legitimate to picture it right outside one’s window, as Boccaccio had done centuries earlier. However, after most of the illusions and disillusion of the Europeans have perished in the Great War, the apocalypse changes its shape and its tone. Italy painfully wins the war, it completes the unification process, and it soon dons the black shirts of the Fascist regime. Benito Mussolini’s autarchic vision exalts

²⁹ “Non so quanto durava; venne il giorno, un’alba smorta nel cielo sembrato, ma l’oceano era divenuto uno di quelli che avevo traversati all’andare. Dal quale, parte a nuoto parte con altri mezzi che mi vennero incontro, raggiunsi dopo qualche tempo novamente le rive dei miei paesi e della mia vita d’ogni giorno.” (Bontempelli, *Racconti e romanzi* 821)

the glorious, Roman past of the Country and establishes a rhetorical iconography that looks backward, at classical imagery that promotes a serious, austere, and religious life (Gentile and Mussolini).³⁰ Meanwhile, the agricultural policy of Fascism wants the rural Italy at the center of an economical project that claims the dictatorship of the proletariat, exalting the stoic and morally impeccable figure of a tireless field-worker.³¹ The Fascist world-view fiercely opposes the ‘tentacled’ city, carrier of cultural and moral decline, and it is consequently anti-cosmopolitan.³² In 1924, therefore, the Italian anti-metropolitan reality, where “the rhythm of life and sensory mental imagery flows more slowly, more habitually, and more evenly” (Simmel 48), is no longer a scenario where the apocalypse is a plausible event. Massimo Bontempelli, who joins the party in the same year *Cataclisma* is published and after having spent two crucial years in France exposed to the theories of Symbolism, thus writes a novella that apparently blends in the Fascist atmosphere. In reality, Bontempelli’s intentions symmetrically diverge from Mussolini’s doctrine: while the dictator aims at the ruralization of the nation, the writer already practices the *sprovincializzazione* of Italian literature (Maccari 16). By 1926, Bontempelli will already claim that the first and most important task of Italy is to Europeanize itself as much as possible (La polemica attorno al “900” 1). Although the story of a *provinciale* who finds the apocalypse when visiting the metropolis seems in line with the Fascist directive, Bontempelli’s novella is actually an accusation about the solipsism and the immobility of provincial Italy. In 1924, the author was already trying to replicate the cosmopolitan atmosphere that he experienced in Paris, and

³⁰ “La vita perciò quale la concepisce il fascista è seria, austera, religiosa: tutta librata in un mondo sorretto dalle forze morali e responsabili dello spirito.” (La dottrina del Fascismo)

³¹ In this regard, see Pennacchi, Antonio. *Fascio e martello. Viaggio nelle città del Duce*. Rome: Laterza, 2008.

³² On Fascism and urban planning, it is instructive to read Mussolini’s introduction to the Italian edition of Richard Korrer’s *Geburtenrückgang*, published in Rome in 1928. In his *La bonifica nella storia e nella dottrina* (1948), Arrigo Serpieri, undersecretary of the Minister of Agriculture during the Fascist period, writes that farmers and countrymen constituted, in 1922, more than one third of the Fascist party (129).

precisely for this reason was at that point unable to imagine an apocalyptic story that took place within the same walls limiting the Fascist rural worldview. His *Protometropoli del Mondo* (Racconti e romanzi 816), his ideal *locus* of a traumatic psychic change, must therefore be set somewhere else. Perhaps it is not yet in America, but it is most certainly not in Italy either.

During the *Ventennio*, there is just a small production of Italian science fiction narrative (Micali, *Apocalissi* d.p. 55), and I believe this happens because an entire society that stares at the magnificent ruins of its past is incapable of imagining a future of its own. A future made out of the same icons that populate classic mythology or the Roman emperors' *Historiae* does not seem to fit an apocalypse taking place in a world yet to come. "The Fascist regime," writes Sandro Bellassai, "never produced a coherent theory of antimodernism [...] but an antimodernist stance was one of Fascism's defining features" (314) as much as the "populist mythology of the peasant" (318) and the fascist myth of romanity were. Although the examples of fascination with modernity are many, Fascism ultimately chooses a rural world over the cosmopolitan metropolis, and it idealizes the adventurous figure of Italian colonists of noble Roman lineage while showing complete disinterest in the revolutionary range of future apocalypses. Apocalyptic fiction is indeed the very contradiction of the Fascist pragmatic rationalism: it is always the story of chaos winning over reason, breaking its squared walls and letting the uncontrollable wilderness into an ordered system. It is therefore irreconcilable with Mussolini's politics, which is about the reclamation of the same land that the apocalypse wants uncontrolled and irrationalized. Ultimately, apocalyptic imagery is the very antithesis

of the core of the Fascist doctrine: it is the negation of the institutions, of the establishment, of the State itself.³³

The Fascist regime does not need to ostracize apocalyptic fiction in order to stop it: all it needs to do is to exalt the opposite iconography, and it will automatically deprive apocalyptic symbols and images of their productive capability. Twenty years of Roman sceneries and rural exaltation derail Italy, casting it away from the ‘classic’ elements of science fiction. After the end of the war, and after the end of the Fascist regime, Italians are therefore left with a lack of imagination: they can certainly picture the future, and even the end of the world, but these two can hardly speak Italian or be set in Rome. There are, of course, a few important exceptions (e.g. Calogero Ciancimino, Virgilio Martini, Giorgio Scerbanenco), but the truth is that an entire generation of Italians grow up without ever embedding certain elements of science and apocalyptic fiction within the Italian landscape. The twenty-year long rhetoric of the Fascist regime hence creates a real gap within the imaginative potential of Italian writers. It is a space that the Americans will soon occupy.³⁴

2.5.2. The emblematic case of *Zombi 2: A Sequel to Nothing*.

³³ About fascist antimodernism, we must add Emilio Gentile’s observations. The Italian scholar argues that the fascist myth of romanity did not express an anti-modern ideology after all (La Grande Italia 155). Andrea Giardina, expanding upon Gentile’s claim, writes that the fascist ‘new man’ was “partly a man of the past, since it kept within itself the spirit of romanity; but it was, chiefly, an original creature, that could have made possible the long duration, or rather the eternity of the fascist era” (The Fascist Myth of Romanity 64). Such ‘creature’ is perhaps not anti-modern per se – as Gentile and Giardina claim – but it is nevertheless based on an anti-modern imagery that leaves no space for another apocalypse. The fascist ‘new man’ comes from the “seemingly impossible rhetorical equilibrium between the positive exaltation of the ‘new’ and the condemnation of the degenerative effects of modern civilization” (Bellassai 321) and from an idea of youth that “merged enthusiasm and maturity, millenary history and the future, tradition and revolution” (322). The only apocalypse Fascism can conceive is indeed Fascism itself, which arrives as an event at once destructive and constructive, willing of dissembling the age of the hated bourgeoisie and of establishing a new way-of-life that bypassed it completely (Bellassai 322).

³⁴ For more information about the Fascist doctrine, see *La dottrina del fascismo*, written by Giovanni Gentile and Benito Mussolini and published on the *Enciclopedia italiana* in 1932. The full text is available on the website polyarchy.org. Finally, on the fascist construction of a myth of romanity, see – among many others – Giardina, Andrea. “The Fascist Myth of Romanity.” *Estudos Avançados* 22.62 (2008): 55-76. Malvano Becchelloni, Laura. “The Myth of Romanity and the Politics of Images in Fascist Italy.” *Vingtième Siècle* 2.78 (2003): 111-120. Nelis, Jan. “Date a Cesare: Caesarism and the Italian Fascist Myth of Romanità as Part of Mussolini’s Sacralisation of Politics.” *Brukenenthalia*. 2 (2012): 127-139. Nelis, Jan. “When Antiquity Becomes Sacred: Italian fascist Romanità as Biopolitics and Myth in the Making.” *6th International Conference on History from Ancient to Modern, Proceedings*. Ed. Nicholas Pappas. Athens, Greece: Atiner, 2012. 247-260.

In 1979, Lucio Fulci directs his first horror movie: *Zombi 2*. The film is a turning point both in the director's career and in the history of zombie fiction (Church 10). Fulci's film grosses around \$30 million worldwide (O'Brien 64) over a relatively small production budget, and it is destined to influence future zombie-apocalypse fiction in Italy and abroad. This film is emblematic of Italian authors' and audiences' persisting difficulty in imagining apocalyptic fiction as something genuinely Italian, and it is indicative of a creative/productive dynamics that demands the Americanization (or at least the transnationalization) of several filmic elements. It is for this precise reason that *Zombi 2*, which would have the aesthetic and cinematographic strength of a self-sufficient work of art, is distributed in Italy as a sequel of George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), known in Italy as *Zombi*. Of course, the truth is that, in spite of its title, *Zombi 2* is not an actual sequel to any other film, and it shares little more than its title with Romero's movie.

Italian director Luigi Cozzi once said that in "Italy, when you bring a script to a producer, the first question he asks is not 'what is your film like?' but 'what *film* is your film like?' That's the way it is, we can only make *Zombie 2*, never *Zombi 1*." It is a case of self-imposed 'creative colonization,' for which Italians do not even want to take into consideration a manifestly Italian production of a film whose plot-elements supposedly belong to a different national imaginary. This is how movies shot in Italy by Italian directors and with Italian speaking casts end up being set in American-looking locations and showing full lists of made-up Anglophone credits. It naturally is, in the last analysis, a matter of revenue, but it goes all the way back to the lack of imagination that had condemned Bontempelli's character to cross a few

oceans in order to witness an end of the world that could not possibly happen in his backyard.³⁵

The assumption is that nobody would go to the theaters in order to watch an Italian science fiction (or horror) film, because the audience would expect it to be bad. A foreign production of genre fiction, on the other hand, is immediately perceived as plausible and possibly good. It is an unbreakable cycle, for which no investor would ever bet his money on a declaredly Italian genre-film (Church 6-14). Consequently, Italian audiences will not expect an Italian film to be particularly good, since all those they liked were either American or they sounded like it. It is a recipe for success: make a cheap movie, make it sound American, make it look something other than Italian, and you will have a product easy to export and to distribute everywhere. The examples are many: from the ‘resurrection’ of peplum films (*Le fatiche di Ercole*, 1958) to early Spaghetti Western, from the boom of Macaroni Combat (Castellari’s 1978 *Quel maledetto treno blindato*, internationally distributed as *The Inglorious Bastards*) to the Italian reboot of Avildsen’s Karate Kid saga (*Il ragazzo dal kimono d’oro*, which Larry Ludman/Fabrizio De Angelis directed in 1987).

This is not a new phenomenon, indeed: as Laura Parigi claims, already in the late 1950s, Italian directors “reinvented mythological cinema” by making sure that “slaves, gladiators, and gods” all had “rigorously Yankee faces” (211). In addition, as David Church points out, from the early 1960s onward, “the use of pseudonyms and dubbing” helps Italian B-movies achieve “transnational visibility” by “allowing them to blend in with the Anglo-American products” (5), and it helps their domestic

³⁵ Stefano Baschiera and Francesco Di Chiara quote Luigi Cozzi in their 2010 article on Fulci’s film (106).

distribution as well, by making the audience perceive them as non-Italian or less Italian.³⁶

In the case of *Zombi 2*, Fulci can count on an international cast, he is granted a medium-sized budget that allows him to shoot several sequences of the film away from Rome (in New York and in Santo Domingo), and he even captures an underwater fight between a zombie and a real shark. Moreover, his movie is meant by the producers to tailgate the great success of Romero's film, and the distributors want to present it as some sort of prequel to *Dawn of the Dead*. The movie really has everything a 1970s exploitation film producer could dream of. Fulci, of course, could not care less: the movie he is making has absolutely nothing in common with Romero's films, and he knows it very well. To those who attack him for taking advantage of another director's success, he replies that zombies do not belong to Romero as they do not belong to Hollywood, and that his film goes beyond a commentary on consumerism, all the way to the roots of a post-colonial discourse. Fulci is right, and *Zombi 2* is a film worth watching not only for the skillful use of the camera and for its outstanding special effects, but also because of the focus on the biopolitical significance of his creatures. The indigenous of the island, exploited by colonization since the 16th century, are now finally feeding on the bodies of the new, white, colonizers: they are literally consuming the white bodies, as a response to the abuse they have suffered in the first place. In *Zombi 2*, the point-of-view of the camera is always the subjective of the zombified human, through which Fulci shows the victims with which the audience identifies: the spectator therefore is at once eaten

³⁶ In regards to the transnationalism of Italian genre films, see Church, David. "One on Top of the Other: Lucio Fulci, Transnational Film Industries, and the retrospective Construction of the Italian Horror Canon." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 32.1 (2015): 1-20 and Parigi, Laura. "The Fake Americans of the Italian Cinema: A Marketing Strategy or a Strategy for Interpretive Cooperation?" *Directed by Allen Smithee*. Ed. Jeremy Braddock and Stephen Hock. Trans. Thomas Kelso. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2001. 209-228. On Italian sf films and national identity, see Rushing, Robert. "The Weight of History: Immunity and the Nation in Italian Science-Fiction Cinema." *Fiction Studies* 42.2 (July 2015): 339-352.

and eating, it is at once exploiting and exploited, and it is colonizer and colonized.

Fulci is very aware of his political message, the movie is an invitation to reflect on the race and origins of oppressors and of victims, and, I argue, it is a meta-consideration on the liminality of Italian exploitation cinema, at once cannibal and cannibalized.

The paradox is that a story about the consequences of colonization is told by following a model that is imposed by the culturally hegemonic model of the United States. What Fulci is therefore also aware of is that he could not possibly direct a completely Italian zombie movie: in part because of the marketing reasons that impose certain aesthetic standards, but once again for the unsolved problem of imagination that still inflicts the Italian ‘national creativity,’ for which a zombie walking around Milan or Palermo is nothing less than absurd. *Zombi 2* finishes with the beginning of the apocalypse: a suggestive long shot of zombies roaming on the Brooklyn Bridge. But why does it have to be New York? Why does it have to be the US? Why can’t the apocalypse be imagined anywhere else?³⁷

The international market demands, as Dana Renga clearly summarizes (246), a derivative production rather than an original one, but although this phenomenon crosses several genres, the apocalypse is ‘copyrighted’ by the US in particular, because it has adopted it as main rhetorical theme at least since the end of WWII.³⁸

³⁷ About *Zombi 2* and about Fulci’s quarrel with director Dario Argento (who had co-produced, co-edited, and co-distributed Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead*) see Palmerini, Luca and Gaetano Mistretta. *Spaghetti Nightmares*. Key West, FL: Fantasma Books, 1996. See also Albiero, Paolo and Giacomo Cacciatore. “Arriva il ‘poète du macabre’, ovvero: *Zombi 2* (1979).” *Il terrorista dei generi. Tutto il cinema di Lucio Fulci*. Rome: Un mondo a parte, 2004. 184-193.

³⁸ About the so-called *filoni*, Dana Renga writes: “Hence the *giallo* was launched in 1963 by Mario Bava’s *La ragazza che sapeva troppo*, clearly indebted to Hitchcock’s *The Man Who Knew too Much* (1956), and Sergio Leone’s *Per un pugno di dollari* gave rise to the ‘spaghetti western’ in 1964. In 1971, Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Il Decameron* inspired the *Decamerotico filone* (1972-1973) and most certainly gave inspiration to directors working in nonexploitation during the 1970s. In 1974, Liliana Cavani’s *Il portiere di notte* and the Canadian film *Ilsa, She Wold of the SS* (Don Edmunds) prompted the prolific, if short lived, ‘nazisploitation’ or ‘sadiconazista’ subgenre. George A. Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (released in Italy as *Zombi*) from 1979 was the inspiration for Lucio Fulci’s *Zombi 2* of the same year, the film which inspired the eponymous *filone*. In 1981, George Miller’s *The Road Warrior*, the second film in the *Mad Max* series, and John Carpenter’s *Escape from New York* became international successes with cult film crowds. Italian genre film directors took notice and, with the release of Enzo G. Castellari’s *I nuovi barbari* in 1982, another *filone* was born which saw the production of eighteen films in just about two years by some of Italy’s most well known and prolific genre directors such as Castellari, Joe D’Amato, Ruggero Deodato, Lucio Fulci, Antonio Margheriti, Sergio Martino and Bruno Mattei.”

From the 1950s on, in facts, the Americans literally manage the apocalypse, as Ira Chernus brilliantly explains in her *Apocalypse Management*, and they use it to explain something perhaps very complicated in the simplest way possible: by using the end-of-the-world mythology and iconography as a sensational, effective, and universally comprehensible political message (5):

By 1952, most Americans embraced the fundamental principle of the Truman administration's discourse – that the United States was locked in a mortal battle against an enemy determined to destroy their way of life.

An eschatological war is all it takes to clarify a complex scenario without going too deep into details: there is Us and there is Them, and it is fairly plain that if you are not one of Us, you must be with Them. An entire world is therefore separated in two biblical blocks, one that is evil and revolutionary, and the other one that is good and conservative (5):

The elites of the Truman era were not bent on triggering the kind of radical change that is always implied by apocalyptic language. On the contrary, [...] the cold war discourse of containment was rooted in the tradition of political “realism,” which is linked to “the absence of motion, to stasis, and more precisely to the physical restraint of undesired motion.”

As the Fascist propaganda aimed at the creation of a rural and classic imagery populated by brave and humble family-men, post-World War II American presidential administrations wanted to feed the public consciousness with an iconography made of red invaders, of nuclear wars, and of a wonderful, capitalistic eschaton. At this point, the strong and effective political application of apocalyptic rhetoric meets the original sources of apocalyptic narrative and their apparent universality and inclusiveness: an apocalyptic rhetoric always preaches from the point of view of the worthy ones; it always deals with the entire world, because the apocalypse – the nuclear apocalypse

in particular – concerns the entire planet; it, therefore, justifies any action, globally: because, if the survival of the whole world is at stake, there is really nothing not worth doing:

Since the paradigm assumed that threats might come from anywhere on the globe, its ideal of peace and stability required the United States to control events everywhere. Each step towards stability evoked fearful images of instability. Each policy enacted for national security created new problems, which defined as apocalyptic threats, eliciting new policies aimed at more effective management and control. (Chernus 11)

The eschatological fight is therefore for everyone – inclusive and universal (if you stand on the right side). Still, if looked at from the Italian *provincia*, it seems terribly remote. It is close in the contents, perhaps, and the communists (Them) are still the necessary enemy who provide meaning to the eschatological apparatus and who render the apocalyptic political discourse meaningful on both sides of the Atlantic (11). But as far as common imagery is concerned, it really seems quite unlikely that, of all the places in the world, the Russians would throw the bomb on Florence. The apocalypse is American, then. It is American because the USA, in full control of the Western hemisphere, presents it as such. It is American because it is heavily represented using elements of the American culture and through an American subject, so that the traditional patterns of apocalyptic fiction are reinterpreted and eventually replaced with their new de-Europeanized images – at the point in which it paradoxically becomes easier to imagine a plague striking Manhattan rather than Florence, and the White House in flames rather than London or Dresden bombed and leveled. The apocalypse is American because, according to their own hegemonic narrative, only they can cause it or avert it: they hold the power to provoke a nuclear

holocaust, or to guard against it. Finally, the apocalypse is American, because the USA has never stopped committing to it:

Today most of America's leaders and foreign policy elite of both political parties remain committed to the apocalypse management paradigm. Any leader or policy that seems able to contain a threat of destruction is considered successful. Little more is asked for; no higher goal is imagined. (Chernus 13)

Americans are still committed to the apocalypse; they are still exporting iconography and still filling the gap Italians produced during the twenty years of Fascism with powerful images. This set of images, which play as signifiers or agents of a specific type of narrative, constitutes a super-national model, and it is almost impossible to tell stories without drawing from this container or to modify its icons and symbols.

When Italians approach apocalyptic fiction, they necessarily do it by utilizing the imagery that the super-national model provides. A problem of imagination has been then 'solved' by occupying and de-Italianizing an available space and the process is so effective that – although Italian in nature – this place is no longer recognized as such. The Italian national identity is, when it comes to contemporary apocalyptic fiction, "transparent and invisible," as Radhakrishnan would say (91), and it authorizes its own "sense of agency" by signifying its "intentions on a preexisting and [...] alien text" (95) belonging to the super-national narrative of which it is nothing but a collateral expression. Naturally, one can expect such a cultural occupation to tend towards a total replacement of the original national identity, but this is not always the case. If the original national identity often goes completely unrepresented, there still are other instances when transparency is matted with authorial traces. Italian authors of the *dopoguerra*, of both literature and cinema, have written apocalyptic narrative employing the Americanized iconography, but not without – in many cases – their own sociocultural background reflected on their texts.

Since the 1950s, Italian authors have substantially had two options among which to choose: they either follow the super-national model fully or escape it bravely, often very cleverly, and sometimes even successfully.³⁹

2.5.3. Dealing with the Model: Transparency or Tangibility.

The greatest problem with a super-national identity is the extreme difficulty – the impossibility, I argue – for the authors to consider an alternative to it. The super-national identity of apocalyptic fiction, which originally is the mere representation of a particular national identity, is elevated to the rank of model and it plays the same role that simulation does in Jean Baudrillard’s vision: it overpowers reality, and it eventually replaces it.⁴⁰

In this case, reality is constituted by the possibility of representing something other than the hegemonic national model. This is eventually impossible, because the iconography that composes the model is mistaken with the only available possibility of representation: it is mistaken with truth, while it is merely a singular perspective on it. Therefore, an extra-canonical representation – namely, a work of apocalyptic fiction that does not follow the hegemonic model – might even be considered as not belonging to the genre for lacking (or hiding) some elements or patterns recognized as fundamental (because appropriated and re-canonized by the hegemonic super-nationality). The images through which American apocalyptic fiction has narrated the end of the world have become the dominant iconography at which “subaltern nations” look while theatricalizing themselves as eternal laggards and “catcher uppers” (Radhakrishnan 93). A theatricalization of this sort, however, will often show itself in the emptiness of the simulation, as the mere shadow of a shadow (Baudrillard, *The*

³⁹ About the crucial post-War years and the context of pre-Cold War propaganda, see Richard Lingeman’s *The Noir Forties. The American People from Victory to Cold War*. New York: Nation Book, 2011.

⁴⁰ These ideas appear in Baudrillard, Jean. *The Perfect Crime*. London and New York: Verso, 2008.

Perfect Crime 35), and all the elements of national identity that might be part of such a representation will constitute a transparent surface through which the super-national narrative is visibly (literally, in terms of images) re-established.

Escaping the model is not difficult because of an actual political dominance of one nation over another, but because refusing to theatricalize that particular canon means to take the risk of placing one's own narrative on a different representational stage – namely, to place it out of the genre fiction that an author wishes to utilize. For a film director to transplant the conventional iconography might mean to make it unrecognizable, and – by doing so – to make his work of fiction unrecognizable as part of a specific genre. The temptation of the author is, therefore, to leave no sign of himself and of the sociocultural background that could unmask his work as alien to the super-national model. What the real artist does, however, is to resist “the fundamental drive not to leave traces” (Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime* 1), and to allow his identity to tarnish its otherwise transparent representation, making it visible and finally discovering its tangibility. When facing the creative moment, Italian artists decide whether to be ‘subalterns’ of the narrative model they choose to follow and of the hegemonic force they decide to appease, or whether to be themselves the actual driving power of their own work.⁴¹

2.5.4. A Matter of Proximity: Degrees of Imitation.

The imitation of the super-national model is a constant factor for Italian authors of apocalyptic fiction, and it has been determining the shape of Italian apocalyptic literature and cinema for the past sixty-five years, as Dana Renga indirectly points out in her brilliantly titled article “Pastapocalypse! End Times in

⁴¹ I use the term ‘subalterns’ by adopting Antonio Gramsci’s acceptance. In “Subalterno e subalterni nei «Quaderni del carcere»,” Guido Liguori retraces Gramsci’s use of the word, which the Italian philosopher employed with increasingly negative implications when referring to subalterns groups or classes.

Italian Trash Cinema” (2011). However, getting too close to the super-national archetype is not always synonym of success. In the several possible degrees of imitation, the amount and especially the deliberate nature of authorial traces define the artistic quality of the work of fiction. One thing is to allow intentionally the author’s identity in the text; another, very different thing is to accidentally leave traces of a national and sociocultural identity that the author himself perceives as out-of-tune with the final product.

Most of the Italian cinematographic genre productions of the late 1970s and 1980s were meant to look as much as possible like the model on which they were based (Renga 246). The low (or even extremely low) budget they were allowed, of course, limited their stubborn and yet impossible chase. Paradoxically, however, the fact that these movies could not possibly look as good as their targets is what left a certain space for artistic and even artisan maneuvers. By allowing crews a very limited budget and a short filming period, producers put the directors in the condition to employ a great deal of creativity and to use their craft to make the best out of the little they had. The result was often poor and even ridiculous, but there are several films (among which I count Fulci’s *Zombi 2*) in which a good writing meets excellent directing and some notable special effects. Therefore, if some products seem to make a mockery of their archetype, others are perfectly self-sufficient works of art, with their own message, their own style, and their own aesthetics. It is indeed authorship that allows a movie such as *Zombi 2* to have a legitimacy of its own.

In recent years, imitating the model has become easier: the digital age has lowered the costs of shooting a film and it has allowed the production of movies that are similar to the target-film in a way that their 1980s predecessors could have not possibly dreamt of. The potential ‘reduction’ of distance, however, can be very

problematic. If the perceptible difference between the original archetype and the final product let some Italian filmmakers of the 1980s keep at least some of their identity in their final cuts, the current potential degree of superimposition on the super-national model makes many contemporary productions look like a very accurate, bad version of their target-film. Indeed, if the superimposition is complete, the new film reaches itself the status of super-national model: the identity is completely absorbed into the alien text that hosts the narrative and there is no longer reason to look for it. Instead, if the superimposition is almost complete, but not perfectly, the presence of the alterity is perceived as an uncanny disturbance on an otherwise flawless model: the risk is for the final product to be a mockery, in spite of the original intentions. This is the case of Francesco Picone's *Anger of the Dead* (2015), a post-apocalyptic movie shot in Italy using an almost entirely Italian cast, but acted in English and set in an Anglophone environment. The aesthetics of this movie rely heavily on *The Walking Dead*, by which even the opening titles and the poster seem to be inspired. Noteworthy for the special and make-up effects, this film puzzles the viewer for the never justified foreign accent of the main characters – the Italian origin of which is never explained – and for a certain 'fanmade' aura that makes it look like an homage to Darabont's TV show. The reason to produce the film in English might be linked to distribution – as it was already in the 1980s – but it makes the Italian casting a contradiction. The Italian elements that constantly pop out are therefore not a deliberate choice to make visible an otherwise transparent national representation, but rather the sloppy oversights revealing a denied identity that the audience was not supposed to detect.

While the production costs are always an important factor in films, literature allows a different degree of freedom and it makes it much easier to copy the super-national model. Since 1952, when Mondadori publishes the first issue of the science

fiction magazine *Urania*, the few Italian authors who manage to see their works published make sure to Americanize not only the themes and the settings of their stories, but even their own names: Roberta Rambelli becomes Robert Rambell, Gianfranco Briatore is John Bree, Luigi Naviglio signs his books as Louis Navire, and Ugo Malaguti chooses to be known as Hugh Maylon (Micali, *Apocalissi* d.p. 56). As novelist Vittorio Catani observes in an article about the history of Italian science fiction, diverging from the American model would mean either to condemn a work of fiction to a commercial failure, or to have it perceived as not belonging to the genre (2-5). As Catani points out (1), still today the quarrel on Italian science fiction literature deriving from (or even depending on) the American model, is far from over. In 2014, for example, the Italian publishing house traditionally specialized in comic books, Sergio Bonelli Editore, publishes “Il fattore Z,” a self-conclusive issue of the *Le Storie* series. Written by Giovanni Gualdoni and illustrated by Marco Bianchini, it is the story of a woman who needs to cross a zombie-infested city in order to reunite her son. What I find interesting is that, after a long foreword in which editor Gianmaria Contro devotes all its space to de-Americanize the paternity of the zombie-image (4), the comic book inconsistently opens on the iconic Brooklyn Bridge and continues in a completely American setting, telling a story that could have been issued by Marvel Comics or DC (5). Some of the elements of *Il fattore Z*, on the other hand, are symptomatic of the Italian identity that Gualdoni and Bianchini hide under a story that could be a spin-off of Kirkman’s *The Walking Dead*. First of all the style of Bianchini’s drawings: his black and white illustrations are in perfect line with the canon of Italian comic books, and they make the pages of *Il fattore Z* look exactly like many other *bonelliane* series. In addition, the finale of the story conserves the radical pessimism typical of contemporary Italian apocalyptic fiction: when Helen finally

reaches her house, her son Kevin is not there, and the reader will never know whether he is still alive (105). In the last panel of the book (114), the zombies surround Helen and Patrick, a kid that the reader – misled by Gualdoni and Bianchini throughout the whole *fumetto* – has mistaken for her son. Armed with a small hatchet only but ready to face the herd of zombies, Helen asks Patrick not to be afraid (113) and she promises she is going to protect him (114). If this issue was meant to have a sequel, one could interpret this open ending as the classic cliffhanger. *Il fattore Z*, instead, is not supposed to continue, and both Helen and the reader are left with neither answers nor satisfaction: not only her narrative drive has not changed – since she has not found her son – but she is probably about to die very soon. Gualdoni and Bianchini tell a story that is perfectly American, but they voluntarily add stylistic and aesthetic elements that make it step away from the super-national model, and that make it very different from Picone's film both in the intents and in the result. There are other cases, such as Niccolò Ammaniti's novel *Anna* (2015), where a very American story is told in Italian, it is even set in Italy, but it is thought in *Americanese*.

As Roman novelist Niccolò Ammaniti has declared, his most important literary influence is American writer Stephen King.⁴² Ammaniti's writing style is indeed similar to the phrasing of King's Italian translations, and it is in fact common, while reading Ammaniti's novels, to perceive the text as if it had been translated into Italian from another language. Perhaps for the rhythm of his prose, perhaps for the simple phrasing that tends to avoid the overflowing texts of other Italian writers, Ammaniti's *Anna* seems conceived in a 'cultural language' other than Italian and, in

⁴² Ammaniti said so several times during a Q&A panel at Rutgers University on November 9, 2015. It declared it again three years later, while accepting the Honorary Degree awarded to him by the Università degli Studi di Foggia on January 18, 2017. In that occasion, Ammaniti explain in length his debt to Stephen King's works. For an excerpt of his acceptance speech, during which the direct references to King are abundant, visit the website < <http://www.lazonamorta.it/lazonamorta2/?p=35710>> and read Filippo Radogna's article *Niccolò Ammaniti... La laurea HC e Stephen King*.

spite of the Italian setting and of the several Italian cultural references, it slavishly follows the super-national model of apocalyptic fiction. The story of *Anna* – a girl who tries to survive in a post-apocalyptic world where a disease has killed all the adults – is set in Sicily, but it is simply by changing the A29 with the New York Thruway that the events could be effortlessly moved on the other side of the ocean. Ammaniti's novel is, and I borrow once again Radhakrishnan's terms, a perfectly transparent representation, where the original national identity of the author is a translucent screen through which the super-national model shines unaltered. The elements of Italian culture – the Sicilian sirocco (9), some direct references to widely known Italian food brands (10), the allusion to a character of the Sicilian folklore (35) – simply give geographical coordinates that relocate the American model without changing it. They are, in way, 'immune carriers' of Italian culture, for they do not add anything specifically Italian to the text, and they function as mere indicators of a spatial displacement. In contrast, the references to several paradigms of the genre stand out as crucial elements of Ammaniti's novel, and it is easy to link them back to the iconography of American apocalyptic cinema and television. The story begins in a hospital, like *The Walking Dead* or the English film *28 Days Later*, directed by Danny Boyle in 2003 (5-6); corridors full of corpses, police cordons, and yellow biohazard suites complete the setting and immediately drag *Anna* into the super-national model (5-6); the fact that the virus – which is called "la Rossa," like Jack London's scarlet plague in the homonymous novel – has already contaminated everyone is another direct reference to *The Walking Dead* (32), where the case is the same. Ammaniti fully adopts the super-national iconography, and he borrows an extensive series of images belonging to the model. Although *Anna* is based on an engaging plot and even it it keeps an overall consistency that never creates the uncanny feeling provoked by

Picone's actors in *Anger of the Dead*, there is never a moment of the novel in which a political urgency of the author prevails on the narration, or in which his personal identity is actually allowed on the page. *Anna*, from this point of view, is an excuse to use the model. A model that, as I have written above, cannot be ignored, but could be challenged. Ammaniti does not have such a desire: he performs his story on the 'alien model,' and he feels perfectly home in doing so. He then commits the perfect crime Baudrillard describes, and he does it so carefully that he leaves not one trace of his being there.

Contrary to Ammaniti's approach, an author may choose not to use a novel as a chance to write a story based on the apocalyptic model, but rather to use the super-national model and its elements as the pretext to talk about something else. The apocalypse, which has always been, at least since Boccaccio, an 'event' representative of a 'condition,' in the context of postmodern science fiction is taken into consideration more for its existential implications than for its catastrophic and spectacular landscapes.⁴³ An approach of this sort allows an author to utilize the elements of the super-national model without being restrained by them in any way. Postmodernity defeats the model because it recognizes its linguistic functions, it comments on its being a model, and therefore it cannot be trapped inside it. Several American writers, although it might seem paradoxical, escape the American model of apocalyptic fiction by approaching it as postmodern authors. In the apocalyptic novels of Kurt Vonnegut, Paul Auster, or Cormac McCarthy it is possible to recognize several of the characteristic elements of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction –

⁴³ The terms 'event' and 'condition' are taken from Simona Micali's "Apocalissi di provincia: La fine del mondo e la fantascienza italiana," where she writes: "[Può] anche accadere che l'immaginario apocalittico diventi mezzo per una riflessione critica sul nostro presente e allora avremo quelli che definirei i primi, e promettenti, casi di una science fiction postmoderna italiana: la quale abbandona i suggestivi scenari catastrofici e catartici della fine del mondo anni settanta, l'apocalisse insomma come *evento*, per raccontarci invece l'apocalisse come *condizione*, soprattutto come una condizione che non pertiene al un più o meno lontano futuro ma nella quale siamo già immersi, nonostante ancora non ce ne rendiamo conto" (61).

even the most fundamental patterns such as the Fortress or the Journey – but their control over them is greater than the one the model might have on their plots. Among the Italian authors of postmodern apocalyptic fiction, director Marco Ferreri is certainly worth mentioning.

Il seme dell'uomo (The Seed of Man, 1969) is the story of a young couple who live isolated on a beach after having survived a catastrophic event. The elements of classic apocalyptic fiction are all present in Ferreri's film, which primarily focuses on the theme of social reconstruction. One of the main themes is indeed the opposition between the two protagonists: while Cino, with a positivist attitude, is excited at the idea of adapting to the post-event world, Dora does not see the point. The man believes that their duty is to have a child and to contribute to the reboot of society, while the woman strongly thinks that they have no right to force another life in the post-apocalyptic world where they now live. While Cino is the ideal post-apocalyptic character, all focused on the future and on the reconstruction of the social sphere, Dora is the greatest threat to their newborn society. When an outsider woman seduces Cino, ready to carry his child, Dora brutally kills her and eventually feeds an unaware Cino on one of her legs. Dora is like a Boccaccian heroine who refuses to play her role in the socially reconstructive masterplan that has been imposed upon her. When she kills the other woman, Ferreri frames the murder in a bucolic sequence taken mostly in long shots, and the sounds of nature (cicadas, birds) are much louder than the noise of her cane hitting the victim's body. Dora is therefore an agent of nature fighting against the socially constructed Man, which is represented by the woman who wanted to slaughter her and to take her place. By killing the woman and eventually eating her flesh, she steps even further than Cino's positivism into a post-apocalyptic and post-human world that flows into cannibalism. At the end, deceptive

Cino succeeds in impregnating Dora after having sedated her. In the last sequence of the movie, he is celebrating his victory, dancing around a confused Dora who cannot understand how she could possibly be pregnant. While he jumps and pirouettes, happy at the idea of the several generations that will follow, an explosion (perhaps provoked by Dora) kills both characters, determining the end of hope for social reconstruction and concluding the narration. In *Il seme dell'uomo*, the elements of the super-national model are accessories that place the work of fiction within a genre, but without limiting the boundaries of Ferreri's scope. The director's authorial presence, on the other hand, is together with his intense nihilism the absolute protagonist of a representation that is everything but transparent. On the contrary, Ferreri's philosophy and political stance shape the elements of apocalyptic fiction throughout the entire movie, and – in this extreme case – it is the super-national model that becomes a transparent surface under which the director represents himself and his vision of the world. This is also the case of Dante Virgili and Michelangelo Antonioni, focus of my next two chapters.

2.6. Conclusions

It is a long way from the political allegories of early Italian apocalyptic literature to the radical pessimism of postmodern authors, but the *storie future* of the 19th century share a certain bitterness with the Italian films of the 1960s. An apocalyptic vision, Boccaccio teaches us, can be very optimistic, in spite of the plague and regardless of the flames. The deal is, however, that one must first pass through them. Optimism is something that the super-national model promotes, but that for some reasons many Italian authors resist. If you go through the plague – if you experience the apocalypse – and you survive, you are no longer the same man, and although one can focus on the bright side – being alive – Italians have instead

stubbornly looked back upon what they lost along the journey. The desire to express something that could not be spoken in the language of the pre-world is what moved the linguistic experimentation of the first twenty-five years of the 20th century: the existential need to find a language that could explain the world as it had become. In the 1960s and in the 1970s, Italian authors of fiction concluded that the mythical and unspeakable language was perhaps better left undiscovered.

Postmodern writers and directors have their own way of representing their scrambled identities, and for them the post-apocalyptic world is a new text on which to recognize the traces of pre-event reality. Nineteen-century writers, who had already pictured the apocalypse, possessed a different sensibility, but in their amusing social commentaries, there is the same sense of unrest that will explode in post-modern authors, thanks at least in part to the Futurists. Despite all efforts and despite the universal aspiration of apocalyptic narrative, the end of the world only goes as far as one's perception of it. By transforming your senses, you will perceive a world you cannot yet see, suggests Marinetti, and you might as well cause the apocalypse, Bontempelli warns. An individual can determine the collapse of the whole universe just by perceiving it, but – as the post-modern authors of apocalyptic fiction will point out – he is not in control, and whether his identity will survive the end of the world is up to the type of approach he decides to use. One way is to adapt to the new condition, by adopting the new model and by making a transparent surface out of one's self; the opposite choice is to resist with a stubborn and probably deadly opacity, by facing the apocalypse as something that will not change you, no matter how painful that might be. The description of this pain is the focus of Dante Virgili's *La distruzione*.

Chapter Three: “As If I Were Never Born.”

The Textual Post-Apocalypse of Dante Virgili’s *La distruzione*.

3.1. Introduction: The End of the War, the End of a World.

In the spring of 1970, one of the most important Italian publishing houses – Arnoldo Mondadori Editore – printed a pro-Nazi novel called *La distruzione*, which contained an apologia for Adolf Hitler. In spite of this, nobody seemed to realize that such a book had appeared (Franchini 21): critics and philosophers ignored the novel (Pischedda 705-706), and together with its author, Dante Virgili, the book ended up relegated to the vast collection of the unnoticed.

La distruzione (The Destruction), nevertheless, had all the elements to provoke the debate that the Milanese editor had hoped for (705), and it was, in addition, a work of literature worth reading for its aesthetic and its linguistic value. The novel consists of a first-person stream of consciousness, with the unnamed protagonist expressing his utmost violent desire for the atomic annihilation of humanity. Set during the Suez Crisis of 1956, it tells the story of three days in the life of a former war interpreter who now conducts a dull existence working as a proofreader for a national newspaper. Virgili’s narrator embodies the perfect anti-social character of apocalyptic narrative, as I described it in chapter one: confused, lost, and doomed to failure. Angst and disorientation are central features of his persona, unable to communicate with anybody – perhaps even with himself – he lives following outdated principles and with the constant feeling of being the last of his kind in a world with which he cannot longer deal: post-war Italy.

The outcome of World War II was a precise political scenario that determined the international dynamics from that moment on. At the same time, the end of the war denied the potential of an alternative vision of the world: the Nazi-Fascist ideal of reality was fought, defeated, and eventually replaced with a different set of values. The rise, as well as the fall, of a totalitarian regime tends to assume apocalyptic features precisely for its totalizing nature. The apocalypse is a social phenomenon, as discussed in the previous chapters, and a totalitarian form of government with its capillary intervention into all aspects of social life has apocalyptic implications for those who do not align to its principles. Totalitarianism, writes Hannah Arendt, develops “entirely new political institutions” and destroys “all social, legal and political traditions” of a country (*The Origin of Totalitarianism* 460). Truly totalitarian systems operate “according to a system of values so radically different from all others,” that no “traditional legal, moral, or common sense utilitarian” category can any longer be of help in understanding, judging, or predicting “their course of action” (460). Although Mussolini’s Italy was, according to Arendt, a non-totalitarian dictatorship rather than an actual totalitarian state (308), the Fascist party still acted profound transformations on Italian society.⁴⁴

The end of a totalitarian regime, and the consequent eradication of its principles and values, have in turn apocalyptic effects on all of those who have embraced them. When the Badoglio Proclamation of September 8, 1943 announced the armistice between Italy and the Allies, Italian men and women continued fight the remaining two years of war on opposite sides: this was a civil war, as many scholars have described it, that left deep scars and unresolved conflicts echoing long after

⁴⁴ On the Fascist party’s methods of social transformation, read Emilio Gentile’s *Fascismo: Storia e interpretazione* (2002). Chapter VII, “Partito, Stato e «Duce» nella mitologia e nell’organizzazione del Fascismo,” deals precisely with the widespread *fascistizzazione* of Italian mass society.

April 25, 1945. For many Italians, Liberation Day signaled the beginning of the reconstruction of post-war society. For several others, however, the fall of Fascism was an apocalypse with which it was hard to cope, and the Italian aftermath of World War II a post-apocalyptic landscape in which one had to struggle for survival. Dante Virgili's *La distruzione* offers to the readers a glimpse of such world through the eyes of one of these survivors.⁴⁵

In this chapter, I present Dante Virgili and his work, and I analyze the powerful, apocalyptic energy of his writing. I argue that *La distruzione* is a post-apocalyptic novel, and that it is not so (or not only) because of the ominous imagery of the protagonist's daydreams (Pischedda), but rather because the narrator himself is a survivor of the apocalypse, already living in what he perceives as (and therefore is) a post-apocalyptic world. I also argue that this novel is noteworthy as an outstanding example of textual apocalypse, in which the crumbling elements proper to the genre 'contaminate' the medium and corrode it up to its syntactical and formal structure: the apocalypse is not limited to the story, because it also determines the shape of the language in which it is told.

3.2. Dante Virgili's Apocalypse: Who Was the Destroyer?

I don't know who Dante Virgili was. Perhaps nobody actually does, not even those who met him in person, and worked with him, and saw his face and his body, and heard his voice. The story of his life is blurry and confused, like the perception of reality his character has in *La distruzione*, and many of the things we know of his

⁴⁵ On the topic, Bertoldi, Silvio. *Apocalisse italiana. Otto settembre 1943: fine di una nazione*. Milan: Rizzoli, 1998. The reference to the apocalypse in Bertoldi's title is emblematic of the perception Italians had of the Badoglio Proclamation and of the following years of war. Among many publications debating this delicate topic, some noteworthy titles are Giorgio Bocca's *Storia dell'Italia partigiana* (1966), Claudio Pavone's *Una guerra civile* (1991), and Giampaolo Pansa's *Il sangue dei vinti* (2003).

biography cannot be confirmed (Franchini 80). There are no videos, no recordings: not even one image of this man exists (Parazzoli 302). He did not want to be photographed, Antonio Franchini writes in *Cronaca della fine* (2003).

Franchini, a writer himself and a book editor, worked for Mondadori when Virgili was trying to have another novel published, in the early 1990's. In *Cronaca della fine*, arguably the richest publicly available source of information there is on Virgili, Franchini draws the silhouette of a complicated, unhappy man, the uncanny shadow of the most bizarre and chronically unsatisfied person (80-84). The several first and second-hand anecdotes, however, still portray Virgili only partially, leaving the reader with a profile that is at once intriguing and discomforting. Alcide Paolini, in the late 1960's an editor for Mondadori and the most tireless supporter of the first publication of *La distruzione*, tells Franchini about his first encounter with the Bolognese writer:

Non mi ricordo quando e dove fu, ma quando lo vidi per la prima volta rimasi sconcertato. Mi aspettavo un personaggio sinistro, anche fisicamente... e invece no, aveva questo aspetto un po'... laido... che mi respingeva, ma anche in qualche modo mi attirava. (80)⁴⁶

Virgili is a little demon (88) of which the editors of his publishing house would like to rid themselves; but he is also the mesmerizing personality they must keep close:

In fondo, personaggi del genere riescono sempre, in qualche modo, a coinvolgerti, tant'è che noi facemmo veramente molto per lui; ci siamo dati da fare in un modo incredibile, e in diversi. (80-81)⁴⁷

⁴⁶ "I don't remember when and where it happened, but when I saw him for the first time I felt disconcerted. I was expecting a sinister persona, also physically... instead no, his look was somehow a little... filthy... and this repelled me and attracted me at once." [My translation]

⁴⁷ "After all, people like him somehow always manage to get you involved. We indeed did a lot for him; many of us did their best for him." [My translation]

Overlapping the protagonist of *La distruzione* with his creator is a tempting and perhaps legitimate mistake (41), because the more one reads about Virgili, the more it seems that the repellent and angry man whose thoughts constitute the novel is indeed the author himself. Some believe in a complete identification (Buttafuoco 10), while others cannot quite accept – although with difficulty – that such a person actually existed (Sommavilla 22).

After all, it is of little relevance whether Virgili actually spent his childhood in Germany (41-42) or not, whether he was a sadomasochist Nazi as much as his character is. It is not important to understand if he shared the beliefs of his protagonist, or his ominous dreams. Whether Virgili craved more the destruction of the post-war world or the publication of his novel is of no significance. His ungraspable personality merges with the passionate lines of his book, the pages of which are the only relevant subject of analysis. The author disappears in the mythical and yet repulsive aura that those who spent time with him recall, and – along with the silence surrounding the publication of his first novel – he now embodies the Barthesian ideal of the dead writer who ontologically dissolves, and who lets the text speak for itself. For those who will not be satisfied with this, I recommend Franchini's book, in which he collects all the available information about Virgili with great precision. Other than that, the brief bio printed on the very first edition of *La distruzione* should suffice:

Dante Virgili è nato a Bologna nel 1928. Oltre a essersi occupato di lavoro editoriale, ha scritto, sotto vari pseudonimi, libri di avventure e gialli per ragazzi. Attualmente risiede a Forlì, presso la Fondazione Garzanti, dove ha potuto scrivere e portare a termine questo suo primo romanzo. (Cit. in Franchini 41)⁴⁸

⁴⁸ “Dante Virgili was born in 1928 in Bologna. Besides his work as an editor, he wrote – using several pen names, adventure novels and crime stories for young readers. He currently lives in Forlì, at the Fondazione Garzanti, where he could complete this first novel of his.” [My translation]

Dante Virgili died in 1992, and it seems that his death was as repugnant as his relatively short existence (195-196). Nevertheless, he was a destroyer. That I know. Because if Virgili did not manage to break through in his career as an author, he certainly succeeded in masterfully shattering the tool of his craft: language. The language of *La distruzione* is a broken element that Virgili crushed with experimentalist accuracy, so as to make a post-futurist novel whose form is more prominent than its own content.

3.3. A Stream of Anger.

The plot of the novel is extremely uneventful, but far from being meaningless. The author frames the story with great precision, and the reader knows that the events unraveling on the pages are set in August of 1956, during the Suez Crisis (Virgili 13). The decision to choose this particular time frame is significant: after Egyptian president Nasser has proclaimed the nationalization of the Suez Canal, English, French, and American fleets gather in the Mediterranean Sea, while the U.S.S.R. seems to be supporting the Egyptian anticolonial policy (Pischedda 706). The prospect of an actual war piques the protagonist's imagination and fills his fantasies with apocalyptic imagery. In the four sections that constitute the novel (*Sabato, Domenica, Lunedì, L'alba*), the reader follows the protagonist from morning to nighttime, looking at the world through his eyes and often leaving the present time of the story for the past, which is the temporality that the protagonist favors, or for the future, which the narrator pictures overloaded by annihilating flames.⁴⁹

The long tagline with which Mondadori promoted the first edition of *La distruzione* indirectly refers to the apocalypse:

⁴⁹ Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Dawn. [My translation]

“La voce delirante di un sopravvissuto alla disfatta tedesca: il sogno di una vita irrealizzabile che sfocia in un’ansia di distruzione totale.” (Franchini 144)⁵⁰

The protagonist is a survivor – a word that goes back to the basic terminology of post-apocalyptic fiction – living an impossible life overwhelmed by angst. His world has collapsed (the German fall is, of course, the end of Nazi-Fascism) and he does not know how to functionally conduct a life according to the parameters that everyone around him considers normative, and that he instead despises deeply. *La distruzione* is a ‘stream of anger’ that presents all the crucial characteristics of post-apocalyptic fiction by organizing them – and here lies one the most interesting aspects of the novel – from the point of view of an anti-social character. Virgili’s protagonist is a survivor who, unlike Boccaccio’s protagonists, did not recognize the sign of the plague and could not leave the city in time. His past crumbled on him, and from the ruins under which he lingers, no rebuilding is possible.

Reconstruction is in any case of no interest to a character who was, to his great shock, standing on the losing side of the eschatological game. Now that the world around him has been rebuilt according to principles he does not recognize, he wishes for it to be blown away once and for all. Of course, he has no such a power: as an anti-social character, he possesses a destructive drive, but no actual destructive potential. Virgili’s protagonist belongs to a past era, and he is therefore impotent and unproductive as much as the plague-stricken city in post-apocalyptic fiction. He is the embodiment of a broken system that has no possibility of re-establishing its structures, and from such an impossibility derives the unspeakable angst of living without assuming any effective role: de Martino’s “permanent anthropological risk,”

⁵⁰ “The delirious voice of a survivor of the German fall: the dream of an impossible life hat merges into the angst for total destruction.” [My translation]

namely the fear of the impossibility of being culturally present in the world (219).⁵¹

The protagonist of *La distruzione* is indeed culturally absent: he biologically lives in the present, but he exists only in the past, in the pre-event reality from which his language, his ideals, and his world-view derive. Therefore, communication is for him impossible: he cannot successfully communicate with anybody and his own voice – as I shall write about in details later on – reaches the reader as distorted as a crackling radio message from another dimension.

As mentioned above, the main character is a proofreader on the editorial staff of a newspaper. The novel gives a glimpse of his relationship with his co-workers and of his troubled and unsuccessful attempts to court women, but none of all the potential narrative threads has any actual development. The past/present dialectic of the protagonist/narrator is more important than the plot, and the way the images are presented is more relevant than the images themselves. The stream of consciousness goes from present events to past ones without using any connectors and therefore indicating the time dimensions simultaneously coexisting inside the protagonist's perspective. In *La distruzione*, the events and the characters all melt together, like in the very instant of nuclear fission, so that faces are interchangeable as much as places and actions: all the time dimensions implode into one internal and ever-present perspective. As Guido Somnavilla wrote in 1971,

è [...] come se le differenze fra tempi, spazi, avvenimenti e persone non esistessero o non importassero; come se la violenza di Hitler sulla Polonia, per esempio, e una qualsiasi violenza d'un uomo su una donna fossero tutt'uno. (23)⁵²

⁵¹ "Rischio antropologico permanente."

⁵² "It is as if the differences between times, spaces, events, and people did not exist or did not matter; it is as if Hitler's violence against Poland, for instance, were the same thing of any violence perpetrated by man on a woman." [My translation]

Indeed, in the eyes of the protagonist, they are. Everything and everyone contracts into a fist, and Virgili's character wishes to punch the face of the world with it. Through the tense eyes of the destroyer, the reader navigates reality on a stream of consciousness that some critics judged negatively – as an unsuccessful experimental text – while others saw as an effective attempt to play with the language (Franchini 151). I believe that the great strength of Virgili's stream of consciousness lies indeed in its linguistic aspects and in the reflections on the use of language that the novel suggests. By presenting a glimpse into the life of a defeated man, and by doing so through his protagonist's eyes, Virgili shows a world that his character does not comprehend and that he therefore cannot describe. "The Destruction" of the title refers to the protagonist's desire to see humanity blasted away, and it refers to the end of the pre-war social systems. Most of all, however, destruction is in Virgili the demolition of traditional languages and codes. The page layout of the novel and the font size and style change throughout the chapters, while punctuation disappears for entire pages. Virgili expresses the devastation in his disordered and disjointed phrasing, as in the following paragraph (79):

In seguito si sarà flagellato per non avere voluto la distruzione di. Ma tant'è. Un complesso d'inferiorità nei confronti degli inglesi. Un misto d'amore e d'odio. Fregato. Bisogna soltanto odiare. *Se non ritiro dalla banca il denaro.* Impossibile. Risparmiare un milione, poi a Berlino. Le macerie della Cancelleria. Vedere e. *Quella sala della cupola con la volta di marmo incrostato* Mi alzo.⁵³

⁵³ "Later he will have beaten himself up for not wanting the destruction of. And yet. An inferiority complex about the Englishmen. A mix of love and hatred. Screwed. Only hating is necessary. *If I don't withdraw the money from the bank.* Impossible. Saving a million, then heading towards Berlin. The ruins of the Chancellery. To see and. *That doom-hall with the encrusted marble vault* I stand up." [My translation]

As it happens in the following passage (129), German and Italian are mixed constantly throughout the entire novel, and Virgili only provides a translation in the endnotes:

Prima del trauma i conti tornavano. Riprendere dal '45 non c'è stata la pace LA GUERRA CONTINUA continueremo a combattere fino a che uno dei nostri maledetti nemici la tempesta della sua voce la Wehrmacht lascerà aperti grandi spazi nei quali alleati e russi si precipiteranno scontrandosi e di quel sudicio giornale che non resti pietra polverizzato non una pietra a testimoniare il suicidio passato. Le mani mi tremano. Jene Aase von den Schutzstaffen erschossen lassen sie mit Stumpf un Stiel AUSROTTEN ich verlor die einzige Gelegenheit sie zu vernichten leider kannt' ich sie noch nicht, gut für sie. Cammino ansando. Er wurde verhaftet und doch nicht erschossen er hat sich gerettet gerettet gerettet. Batto il pugno sul muro. Come questi dovevano finire. Come questi.⁵⁴

Virgili rarely introduces direct and indirect speech. When he does, he often leaves the quotation marks open by having the text of the direct speech 'flowing' back into the subjectivity of the narrator (78-79):

«...e non posso rimproverare nulla ad Alfredo, mi è venuto in aiuto anche dopo la separazione. È buono, generoso. Se oggi riuscissi a incontrarlo potrei fare qualche spesa, ma temo sia andato in campagna col bimbo, ci va spesso in estate. Mio figlio
Vale la pena chiderle: posso accompagnarla a casa. Poi: posso salire. La volta precedente evitò con un pretesto. Anche stavolta, ne sono certo. *Se non. Il principio della fine.*⁵⁵

⁵⁴ It all added up before the trauma. *To start again from '45* there was no peace WAR CONTINUES *we'll keep fighting until one of our wretch enemies* the tempest of his voice *Wehrmacht will leave large open spaces where the Allies and the Russians will rush colliding* might there be no stone left of that filthy newspaper pulverized not one stone testifying the past suicide. My hands tremble. Jene Aase von den Schutzstaffen erschossen lassen sie mit Stumpf un Stiel AUSROTTEN ich verlor die einzige Gelegenheit sie zu vernichten leider kannt' ich sie noch nicht, gut für sie. I walk panting. *Er wurde verhaftet und doch nicht erschossen* er hat sich gerettet gerettet gerettet. I bump my fist on the wall. That's how they shoul've ended up. Like that. [My translation]

⁵⁵ ««...I can't really blame Alfredo, he helped me even after the separation. He's nice, generous. If I managed to meet with him today I could do some shopping, but I am afraid he went to the country with his kid, he often goes in summer. My son
It is worth asking her: can I walk you home. Then: can I come up. Last time she did not let me with an excuse. This time she is gonna do the same I am sure. *If not. The beginning of the end.*» [My translation]

Similarly, the author seldom announces flashbacks and flash-forwards, as in the following passage, where past, present and future blend (80-81):

Il chiosco delle bibite, una bambina chiede qualcosa. Quello dei giornali, chiuso. Porge i soldi allungando il braccio. *L'abbagliante bellezza della vampata atomica* il sogno di una gioia raffinata mai goduta. No. Sì. Al comando delle Schutzstaffeln *la luce della lampada le batte sul viso occhi alterati dalla paura. La coscienza torna in lei a onde opache* il gioco delle funi. ELENA invece se la cavò bene, non ero ancora gonfio d'odio. Giungo al bar. Affollato, maledizione. Salgo i tre gradini. *Ci sarà Graziano.*⁵⁶

Virgili's remarkable writing style aims at conveying the protagonist's deep sense of estrangement, and at rendering the idea of the simultaneity of the different time dimensions that coexist within the narrator's perspective. In the next two sections, I describe first the post-apocalyptic condition of the protagonist, from which the language of the text derives, and, secondly, the experimental simultaneity of time, space, and emotional levels, which Virgili achieves by using a 'contamination' of linguistic codes. In a text written in several languages (Italian, German, Spanish, English), I finally argue that it is by adopting cinematic language and by applying it to his writing that Virgili manages to represent what he would otherwise deem inexpressible.

3.3.1. *Pereat Mundus Totus: Last Man Dreaming.*

Towards the end of the novel (fourth chapter, third section), the protagonist is having a little altercation with one of the colleagues he likes the least, Beltrami.

Beltrami loses his control for an instant, and he threatens to report the protagonist's

⁵⁶ "The soda stand, a little girl asks for something. The newsstand, closed. She passes the money extending her arm. *The blinding beauty of the atomic blaze* the dream of a sophisticated and never relished joy. No. yes. At the head of the Schutzstaffeln *the light of the lamp hits her on the face fear-altered eyes. Her consciousness comes back in grim waves* the game of the ropes. ELENA managed fine instead, I wasn't filled with hate yet. I get to the bar. It's crowded, dammit. I walk up the three steps. *Graziano will be there.*" [My translation]

behavior to their superiors. The narrator is – as always – completely detached from the practical implications of his surroundings. The rage of his coworker is instead a good occasion for an important reflection (Virgili 203):

Ecco, gli piace darsi importanza far valere la piccola autorità. Se la prenderebbe anche con l'usciera pur di sentirsi qualcuno. Per cinque minuti ben inteso. Eleverà davvero qualche piccolo legno per mostrare alla nuova banda quanto lui s'interessi alle sorti del giornale. Ma è un uomo fortunato, ha trovato il suo posto *essere parte integrante di un mondo che abbia un senso*. Ci ero riuscito poi tutto mi è crollato addosso. *Sa sulle prima dovrà accontentarsi di fare da tramite fra la redazione e la tipografia non c'è altro per ora* neppure il coraggio di esprimere le cose con franchezza. Usciere. Raccattavo la carta dal pavimento la introducevo nel cestino. Mi chinavo più volte disegnando col corpo un semicerchio. Il fiato grosso ricordo. Mica ero in forze. Quando suonava il campanello cercavo di sottrarmi. Si faceva avanti l'altro. Ma a volte dovevo andare. Mi tendevano cartelle scarabocchiate *giù* senza neppure guardarmi in faccia. Gente che appena un paio d'anni prima. La porta si apre. Sgusciati fuori dalle macerie della guerra. Se il Reich avesse vinto sarebbero ancora rintanati nelle loro parrocchie.⁵⁷

This dense paragraph includes the whole drama of the protagonist: the end of Nazi-Fascism (“Se il Reich avesse vinto”) is the turning point after which reality changes. He hates his new self and he hates all those who, unlike him, managed to adapt to the new world (“[Beltrami] è un uomo fortunato, ha trovato il suo posto”) and who, for this reason, represent what he cannot possibly be any longer, but what he once was (“Ci ero riuscito poi tutto mi è crollato addosso”).

⁵⁷ “Here he is, he likes to show off to make his little authority count. He would take it out on the usher only to feel big. For five minutes only, of course. He will actually do some little thing to show the new bosses how much he cares for the newspaper. But he is a lucky man, he has found his place *to be an essential part of a world with a meaning*. I had managed myself then everything collapsed on me. *You know at the beginning you shall settle for being the courier between the newsroom and the printing press there is no other opening right now* not even the courage to say things as they were. Usher. I used to pick up paper from the floor and to throw it away in the bin. I would bow down drawing a hemicycle with my body. I remember being out of breath. I was not in shape. Every time the bell rang I always tried to back out. The other guy would step up. But some other times I had to go. They used to give me scabbled pages *downstairs* without even looking me in the eye. People that just a few years before. The door opens. Wiggled out of the ruins of the war. If the Reich had won they would still be hiding in their parishes.” [My translation]

Beltrami is part of a “world with a meaning,” while the protagonist’s world lost his sense under the ruins of the Reich. From the same ruins many came out renewed (“Sgusciati fuori dalle macerie della Guerra”), while he came out deprived of his social role. After the war – after the apocalypse – his prestigious and advantageous occupation as German interpreter abruptly turns obsolete and he finds himself in need to start again from the very bottom of the society – which Virgili represents, in this case, with the newspaper office. After the apocalypse, the world might be upside down, as Perry suggests (45), and the protagonist of *La distruzione* seems to be alluding to a preexisting condition in which the same characters of the new society would have found themselves playing very different roles (“Gente che appena un paio d’anni prima.”). This is a common trope of post-apocalyptic fiction, where characters who very successfully adjust to the post-event world often come from completely different social personae (e.g. *The Walking Dead*’s Carol Peletier: a meek and abused housewife who soon becomes a merciless survivor, proficient with any kind of weapon).

This pattern usually is indicative of the imperative need for the post-apocalyptic human to change. In *La distruzione*, it underlines the defeated condition of the protagonist, who crumbled together with the establishment (“tutto mi è crollato addosso”) and had to go through bitter humiliations in order to survive in a world of which he is no longer in control (“Mi tendevano cartelle scarabocchiate giù senza neppure guardarmi in faccia.”). In the following chapter, Beltrami is again debating with the protagonist, and he shows he is well aware of the crucial mutation humans must go through in order to survive (224):

«Dibattere una questione del genere mi sembra superfluo; una guerra non è più possibile.»

«Chi lo dice?»

«Implica la distruzione reciproca, vecchio l'argomento. La massima evangelica ama il tuo nemico è oggi veramente attuale.»

«Fra poco i cinesi appoggeranno il dito sul grilletto atomico eh eh. Il tempo *l'Europa guidata da noi Germani potrà sostenere le fatali battaglie contro l'Asia* è dalla loro parte.»

«Ragioni secondo i vecchi schemi, non comprendi che l'era atomica ha creato un fatto nuovo imprevedibile. Per sopravvivere l'uomo dovrà mutare, in senso direi biologico.»⁵⁸

The biological mutation that Beltrami deems necessary is conceptually identical to the one that Curtoni observes in the characters of Ballard's post-apocalyptic novels (17), and that we observed in Chapter One. Changing is survival, but the protagonist – as Beltrami notices – reasons according to old parameters (“Ragioni secondo i vecchi schemi”), and he is unable to see the need for mutation that his colleague considers essential. The protagonist continues (225):

*«In verità le specie tendono a mutare se si profila il rischio di scomparire. A parte il fatto che all'era atomica hanno dato il via gli americani, per sedere a Norimberga come giudici ci voleva proprio tutta la loro ipocrisia, non vedo come possa mutare. La sua condizione è inalterabile.»*⁵⁹

The narrator claims the inalterability of human nature (“non vedo come possa mutare. La sua condizione è inalterabile”), but he inadvertently admits Beltrami's argument in the first sentence of his line (in italics, this time indicating that he thinks but does not utter the words), by stating that just endangered species tend to mutate in order to survive. As an anti-social character in the post-apocalyptic world, he is not fully

⁵⁸ “«Debating on such an issue seems useless to me; a war is no longer possible.» «Who says that?» «It implies mutual destruction, it's an old thesis. The evangelic principle of loving your enemy is valid today more than ever.» «The Chinese will soon lay their finger on the atomic trigger eh eh. Time *Europe led by us Germans will be able to handle the crucial battles against Asia* is on their side.» «You think using old schemes, you don't understand that the atomic age has created a new, unpredictable fact. In order to survive, man must mutate, even biologically.»” [My translation]

⁵⁹ “«*Actually species tend to mutate if facing the risk of extinction.* Besides the fact that Americans started the atomic age, it took all their hypocrisy to sit in Nuremberg as judges, I don't see how he can possibly mutate. His condition is unchangeable.»” [My translation]

conscious of himself as part of a vanishing group, a residue of a vanished society. He does not recognize the rules of the new society, and when he bows to them, he does it with great sufferance – “Mi chinavo più volte disegnando col corpo un semicerchio” (203), – but he is as well aware of the necessity to obey the laws set by the new leadership – “È di moda il martirologio ebraico. Tant’è, non si può andare contro il proprio tempo” (98). The contrast between his interior system and the surrounding reality alienates the character from the world.⁶⁰

Virgili’s protagonist, inside whose perspective the reader is imprisoned, looks at the world with inadequate pre-apocalyptic eyes. The incipit of the novel, when the protagonist wakes up in his bed on a Saturday morning, is immediately indicative of his profound estrangement (11).

Chi sono io perché sono qui ⁶¹

These two questions – deprived of punctuation and fused together as one single statement – open the novel. The protagonist’s existence in that particular time/space (“here”) is indeed strictly connected to identity issues: who is he now, after the war? Can he recognize himself as the same person? And why is he here? Why does he still exist, while the rest of his world has collapsed? Awakening is certainly a painful act for the protagonist of *La distruzione*, who suffers the repetition of the apocalyptic event every time he becomes aware of being living in the post-war world. Virgili goes back to this idea again at the beginning of other two sections of the book, and his character always wakes up into a nightmare much darker than his destructive dreams (139):

⁶⁰ “I would bend over and over, drawing a hemicycle with my body.” “The martyrology of Jews is trendy. But that’s it, one cannot go against his own times.” [My translation]

⁶¹ “Who am I why am I here” [My translation]

Fluttuo dal sonno alla veglia, grondo sudore. Non so quanto tempo passi non lo misuro mai al mattino.⁶²

And just a few lines later, when he has started to identify himself with Adolf Hitler, in the third person (140):

Torna svegliandosi nel tempo e alla realtà riemerge all'orrore dopo la protezione del sonno.⁶³

However, it is in the opening chapter of the second section of the novel (*Domenica*) that Virgili better describes the pain tormenting the awakening protagonist (67):

Emergo con lentezza *questi istanti che precedono il risveglio*. Potrei essere un altro essere altrove. Vivere in un anonimo momento del passato. Un poco di luce filtra. Ondeggio per qualche secondo in questa dimensione. Un prodotto biologico senza legami senza ricordi. Il mio benessere ora è grande ma basta riaffiori il senso della mia identità e soffro di nuovo.⁶⁴

When the protection of his sleeping state is over, the protagonist of *La distruzione* starts wandering in a world that keeps him in a continuous sense of unreality (200).

The angst of the character, as I stated above, passes from his emotions to the text itself, and Virgili on purpose uses a stream of consciousness to depict it from within. The protagonist's uninterrupted subjective point-of-view has all the characteristics of the traditional stream of consciousness (Pischedda 711), but in its narrative mode, *La distruzione* is more Futurist than Joycean (711-712). This aspect links it to the apocalyptic mood that Simona Micali had already recognized (as mentioned in Chapter Two) in some works of the Italian avant-garde (Apocalissi d.p.

⁶² "I fluctuate from sleep to wake, I drip sweat. I don't know how much time passes I don't keep count of it in the morning." [My translation]

⁶³ "He comes back waking up into the time and re-emerges into reality and into the horror after the protection of sleep." [My translation]

⁶⁴ "I slowly emerge *these instants preceding the awakening*. I could be another being elsewhere. I could be living an anonymous moment in the past. A little of light seeps in. I ripple for a few seconds in this dimension. I am a biological product without links without memories. My wellness is now great but for me to suffer again it is enough that my sense of identity surfaces." [My translation]

55) and that James Leveque considers prevalent even in Marinetti's earliest compositions. According to Leveque, the apocalyptic theme represents, in pre-manifesto works such as *La Conquête des Étoiles* (1902) and *Destruction* (1904), "the rapid and violent establishment of new social values" and the "new perceptions of the world" (425).⁶⁵

A new perception of the world is precisely what torments Virgili's narrator, who does not react with the same inflamed and optimistic response early Futurists devoted to modernity, but who applies all their violence on his language. *La distruzione* stands indeed somewhere down the line from Marinetti's *Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista* (1912) and the Russian Cubo-Futurists' texts, which "mark the tenuous line of contest between the material substance of written language and its deployment in a signifying system of reference and representation" (Dworkin 185). There are broken sentences (page 89 provides several examples), long sequences without punctuation (there is absolutely none between page 131 and page 136), clauses ending with a preposition (perhaps mimicking the structure of languages other than Italian). All these characteristics are symptomatic of an interior battle and they aim at the complex representation of the protagonist's wrecked sense of reality. The most honest way for the author to convey the incommunicability of the protagonist is to make his thoughts rebel against the law of syntax and the codes of written language, and destroying linearity is therefore paramount.

Virgili does so by meshing different languages – mostly German and Italian, but also English and Spanish – or by interrupting the logical sequence of sentences,

⁶⁵ Micali mentions Marinetti's *Uccidiamo il chiaro di Luna!* (1909), where the Moon and the Ocean fight against each other, and *Mafarka il futurista* (1909), with the giant robot Gazurmah battling the Sun. The apocalyptic theme, she points out, continues in the following generations of Futurists as well, with Fillia's *La morte della donna* (1925) and *L'uomo senza sesso* (1927), or with Ruggero Vasari's '*Ciclo delle macchine*' (*The cycle of the Machines*, 1923-1927). One can certainly add to the list Massimo Bontempelli's *Cataclisma* (1924), to which I dedicate a substantial portion of Chapter Two.

the narration of episodes and the normative structure of the pages. He, however, destroys linearity also by contracting every temporal and spatial dimension belonging to the character. The mind of the protagonist is therefore the stage of simultaneity, which allows the narrator to wander irregularly between different moments (real or imagined) of his existence (in the past, in the present, or in the future). Time's linearity is broken together with the linearity of the normative language, which consequently becomes inadequate to represent it.

The protagonist indeed distrusts human languages (68): after the apocalypse – after the great crisis of the end of his world – languages show their imperfection, their dramatic and final insufficiency. As Stéphane Mallarmé had written in his *Crisis in Poetry* (1886-1895), in a time of “fundamental and fascinating” crisis, languages show their limits (123-124). The *fin de siècle* atmosphere in which Mallarmé and his fellow decadent poets conceived their works was at once of rejection and proposition: by denying the positivist certainties of the previous generation, they were questioning the possibility of representation and therefore exploring new means. The French poet wanted to overcome the limits of expression with his verses, while Dante Virgili faced them by contaminating his prose with the codes of a non-human language, which specialized in the representation of simultaneity: cinema.

3.3.2. *Bilderführung*: No Human Language Will Do.

‘*Bilderführung*’ is Béla Balázs’s early term for montage. According to Erica Carter, the best translation of this German word – which literally means ‘leading the images along’ – would be ‘linkage’ (Notes xi). It is one of the concerns of a film director – claims Balázs himself – to determine how and when to insert an image without disrupting the continuity of the film (39). “Only in the montage, in the rhythm and the associative process that link up the image sequence, does the essential factor,

namely the work's composition, appear,” states Balázs (98). Linking one image to another is among the basic syntactical elements of film: the components produce meaning while colliding with each other. An encounter of this precise sort is what Mallarmé had in mind when expressing an idea conceptually very similar to Balázs's: in the modern poetry that the French artist theorizes, initiative should be “taken by the word themselves, which will be set in motion as they meet unequally in collision” (126). It is by following a similar aesthetic imperative and because of an analogous distrust for languages that Virgili builds his novel as an experimental text.

Mallarmé's ideal poem, like music, does not need to provide any explanation to its reader (126): “It is not *description* which can unveil the efficacy of beauty of monuments, or the human face in all their maturity and native state, but rather evocation, *allusion, suggestion*” (125). “The poet must establish a careful relationship between two images,” he continues with indications resembling those that Balázs will some years later give to the film director, “from which a third element, clear and fusible, will be distilled and caught by our imagination” (125). These are the instructions for a new codification that will later on constitute the French Symbolist movement, but if Mallarmé and Verlaine had developed this aesthetics one (perhaps two) decades later, they would have probably found an incredible visual translation of their beliefs in the idea itself of cinematographic montage and in its expressive potential.

Mallarmé starts his argument from a crucial premise: human languages are imperfect, for their multiplicity signifies that none of them can actually “utter words which would bear the miraculous stamp of Truth Herself Incarnate” (124). Symbolism will be Mallarmé's solution to the intrinsic imperfection of languages, while Balázs –

of course – will identify in cinema the ultimate, universal answer to the curse of Babel:

The culture of words is dematerialized, abstract and overintellectualized; it degrades the human body to the status of a biological organism. But the new language of gestures that is emerging at present arises from our painful yearning to be human beings with our entire bodies, from top to toe and not merely in our speech. We long to stop dragging our body around like an alien thing that is useful only as a practical set of tools. This new language arises from our yearning for the embodied human being who has fallen silent, who has been forgotten and has become invisible. (Balázs 11)

When the Hungarian critic writes this text, he has in mind silent films and visual aesthetics closer to choreography. The shapes of the shot, the meaningful existence of the body in the frame, the speechless messages of proxemics: Balázs conceives the filmic codes as a transnational language and, although his view will soon be shaded by the advent of sound, his observations are appropriate in a debate on the actual expressive potential of language:

We evidently have many things to say that cannot be expressed in words. Now that the secondary and derivative modes of our culture appear to have ended up in blind alleys of different sorts, we are reverting to primordial forms of expression. The word seems to have taken men by brute force; over-rigid concepts have obliterated much, created an absence which we now feel keenly, and which music alone does not suffice to fill. (11)

Dante Virgili, half a century later, is also trying to solve the same problem. He also, perhaps for different reasons, feels the need to find an alternative to human languages. In showing a moment in the life of a character who lives alienated in an alienating world, Virgili must at once estrange his protagonist and distance the reader. The narrator of *La distruzione* is not comfortable with the spoken language of post-war Italy: it is a world where he feels he has nothing left to listen to (Virgili 15) and where

his survival is achieved by speaking nonsense (76). The author's search for a fitting language is ongoing in the text – as proven by the intermingling of several human languages, with German invading the prose in many occasions – and the protagonist joins Virgili in this frantic pursuit (68):

Ragiono ancora in termini umani, un vizio dal quale non riesco a liberarmi. Diffidare del linguaggio, forse creare un nuovo linguaggio una nuova dimensione. Abolire l'umano *l'uomo è qualcosa che bisogna sapere superare diceva*. Un linguaggio che non abbia alcuna connessione col vecchio. Pensare e parlare in Tedesco. Ma è un linguaggio umano, non va.⁶⁶

A human language – even the adored German – is deceitful and inadequate. The ideal language, says the narrator, should have nothing to do with the old (world), and it should even surpass the human dimension. This claim rejects the present – because it would mean to surrender – and rejects the past as well – because the protagonist well knows that living in the post-event world using previous schemes leads to certain failure (98).

As discussed above, the identity-fragmented protagonist looks at his present from a remote perspective that distorts his 'subjective shot,' while projecting his point-of-view into the future apocalypse he evokes throughout the novel. Virgili wants to express the coexistence of these three moments – of these different emotive segments of the character's identity – and he does so by using narrative modality uncommon for a novel. The "experimental simultaneity" at which Virgili's text aims (Pischedda 711) is constructed – I argue – by following cinematographic transitions and therefore by contaminating the written language of the novel with the visual and

⁶⁶ "I still think in human terms, a bad habit I cannot get rid of. To mistrust language, and perhaps to create a new language a new dimension. To abolish anything human *man is something that should be overcome he used to say*. A language without any connection with the old. To think and to speak in German. But it *is* a human language, it won't do." [My translation]

acoustic language of film. *La distruzione*, one could claim, is not made with words, but with images – as Mallarmé himself once said about movies (Ray 173-174).

Virgili uses the protagonist's perspective as a camera, and it cuts from one shot to another with the tempo of filmic editing. This is evident from the very beginning of the novel, which Virgili writes almost as directions for camera movements (11):

Giro il capo sul cuscino apro gli occhi. Intravedo gli arabeschi grigi della trapunta sul fondo giallo del tessuto. Il sudore mi bagna il collo il petto. Deviando un poco lo sguardo colgo il riquadro del muro alla base della finestra, le persiane accostate.⁶⁷

The protagonist wakes up and his eyes are lenses turning, through which Virgili unveils the space. A similar technique is employed a few pages later, where store signs appear on the page as the character passes by them. Mimicking a sort of fast reverse shot, Virgili writes (13-14):

Lascio questi pensieri. Ora devo telefonare. Da Laura. Il negozio è vicino, poche decine di metri prima dell'incrocio. *Qui si tingono BORSE E SCARPE in qualsiasi colore* – RAMMENDI PERFETTI.⁶⁸

Exactly like in cinematographic language, there is no need for an explanation: the proximity of two elements suggests a correlation between them. This active link becomes more complex once the codification develops, and it makes the film-viewer understand – for instance – that the shot of an interior coming right after an establishing shot of a building indicates that the first is contained within the latter. In his case, Virgili does not need to write that the character mentally reads the sign, because the proximity between the subject and the object already implies it. The

⁶⁷ “I turn my head on the pillow I open my eyes. I see grey arabesques of the quilt on the yellow fabric. Sweat is soaking my neck my chest. Slightly diverting my gaze I catch the square of wall under the window, the shutters set ajar.” [My translation]

⁶⁸ “I leave these thoughts. I must phone now. At Laura's. The shop is near, a few dozen meters before the crossroad. *Here BAGS AND SHOES dyeing in any color* – PERFECT PATCHING.” [My translation]

point-of-view of the protagonist is the shot through which the reader contextualizes any passage of the novel, and the simple presence – in capital letters – of the sign of Laura's shop immediately places it as object of the narrator's gaze. As longed for in turns by Mallarmé and Balázs, a wordy transition is unnecessary for the collision to produces meaning.

Similarly, when in Chapter Three the protagonist stops paying attention to what a colleague is saying and resumes reading the draft of the article he is working on, nothing introduces the transition (24):

Sollevo il capo ascolto un istante.

La conferenza sarà breve. La Gran Bretagna proporrà l'internazionalizzazione del canale di Suez e presenterà un progetto che prevede la creazione di un'autorità con personalità giuridica internazionale, e con escluso ogni scopo di lucro, dalla quale dipenderanno gli organismi tecnici, un Consiglio d'Amministrazione e tutti i servizi che dovranno far funzionare il canale. Le concessioni francesi e britanniche potranno

Dalle loro deposizioni si è appreso che i malfattori erano di statura media e indossavano vestiti scuri. Dopo avere precisato che essi portavano con sé una valigia di pelle nera nella quale hanno posto il denaro, la signorina Bianca Salinari ha affermato che

Sussulto. Sei l'amante di Stemmman voglio sapere sei l'amante di Stemmman ⁶⁹

The protagonist loses interest in the article his colleague is reading and goes back to his own work. We go from an acoustic dimension to a visual one – from him listening to him reading – and the author conveys this transition with a simple, abrupt interruption. A filmic cut, like the one triggered by the name 'Bianca,' which drags

⁶⁹ "I lift my head and I listen for a moment.

The conference will be short. Great Britain is suggesting the internationalization of the Suez Canal and is presenting a project for the creation of a non-profit international authority on which the technical agencies, the board of directors, and all the necessary services will depend. The French and British concessions will

According to their depositions, the wrongdoers were of medium height and wore dark clothes. After having specified that they were carrying a black suitcase inside which they put the money, Miss Bianca Salinari declared that

I jump. Are you Stemmman's lover I wanna know are you Stemmman's lover" [My translation]

the protagonist's attention away from the draft he is proofreading to a memory. The name works as the insert that bridges one shot to the following: it is the connective element of Balázs's 'linkage' (39).

Comparable transitions are frequent in the novel: in the fourth chapter of the third section (*Lunedì*), the landscape of a cheap painting brings the protagonist's memory to an intense night of the previous decade (215-216):

Come pittrice non esiste. Suoi i quadretti alle pareti. Nature morte paesaggi.
 Quello sfondo *i monti intersecati di spaccature*
 un nastro semovente di uomini automezzi
 che di notte infittiscono
 talvolta inchiodati sui sentieri per mancanza di carburante
 Presto Bianca Sali
 il gorgo della ritirata
 tallonati dall'88^a divisione americana
 Haben Sie irgend eine Nachricht aufefangen was wird übertragen
 la voce metallica dello Sturmbannführer
 al posto di radioascolto tento di captare sembrano in corso trattative⁷⁰

A detail of the painting triggers the memory. The transition, as always in this book, is not prepared or announced: it just happens. The image of a rocky landscape cross-fades into the establishing shot of a different sequence. At that point, as it happens in cinema, the camera closes the shot on the characters and the dialogue commences.

⁷⁰ "As a painter she's worthless. The little painting on the walls are hers. Still-lifes landscapes. That background
cracks crossing the mountains
 a conveyor belt of men vehicles
 that get more at night
 sometimes stuck on the trails because of a lack of fuel
 Hurry up Bianca get in
 the vortex of the retreat
 tailgated by the 88th American division
 Haben Sie irgend eine Nachricht aufefangen was wird übertragen
 the Sturmbannführer's metallic voice
 sitting at the radio I try to catch something it sounds like negotiations are going on"
 [My translation]

Even in this case, Virgili does not identify the direct speech using diacritics; he rather intends it as the soundtrack with which other filmic elements will be mixed.

Virgili shatters the syntax of the written text and replaces it with a cinematic one. The protagonist's gaze, however, is not simply presented as an incessant point-of-view shot. The long subjective shot that constitutes *La distruzione* – this intense stream of consciousness in search of simultaneity, devouring the world like a still detached and yet ravenous Pirandellian black spider – is a continuous extreme close-up as well.⁷¹ While offering a glimpse of all the character's dimensions through his very eyes, Virgili also 'points the camera' right at the protagonist's face. He unmasks his character – and perhaps himself – by producing an intense and uninterrupted close up of the protagonist's expressions. Only in this way can Virgili succeed in showing what Balázs would have called "the tempo of emotions" (35): it is only by pointing the camera on the multifaceted identity of his complex character that he manages to represent it without getting lost in the hypocrisy of words, and to conserve the strength of the sensation without watering it down with superfluous periphrasis. "There is something that words are incapable of," laments Balázs, and the "description of a feeling always lasts longer than the time taken by the feeling itself" (35). For this reason, Virgili wishes to eradicate everything unessential and to present the reader with a face – the character's – whose timeless expressivity aims at the simultaneity of its multiple dimensions (spatial, temporal, and emotive). The author's goal – as well as his greatest achievement – is indeed to do what Balázs deemed impossible (34): expressing simultaneity with words, in a written text.

Virgili builds a text that is at once a subjective shot and an extreme close-up, with all the constitutive images of the novel that departs from and goes back to the

⁷¹ I am of course referring to Luigi Pirandello's novel *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore* (1925), originally published in 1916 as *Si gira...*

narrator. The protagonist's face – like the first cinematograph – serves as camera and as projector: it is the ideal platform of Henri Bergson's *durée* and, when exposed with such a merciless close shot, it “affords the possibility of an emotional expressivity that is detached from time and space, and exists instead in a dimension of emotional experience” (Carter, Introduction xxxiii).⁷²

There is a little of love, a lot of lust, and endless anger springing from the protagonist's exposed identity. There is hate enough for two wars and the overwhelming will of revenge. The apocalypse is in the protagonist's eyes as well as the uncontrollable desire to witness another.

3.4. The Overimposing Finale

In his 2004 book *La grande sera del mondo*, Bruno Pischedda explores the content and the themes of seven Italian works of literature that deal with the apocalypse. Pischedda divides his book in two parts: he dedicates the first one to what he calls “*Il sentimento dell'apocalisse*,” while he titles the second part “*L'apocalisse narrata*.” In the latter section, Pischedda discusses Italian novels in which the apocalypse is actually told, while in the former part of his book he analyzes those texts in which the apocalypse is, in a certain way, just ‘sensed.’ Dante Virgili's *La distruzione* rightfully belongs to the first section of Pischedda's essay and it is fair to consider the immanent apocalypse of Virgili's pages as felt rather than told. The

⁷² “Henri Bergson's analysis of ‘duration’(*durée*) and time can help us to gain an understanding of this novel dimension. A melody, Bergson asserts, consists of individual notes that follow one another in time, but despite this the melody has no extension in time. For from the vantage point of the first note the last one is already implicit, and on the last note the first one is still - interpretatively - present. That is what makes every note part of a melody, which latter as a form has a duration, a course to run, and yet exists as a totality from the outset, instead of gradually coming into being in time. For the melody is not just the notes but their (audible) relationship. This relationship is not temporal. It exists in a different, spiritual dimension. To make a logical deduction may similarly take time because it involves work. But its premises and conclusions do not follow one another in temporal sequence. Physiognomy has a relation to space comparable to that existing between melody and time. The facial muscles that make expression possible may be close to each other in space. But it is their relation to one another that creates expression. These relations have no extension and no direction in space. No more than do feelings and thoughts, ideas and associations. All these are image-like in nature and yet non-spatial. This issue of the new, curiously paradoxical dimension of film, its creation of the visible spirit, is one we shall return to in connection with the montage of associations and ideas.” (Balázs 101)

protagonist's desire for the end of the world is real, but the nuclear war he prays for throughout the entire novel is just in his mind. On the other hand, the simultaneity discussed in the previous section intensifies the ominous clarity of the protagonist's imagery: if everything coexists in the narrator's perspective, then the imagined events are as material as his present and past ones. Since the reliability of the narrator cannot be questioned – because of the impossible and superfluous task of determining it – everything he claims is true as long as it is framed within his perceptive dimension: whatever he feels, is. Virgili's apocalypse is therefore at once felt and told. In addition, the real apocalypse of *La distruzione* is not the one forthcoming, but the one that has already passed.

The protagonist's feverish anticipation of the future is indeed extremely graphic (57):

Gli artigli mostruosi dello spostamento d'aria. Ombre di esseri viventi carbonizzati nel fuoco del lampo atomico. I contorni di una mano di una testa su un pezzo di maceria. Superficie liscia ombre ben conservate ah ah. L'ombrello a fungo sopra le metropoli. L'immensa fiammata di luce giallobiancastra 2.000 gradi di CALORE. Arsi vivi. Le carni si liquefanno cadono a brandelli. Il suono delle ossa che si spezzano. La tempesta di fuoco. E stavolta *non* soltanto sulle città tedesche. Die Rache der eingestürzten Tempel. La GIOIA per le città americane incenerite, finora invulnerabili. *Anche le pietre piangono e sanguinano* un momento della fine del mondo. Montagne di cadaveri bruciano er ist gerächt GERÄCHT.⁷³

And again towards the last pages of the book, in another paragraphs that exalt, with a Futurist tone, the nuclear war (256-257):

⁷³ "The monstrous claws of the air blast. Shadows of living beings charred in the fire of the atomic flash. The silhouette of a hand of a head on a piece of ruins. Smooth surface well-preserved shadows ah ah. The mushroom-shaped umbrella over the metropolis. The immense blaze of yellow-whitish light 2,000 degrees of HEAT. Burned alive. Flesh liquefies drops in pieces. The sound of the breaking bones. The storm of fire. And this time *not* only on German cities. Die Rache der eingestürzten Tempel. The JOY for the incinerated American cities, so far invulnerable. *Even the stones cry and bleed* a moment of the end of the world. Mountains of burning bodies er ist gerächt GERÄCHT." [My translation]

sfera gigante di fuoco. Divora tutto.

Le due semisfere di uranio nella bomba combaciano raggiungono la massa critica
ESPLODONO

$E=MC^2$ LA FORMULA DELLA VENDETTA

materia volatilizzata liberazione di energia

[...]

Mi sento inondare di sudore

separazione degli isotopi bombardamento neutronico di nuclei d'U 235
frammenti cripto bario

neutroni liberati fissionano altro nucleo reazione a catena

danza dei neutroni nel reattore miliardi di esplosioni dei nuclei frantumatisi

[...]

bomba A innesca H amplificazione del massacro fusione dei nuclei leggeri a
milioni di GRADI

il calore vaporizza gli umani la GUERRA la distruzione NUCLEARE ringrazio
l'onnipotente fra le lacrime l'intera struttura della REALTÀ salta in aria in
deflagrazioni colossali immani onde d'urto

lacerazioni nel cielo l'orizzonte erutta

incendi si dilatano ogni cosa dentro un vortice di fiamme riverberi giganteschi

città si sciolgono blocchi di popolazioni scompaiono fra parossismi di terrore

MEGAMORTE

orde di profughi nudi fratturati mutilati urlanti *occhi accecati orbite vuote*

superstiti piagati trasfigurati combusti *donne si dimenano rantolano* marciscono
immobili privi d'acqua cibo fra invocazioni d'aiuto lamenti imprecazioni⁷⁴

⁷⁴ "giant fire sphere. It devours everything.

Two uranium hemispheres inside the bomb line up reach the critical mass EXPLOD

$E=MC^2$ THE FORMULA OF REVENGE

volatilized matter discharge of energy [...]

I feel sweat soaking me

scission of the isotopes neutron bombing of U235 nuclei fragments krypton barium

discharged neutrons fission another nucleus chain reaction

neutron dance inside the reactor billions of explosions of the shattered nuclei [...]

A-bomb triggers H amplification of the massacre light nuclei meltdown at billions DEGREE

heat vaporizes humans WAR NUCLEAR destruction I thank the almighty in tears the entire structure of REALITY

blows up in colossal deflagrations enormous blast waves

lacerations in the sky the horizon erupts

blazes spread fire twirls roars *blinded eyes empty orbits*

plagued transfigured burned survivors *women struggle wheeze* rot motionless waterless foodless among cries for
help moans imprecations"

[My translation]

A tremendous need for universal death flows from these lines, and it is in sequences such as this one that Pischedda identifies the apocalyptic drive of Virgili's novel. This is undoubtedly true, but I believe that these grim images refer more to the past than to the future. Virgili's protagonist envisions the nuclear blast as the ultimate act avenging Hitler's defeat (62):

E LA FIAMMA GIGANTESCA SI ESTENDE SU TUTTA L'EUROPA la
sudicia Europa città dilaniate incenerite cento milioni di corpi duecento milioni
miliardi di frammenti di pietra miliardi di cumuli di pietra

mi occorre un miliardo di cadaveri l'Europa esplode in neri grumi di città mi
rialzo a sedere sul letto con uno strozzato grido di trionfo l'Europa si disintegra in
montagne di macerie mari di lava contemplo lo spezzone fumante di un'Europa arsa
dal fuoco Tu sei VENDICATO il cuore subisce come un arresto mi duole per eccesso
di gioia⁷⁵

Virgili's apocalypse is therefore an event of reaction that finds meaning in the collapse the protagonist suffered – together with the Nazi-Fascism and with its personification, Hitler – when the war was lost and the world changed. The flames of the protagonist's visions are the impossible redemption that the character nevertheless seeks – “la distruzione totale riscatta le angosce del passato e la Sua morte” (63)⁷⁶ – and there would be no apocalypse, in *La distruzione*, if not for the one the protagonist has already, although barely, survived. These two, separate ‘ends’ of the world must be therefore read as one, overlaying disaster: the apocalypse the protagonist envisions is nothing but the reliving of the one he actually experienced.

⁷⁵ “AND THE ENORMOUS FLAME SPREADS ON THE WHOLE EUROPE suicidal Europe torn apart burned down cities one hundred million bodies two hundred million billion fragments of stone billions of piles of stone I need one billion bodies Europe explodes in black clots of cities I sit on the bed holding a triumph cry Europe disintegrates in mountains of ruins seas of lava I contemplate the smoking chunk of a burned down Europe You are AVENGED the heart suffers something similar to an arrest it aches out of too much joy”

[My translation]

⁷⁶ “the total destruction redeems the anguish from the past and His death” [My translation]

After having aimed at this superimposition for the entire novel, Virgili finalizes it towards the end of the book. When the narration of the last hours of the Nazi-Fascist experience of the protagonist reaches its climax, his identification with Hitler is complete, and the collapse of the Nazi regime and the apocalyptic visions of the narrator merge into each other. At that point, Hitler's death coincides with the ignition of the ultimate nuclear bomb (256), while the protagonist – combining more than ever the time dimensions in which he exists – painfully takes his leave from the retiring German army and from Bianca, the woman he then loved (248-249). The last, agitated pages of the novel go fast and almost without sign of punctuation, and Virgili's experimentalism reaches here its highest moment, together with its post-apocalyptic tone. It is indeed in the final pages, when in the anti-linearity and atemporality of the simultaneous description of two different (and yet equal) collapses the protagonist is left alone, that Virgili pictures his character with the same dramatic features of Shelley's hero. One by one, the German silhouettes that had filled up his existence disappear, and his sudden and unbearable solitude is as excruciating as any post-apocalyptic last man's (248-249):

rimango immobile presso il cancello l'auto di Stemmman ha già iniziato la salita
radi sentieri si snodano confusi veli di nebbia ondeggiano sempre più spessi non odo
che il rumore dei motori *quel cupo ronfare* saluto militarment Leb' wohl comando
Südstern lo dico forte poi abbasso il braccio crollo come sotto uno sforzo troppo aspro
a passi lenti torno nel parco un gelido silenzio intorno quasi la guerra avesse distrutto
ogni esistenza umana e io fossi il solo inutile superstite

Tutto finito. Bianca scomparve.

Io testimonia la fine di un mondo⁷⁷

He is the useless survivor, witness of the end of his world – and therefore of the beginning of another one. The protagonist is immediately aware of his belonging to the collapsing side, and this certainty is what makes him *inutile*: he will not be part of the reconstruction of the new world, because he is embodiment of the crumbled one. The flames of the *ekpyrosis* have burned down his existential dimension leaving him lingering: the protagonist's world has vanished, but he was left behind, forgotten and unable to take an active role in the following *apokatastasis*. Destroyed and yet present, neutralized but still a thinking entity, the protagonist of *La distruzione* remains in the middle: spectator of his own end, now he haunts the present of a meaningless life and – like a cursed ghost – he lives over and over the torment of his personal, agonizing destruction.

3.5. Conclusions: As If I Were Never Born.

The protagonist of *La distruzione* never looks for salvation, and he desperately wants the next apocalypse to have no eschaton. Having survived one apocalypse already, he wants to make sure not to live through another: he knows that there is nothing worse than not belonging, that there is something excruciating in being trapped within an uncanny dimension, where everything looks familiar and very alien at once. He mercilessly wishes everyone to die in terrible pain, but in his last pages he does not hope for anybody else to struggle with the same agony he endured: after the nuclear apocalypse, all humans must be gone (258):

⁷⁷ “I stay still close to the gate Stemmman's car has started climbing the hill sparse trails twist and turn confused veils of fog ripple thicker and thicker I hear nothing but the noise of engines *that deep rumble* I do the salute Leb' wohl chief Südster I say it aloud and then I lower my arm I crumble as under an unbearable effort stepping slowly I go back to the park a freezing silent around as if war had destroyed any human existence and I were the only useless survivor

All is over. Bianca vanished.

I give testimony of the end of a world” [My translation]

Tutto si fa silenzio il giorno sempre più buio. Ma è un'ALBA nuova che segna la dissoluzione dell'umanità. La mia stessa morte Mut zum Abgrund come non fossi mai nato.⁷⁸

Plants and other mutated organisms take over the human-less world (258) and, as in the best postmodern post-apocalyptic fiction (e.g. Vonnegut and Ballard), the real shift is from the most violent anthropocentrism to the most extreme allocentrism. Virgili's vindictive explosion does not serve to bring back the splendor of his war-years, nor does it resuscitate Fascist drives: the blast blows away the whole of humanity. By doing so, Virgili's apocalypse eradicates the concept itself of memory, and it brutally overcomes the inadequacy of human language. If everyone goes, then it is as if nobody was ever there, and if there is no longer an active subject determining itself and its surroundings, then nothing is determined and nothing exists as a perception. The protagonist's apocalypse is a massive murder-suicide that comes from his being unable to cope with the world; it is full of regrets and jealousy, but there is no trace of a sense of guilt, because the survivor sees his being made of *pars destruens* only as an imposed sentence, not as a choice. By destroying everyone – especially himself – the protagonist frees his personal time-dimensions from the historical curse of remembrance and he eliminates all the subjects, finally leaving the objects alone in their timeless, self-sufficient ontology. The presence of something other than human is made irrelevant by the absence of any possible narrator, and so the novel ends because it finally is impossible for narrative to continue.

Dante Virgili's apocalypse consumes the same language by which it is told, it disintegrates its own narrator, and it finishes in silence. A silence the narrator

⁷⁸ "It all gets silent the day darker and darker. But it is a new DAWN that determines the dissolution of humanity. My own death Mut zum Abgrund as if I were never born." [My translation]

interrupts with a stream of anger as long as the space between one end of the world
and the other.

He tried to think of something to say, but he could not. He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. (McCarthy 88)

Chapter Four: Grayed Out.

The Apocalypse of Language in Antonioni's *Il deserto rosso*.

4.1. Introduction: A Different Kind of Survivor.

Michelangelo Antonioni looks at the world with the astonishment of someone who has survived the apocalypse and who now rambles through unfamiliar lands. There is suffering, in his gaze, and angst. But there is also curiosity, a certain fascination, and no sign of anger. Unlike Virgil's destroyer, who perceives nothing but the horrible vacuity of the post-apocalyptic world, Antonioni is able to glimpse the intrinsic, plastic beauty of a reality to which he does not belong, but that he does not reject either. He is a different kind of survivor, who does not seek revenge nor destruction: he might never be able to adjust, but he will most certainly try to understand.

The Post-World War II process of industrialization, with its "intrigue of power, beauty, and squalor" where machines and technological progress are transforming Italy's natural landscapes, is an occasion for Antonioni to claim the absolute need for people to accept the change and to adapt to it (Architecture of Vision 98). "Machines are not the cause of the crisis of the anguish that people have been talking about for years," he claims in 1970. Therefore, "we must not long for the more primitive times, thinking that they were a more natural landscape for man."

Rather than negating technological progress, man must “mold and restrict the machines” to his measure (98). Men and women must adapt to the new world: as happens in post-apocalyptic fiction, the survivors need to understand the ‘language’ of the new reality in order to adjust to it.

In many ways, this is precisely what Antonioni does in his works of art: he adjusts his cinema to the external reality by ‘molding and restricting’ the complexity of the modern world to the dimensions of his camera, and by rearranging the cinematic language of his films to the modern world. The physical space of modernity – the city, for instance, with the geometrical presence of its buildings and the abstract designs of its overhead power lines – is indeed an expressive opportunity for Antonioni rather than an obstacle. It is by framing his characters into such a modern space that he finds his way to read and to interpret reality productively. A mutation in cinematic language is his answer to the call for transformation that the new landscape demands. Unlike Virgili, who refuses the present and manipulates its language into annihilation, Antonioni uses the very aesthetics of the new world as the substantial matter of his narrative. He reinvents a language, he codifies a new mode of expression in the attempt to better grasp the essence of a reality that is at the same time subject and means of its own representation, but that – in Antonioni’s films – is far from being objective.

In spite of his desire to embrace the changing world and to adapt to it (Deleuze 204), Antonioni cannot overcome his philosophical condition of alterity, his belonging to a different linguistic and aesthetic cultural moment. Notwithstanding his deep interest in the representation of the new reality, Antonioni is not an original part of it, and he must consequently relate to it from the liminal stance of a ‘survivor’ who approaches it from an ‘alien’ perspective. His representation of reality is therefore

extremely subjective and it is from a pre-industrial – and fascinated – point-of-view that he describes the world. The collision of a director's inner reality with his visual experience – therefore the discrepancy between the perception and the perceived – determines the angle of any shot, the construction of any frame, and the color of any sequence. Antonioni's cinematic language expresses reality in a formal solution – his films – that is the synthesis of the unspeakable language of the post-event reality and of the Bergsonian partial perception of it: the 'world of tomorrow' is seen through the eyes of a limited, pre-event observer (Antonioni himself).

Most of Antonioni's characters – his alter egos – share this 'outsider's' perspective in presenting the existential conundrum of inhabiting an alien dimension and the lacerating realization of being unable to communicate with the world (Claudia in *L'avventura*, Vittoria in *L'eclisse*, Giovanni and Lidia in *La notte*, just to mention a few). Many of the protagonists in Antonioni's films are indeed survivors themselves. They are pre-apocalyptic characters lost in the aftermath of an apocalypse that arrived without preparing them in advance. An invisible – figural – bomb exploded without making any noise, but it exploded nonetheless. For this precise reason, several elements of apocalyptic narrative are explicitly or implicitly present in Antonioni's works, among which *Il deserto rosso* (1964) stands out – as I argue – as an actual example of post-apocalyptic fiction.

In the following sections, I observe the elements of apocalyptic fiction in the movies Antonioni directed between 1960 and 1975 – crucial years of social revolt and linguistic experimentalism – and I point out the aesthetic, formal, and thematic characteristics that specifically link *Il deserto rosso* to post-apocalyptic fiction. Antonioni's ninth feature film shares several essential patterns with other works belonging to the apocalyptic genre, and it is particularly close to Cormac McCarthy's

Pulitzer prize-winning novel, *The Road* (2006). I underline the proximity of both works, thereby demonstrating that Antonioni's film belongs to the genre of apocalyptic fiction. I then explore how the apocalypse of *Il deserto rosso* is an apocalypse of language, focused on the intimate relation of the self with the external world and once again based on the troubling comparison of two different realities (one preceding, the other one following the 'end of the world'). Finally, I argue that the portrayal of such an intimate and subjective apocalypse is effectively achieved by using what Pier Paolo Pasolini called a "cinema of poetry." A poetic language, such as the one that Russian film critic Viktor Shklovsky had already described in 1927, is, as I claim, the only means to coherently represent an ungraspable reality that would otherwise remain unspoken.

4.2. "C'è molta polvere qui:" Elements of Apocalyptic Fiction in Antonioni's Films (1960-1975).

Between 1960 and 1975, Michelangelo Antonioni directs seven motion pictures: *L'avventura* (*The Adventure*, 1960), *La notte* (*The Night*, 1961), *L'eclisse* (1962), *Il deserto rosso* (*Red Desert*, 1964), *Blow-Up* (1966), *Zabriskie Point* (1970), and *Professione: reporter* (*The Passenger*, 1975). These films all contain either elements of apocalyptic fiction or direct references to the apocalypse. While it is true that these films convey what Frank Kermode calls "immanent" apocalypse – as opposed to the "imminent" End of the eschatological tradition (25), with the exception of *Il deserto rosso*, none can be ascribed to the genre. The apocalypse indeed enters these films not as the sense of an oncoming catastrophe but as a tangible

and unmovable presence that guides the aesthetic and thematic choices of the director.⁷⁹

Antonioni's international affirmation begins, perhaps paradoxically, with the "boorish reception" that *L'avventura* was given at the Cannes Film Festival in 1960, and of which Peter Brunette provides an account in his *The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni* (28-29). *L'avventura*, which would eventually reach the status of a canonic work of art (28), is the first 'chapter' of the famous *trilogia dell'incomunicabilità*: Antonioni's trilogy "on modernity and its discontents" that he completed with *La notte* and *L'eclisse* (Holden 6). The modern man's struggle with communication that Antonioni explores in these three films – also a motif in his later production – is similar to the difficulty of the post-apocalyptic survivor in relating to his surroundings and to himself. Modern Western man – that is to say after Hiroshima – is not only threatened by the possibility of a nuclear apocalypse, but also and perhaps primarily by the risk of an "intimate catastrophe," a "radical crisis" that jeopardizes his "cultural existence" and impedes his communications (de Martino 470-471). Modern literature – as de Martino states – 'thematically' tends towards the apocalypse (471), and so does Antonioni's cinema in his trilogy.

Ernesto de Martino points out that the apocalypse of modern literature is Albert Camus's *absurde*, Jean-Paul Sartre's *nausée*, and Alberto Moravia's *noia* (544). Apocalypse is the feeling that something has changed (530), but the impossibility of expressing or even understanding this state. Apocalypse is the broken connection between the individual on the one hand and the world on the other, with the former left as an alienated stranger in an unknown place (544). Finally,

⁷⁹ In 1972, Antonioni also directs a documentary titled *Chung Kuo, Cina* that I do not take into account while analyzing his works of fiction.

apocalypse is the apathy of Antonioni's protagonists, who detachedly wander within the geometrical frames of *L'avventura*.

4.2.1. A Radical Journey: *L'avventura* (1960).

L'avventura tells the story of a woman who disappears during a trip on a small Mediterranean island and of the love affair between her best friend and her lover. The theme of broken communication is so prominent that the characters often speak without looking towards their interlocutors. In several sequences, Antonioni creates beautiful *tableaux vivants* with 'clusters' of actors who dialogue with each other while facing different directions, each one of them lost in a personal and unsuccessful attempt to connect with reality (Fig. 1). Conceptually, the alien space in which Antonioni's characters wander is the same unwelcoming environment presented in apocalyptic fiction, and the stark island on which a long and important part of the movie is set perfectly represents – both symbolically and visually – the post-apocalyptic landscape of literature and cinema.

With *L'avventura*, Antonioni "radicalizes his search" for new linguistic and expressive codes "by going beyond traditional storytelling" and, as cinema critic Adriano Aprà claims, by also going beyond the idea of traditional characters (Elements of Landscape).⁸⁰ The 'intimate' apocalypse of the movie is therefore visually rendered in the plastic constructions of the shots, but it also involves the plot – which abruptly 'breaks' when the characters of the movie suddenly stop looking for the vanished friend. The geometrical style of Antonioni's film – which entails that the background tends to prevail over the characters or the plot itself – deserved the Special Jury Award at the 1960 Cannes Film Festival for "a new movie language" and

⁸⁰ The short documentary produced by Criterion as an extra to Antonioni's *L'eclisse* can be retrieved at the following URL: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vIhh62oWp9o>> For more details, see bibliography.

for “the beauty of its images” (89). In *L'avventura*, space exists indeed without any characters in it: it is a ‘space-in-itself’ or more extensively – borrowing Eugene Thacker’s expression – a “world-in-itself” (4-7).

According to the American philosopher, the ‘world-for-us’ – the world “that we, as human beings, interpret and give meaning to” (4) – is to be distinguished from the ‘world-in-itself,’ which is “the world in some inaccessible, already-given state, which we turn into the world-for-us” (5). It is a paradoxical concept, as Thacker argues, because the moment we “think [the world-in-itself] and attempt to act on it, it ceases to be the world-in-itself and becomes the world-for-us” (5). In *L'avventura*, Antonioni precisely shows the rough relationship between his characters and their world: their vain attempt to make sense out of it and the discomforting realization of its independent presence. Antonioni’s world-in-itself, however, is not only natural – non-human, as in the case of the island – but also and perhaps primarily ‘post-human.’ When Sandro and Claudia, on their way out of Noto, reach a deserted town on the top of a hill, she is anguished by the concrete walls, the shattered windows, the human-like and yet definitely human-less environment. It is the “impersonal and horrific” (6) world-without-us that terrifies Claudia: the unconceivable and yet somehow perceivable “subtraction of the human from the world” (5). Antonioni translates such angst into aesthetics, and when Claudia and Sandro leave the town, the camera unnaturally and meaningfully lingers on the emptiness of that post-apocalyptic world.

4.2.2. The City Belongs to Itself: *La notte* (1961)

Antonioni’s radical search for linguistic experimentation continues in *La notte*, where Milan’s urban landscape offers him the opportunity to create abstract images out of the geometrical forms of the buildings while telling the story of a day in the life of a couple whose marriage is in crisis. The characters’ mental immobility is

symbolized by static objects and figures and echoes the dull wandering of the protagonists, as happens towards the end of the film, when Giovanni and Lidia are walking on a field and their dark profiles are doubled by the presence of two trees. Exactly like the trunks of these trees, they are unable to “touch” each other in spite of their constant physical proximity (Figure 2). The impossibility of communication – which is the cursed of Virgili’s protagonist and almost kills Rick Grimes in the pilot episode of *The Walking Dead* – is a major theme of apocalyptic fiction and one of the central motifs of *La notte* in particular and of Antonioni’s films in general.⁸¹

What is more, the loss of identity that the protagonists of *La notte* experience – a topos of modern narrative – is a crucial theme of apocalyptic fiction as well. In Antonioni’s film, the alienating presence of the city is sufficient to underline the ‘otherness’ of the characters walking through its streets, in which the protagonists constitute little more than a superfluous addition to an esthetically self-sufficient entity (Figure 3). The characters are therefore “disoriented” and, as we recall from Chapter One, so are the protagonists of *The Walking Dead* when they first realize that they are living the zombie-apocalypse. The disorientation that Rick remembers from his first encounter with the new reality – which initially leads him to believe he is insane – is similar, in many ways, to the constant bewilderment of Antonioni’s characters throughout *La notte*. Rick’s state of confusion as he is wandering through a deserted town right after he wakes up from his coma, then again, is not different from Lidia aimless walk through the streets of Milan: both characters are overwhelmed with the unexpected feeling of belonging no longer to their known surroundings. For different reasons, the urban space has become a *locus* of estrangement and, while in

⁸¹ On the protagonist of Virgili’s novel, see Chapter Three in general and 3.5 in particular. On *The Walking Dead* and communication within it, see Chapter One, in particular 1.6 and 1.7.

The Walking Dead the city “belongs to the dead,” in *La notte* it belongs to itself.⁸²

Space is therefore once again the real protagonist of Antonioni’s film. In *La notte*, space is an aesthetically independent, prominent entity that at once provokes and underlines the “desertification of the character’s emotions,” as Italian director and film critic Carlo di Carlo argues (*Elements of Landscape*).⁸³

Antonioni immediately sets the tone: the film opens on a busy street, but the ‘human level’ is soon abandoned when the camera tilts up and the scene cuts to the top of a skyscraper. Over the opening titles, the camera dollies down, showing the city from an ‘impossible’ point of view that belongs to the building rather than to any human eye. The spectator sees the reflection of Milan on the glass surface of the windows – through the perspective of the building itself, one could argue – and, although there are vehicles moving around, not one person can be distinguished. In addition, composer Giorgio Gaslini’s electronic music contributes to the ‘de-naturalization’ of the sequence: rather than supporting the narration and facilitating the audience’s immersion in the film, Gaslini’s tune brings a sense of inexplicable artificiality and underlines the ‘non-humanity’ of Antonioni’s opening shots. The director is expressing the complete self-sufficiency of the human-less environment: the city does not depend on the perspectives of the characters, it is not defined by their active action of subjects; the city exists – aesthetically, ontologically – by itself.

In Antonioni’s film, the human presence does not determine reality – space, the city –, because it is precisely in spite of human presence and subjectivity that

⁸² As for the impact of Rick Grimes with the post-apocalyptic world of *The Walking Dead*, see the first three episodes of Season 1. In particular, the third episode begins with the group of survivor discussing their feelings about the abrupt change of life they are going through. This scene points to the difficulty of putting into words what they have actually been experiencing. “Words fall short,” says Dale in S01E03 “Tell it to the Frogs”.

⁸³ The observations on the “desertification of the characters’ emotions,” are Carlo di Carlo’s, who is interviewed together with Adriano Aprà in the short documentary – *Elements of Landscape* – that the Criterion Collection produced in 2005 as an extra feature for *L’eclisse* (see bibliography).

reality is. The characters' role becomes therefore vague and ungraspable, especially for the protagonists of the film, who wander in a space they are no longer certain to be a vital part of and who collapse into anguish when glimpsing the frightening and self-sufficient 'world-without-us'.⁸⁴ In Antonioni's Milan, the characters are as much unnecessary, marginalized and alienated as the survivors of *The Walking Dead* are when roaming around Atlanta.

4.2.3. A Taste of Science Fiction: *L'eclisse* (1962).

The third 'episode' of Antonioni's trilogy is *L'eclisse*, the story of a girl who breaks up with an older lover and later starts an affair with a young stockbroker. Once again – and perhaps even more than in the two other films –, space alienates the apathetic characters, whose emotional dimension is slowly and yet inexorably fading out. In addition, as Aprà points out in a recent interview, *L'eclisse* conveys a feel of science fiction that Antonioni deliberately infuses into his movie from its first sequences onward (Elements of Landscape).

In lockstep with Antonioni's abstract composition of the frames and with Giovanni Fusco's soundtrack, the science fiction elements of the film contribute to building a visual experience that tends to alienate the viewer in a way that 1960s mainstream cinema would not. As Aprà observes, the mushroom-shaped building that the protagonist Vittoria sees from a window at the beginning of the movie and that will reappear several times throughout the film relocates the plot in an unfamiliar dimension. While Romans would recognize this bizarre building as an actual

⁸⁴ About the 'world-without-us', writes Eugene Thacker: "The world-in-itself may co-exist with the world-for-us – indeed the human being is defined by its impressive capacity for not recognizing this distinction. By contrast, the world-without-us cannot co-exist with the human world-for-us; the world-without-us is the subtraction of the human from the world. To say that the world-without-us is antagonistic to the human is to attempt to put things in human terms, in the terms of the world-for-us. To say that the world-without-us is neutral with respect to the human, is to attempt to put things in the terms of the world-in-itself. The world-without-us lies somewhere in between, in a nebulous zone that is at once impersonal and horrific." (In the Dust of This Planet 5-6)

restaurant in the EUR district of the city, all other spectators, as Aprà claims, find it a disturbing, out-of-place sculpture of the atomic mushroom. This way, Antonioni plays with the landscape and with the expectations of the viewers, who are bound to question the spatial collocation of the film, and perhaps even its genre. We might consider the first shot of the mushroom an ‘anti-establishing shot,’ because it disorients the viewer by ‘contaminating’ the location with an alien element.

In the famous, abstract final sequence of the film, Antonioni shows the mushroom-shaped building again, this time in a long shot that evokes a science-fiction atmosphere echoing the visual style of some episodes of *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964). Fusco’s music builds a certain tension, as if an event were imminent, while with eagerness and even anxiety, a group of people is waiting for something – a bus, as the viewer will learn in due time. When the bus finally arrives, the camera follows a man stepping out of it while reading a newspaper article dealing with the precarious state of peace and the concrete risk of atomic war. Still, the group is waiting, and the viewer arrives at the conclusion that it is not the bus that everyone is waiting for. Other close-ups of faces expressing impatience and expectance follow. The final shot of a street lamp that fills the screen while Fusco’s music becomes dramatic in crescendo is the last reference to the apocalypse: a reference to the blinding explosion that everyone seems to fear, that everybody seems to be waiting for, and that may finally transform the world into the very human-less urban landscape that Antonioni shows multiple times throughout the film and with great effect. The threat of human extinction seems to haunt *L’eclisse*’s final sequence, but Antonioni’s apocalypse has actually little to do with a real nuclear blast. In his film, the bomb has already exploded, but nobody has noticed it: everyone is still waiting for

an event whose consequences are already. Antonioni will continue these reflections in his *Il deserto rosso*, as I discuss in 4.3.

4.2.4. Simulacra and Simulation: *Blow-Up* (1966).

Antonioni's passion for abstraction continues in the first of the three films he directed for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. *Blow-Up* aims at recreating "reality in an abstract form," and, by doing so, it questions the authenticity of human experience (Architecture of Vision 89). "One of its main themes," as Antonioni himself writes about his film, "is to see or not to see the correct value of things" (89).⁸⁵

Produced by Carlo Ponti and starring David Hemmings, *Blow-Up* is the story of a fashion photographer who realizes that he has accidentally captured the images of a committed murder already on film. There is just one clear reference to the apocalypse in Antonioni's first entirely English-language film: a pacifist, anti-nuclear rally in London, where some protesters hold up boards against the war and the atomic bomb (Figure 5). However, although at a deeper level, Antonioni's reflection on the reliability of the human perception of reality is the same that apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction have considered crucial since their very origin: since the Futurist movement of the early 20th century and even since the social reconstruction-oriented apocalypse of Giovanni Boccaccio. As shown in previous chapter, any post-apocalyptic tale is the story of the discrepancy between reality and its perception.

In *Blow-Up*, the protagonist takes some photographs of a couple in a park. Only after having developed the negatives, he notices that a figure with a gun may have been hiding in the bushes. He then begins enlarging details of the images repeatedly, and observing the blow-ups, he determines that a man must have actually been killed in front of his eyes. Looking for final proof, he returns to the park at night

⁸⁵ From *Corriere della Sera*, 12 February 1982. Translated by Allison Cooper.

and finds a corpse. The story, however, does not continue according to the traditional paradigms of crime fiction: not only is the mystery not solved and the murderer never punished, but in the end the truth itself is being called into question by the disappearance of the rolls, the negatives, the blow-ups, and of the body itself. The murder probably happened, but without any physical evidence, it might as well never have taken place: the protagonist's mechanical eye (his camera) had perceived the event, but without the photographs compensating what he did not see, the experience is lost. In *Blow-Up*, reality is constituted by its representation rather than by itself. Thus, when the representation goes missing, reality lacks truth. Simulation is not just as important as the reality it is representing, but even interchangeable with it. The photographic representation of the truth can very well tell much more than reality could in the first place (as proven by the fact that the camera caught an event both the protagonist and the viewer did not perceive). Indeed, reality and its representations must always differ from each other: as Jacques Derrida points out, any repetition of reality – any blow-up, as Antonioni might have said – is different from all the others, or it could not be individuated as a separated entity. This intrinsic self-sufficiency exponentially multiplies reality and, in the end, really gets lost – as Baudrillard will later argue in *Simulacra and Simulations*. Although the photographic representation “starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent” and that the image is “the reflection of a basic reality,” it ends up bearing “no relation to any reality whatever” (Baudrillard, *Selected Writings* 170).⁸⁶

In the post-modern age, the end of the world is the end of trust in human perception and representation of it. For Antonioni, the apocalypse does not arrive through the violent explosion of a nuclear bomb, but through the sudden realization

⁸⁶ About Derrida, see Brunette, Peter. “Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction.” *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*. Ed. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. 91-95.

that – at a certain moment along the way – people have lost their grip on reality.

According to Antonioni, there is a dramatic discrepancy between the modern world and modern man's approach to it. In his *Decameron*, Boccaccio fosters a proactive attitude towards reality, encouraging the members of his own society to embrace the unavoidable changes that have already irreversibly altered the nature of the world. In the same manner – although perhaps with a less optimistic impulse – Antonioni advocates a radical change of the human understanding of the world:

[Modern man is] burdened with a heavy baggage of emotional traits which cannot exactly be called old and outmoded but rather unsuited and inadequate. [...] He reacts, he loves, he hates, he suffers under the sway of moral forces and myths which today, when we are at the threshold of reaching the moon, should not be the same as those that prevailed at the time of Homer, but nevertheless are. [...] For even though we know that the ancient codes of morality are decrepit and no longer tenable, we persist, with a sense of perversity that I would only ironically define as pathetic, in remaining loyal to them. Thus moral man who has no fear of the scientific unknown is today afraid of the moral unknown.⁸⁷

From *L'avventura* onwards, Antonioni's films are meant to show the old and obsolete myths and conventions by which Post-World War II men and women live (Brunette, *Films of Michelangelo Antonioni* 50), in the same way as Boccaccio had invited his readers to reconsider the value-system upon which their priorities were set. The concept that modern apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction get from Boccaccio's legacy to is the one of a re-foundation of society based on reinterpretation of reality and on the effort of adapting to it. Antonioni, who, as testified by his own statements, proceeds from a similar philosophical approach, does however not share Boccaccio's solid trust in humanity that emanates from the pages

⁸⁷ Antonioni circulated this statement at the world premiere of *L'avventura* in 1960. I quote these excerpts from Brunette, Peter. *The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 50-51. According to Brunette's notes, the complete text of the statement can be found in *L'avventura*, edited by Seymour Benjamin Chatman and Guido Fink.

of the *Decameron*. Antonioni's characters are either oblivious prisoners of the old system, or neurotic individuals who regretfully realize that they are living within a simulation.

4.2.5. The Other Desert: *Zabriskie Point* (1970)

In post-apocalyptic fiction, younger people in general and children in particular often embody the prototype of a generation with the potential not merely to survive the apocalypse, but to live in its aftermath as it were their native land. In *Zabriskie Point*, there are important examples of the post-apocalyptic 'race' that – according to Antonioni – might have what it takes to defeat the angst, the neurosis, the 'blindness' that have afflicted most of his characters up to this moment.

Antonioni's 'American' movie is the story of a young man and a young woman who are both living –although in different ways – in between the counterculture of the 1960s and the establishment, and who go through an intense experience together while travelling through Death Valley in California. The desert provides a setting that already suggests a post-apocalyptic landscape, as the iconography of literature and cinema of those years demonstrates. *Zabriskie Point* in particular is itself, one might argue, the 'scar' of an ancient apocalypse, of a geological transformation that mutated a lake in sandy dunes. Death Valley, with its 'alien' and alienating beauty and with its small, rusty human settlements, demarks a space that aesthetically encloses the apocalypse. It is in this scenery that the female protagonist Daria encounters a group of children that have been brought to the desert because they are "sick, emotionally sick" and who seem to have formed a small, autonomous community of "wild kids." Seemingly at ease in spite of and within their surroundings, they play within what looks like the rusty, metallic ruins of a pre-event society, featuring rollover vehicles, empty steel drums, and a lot of dust. At the same

time, they are in relationship of reciprocal ‘interference’ with the old owner of the diner where Daria has stopped by on her way: the old man is disturbed by the presence of the kids, who break one of the windows of his restaurant with a rock while he is talking to the girl. In this sequence, Antonioni draws a clear parallel between the wild kids and the remarkably old patrons of the saloon – the embodiments not only of two different generations, but of two different cultural approaches to the apocalypse (that is, the change, the transformation). The old men stay inside, in a fortress-like building that keeps the effects of the apocalypse at bay; the kids, on the other hand, live in the apocalyptic landscape and actively take part in the ‘invasion’ of the pre-event reality by crashing a window of the bar and by therefore having a ‘piece’ of the end of the world entering the threshold of the old men’s vain resistance. The broken window is a step towards the transformation of the anti-change stronghold into another element of the wasteland that it is resisting.⁸⁸

The generational conflict is indeed a crucial theme of *Zabriskie Point*, which explores the conflictual relationship between young people and adults from its very opening onward. In its first sequences, an assembly of students is discussing the proper actions to take against the establishment, while it is travelling through the desert towards Phoenix that Daria picks her side in the ongoing eschatological war. When she eventually sees her boss’s (and perhaps older lover’s) villa exploding, she is in fact ‘perceiving’ the apocalypse. It is irrelevant whether the big house actually blows up or not – what is relevant is that she concretely perceives its destruction.

⁸⁸ Several works of fiction published between the 1950s and the 1970s have a desert-like post-apocalyptic landscape as their main setting. In 1969, Harlan Ellison publishes *A Boy and His Dog*, which is set in a dry, post-nuclear world. J. G. Ballard himself published in 1964 a novel about desertification: *The Burning World*. *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* is a movie from 1961, directed by Val Guest, which contains several shots of desertified cities. John Christopher’s novel *The Death of Grass* (1956) is about a virus that kills all the plants. The ‘wasteland,’ however, will rise to the status of ‘cult setting’ only between the late 1970s and the early 1980s, with famous movies such as the Australian *Mad Max* (George Miller, 1979) and its sequels, and with manga series of great success such as *Fist of the North Star* (first published in Japan in 1983, on the “Weekly Shōnen Jump,” and created by Tetsuo Hara and Yoshiyuki Okamura).

Exactly like in Bontempelli's *Cataclisma*, Daria herself might be evoking the apocalypse, she might be the demiurge figure that provokes the cataclysm because of her different sensibility. Antonioni's explosion destroys not only the house, but also a socio-political system, an aesthetic philosophy, and an economic structure. It is the apocalypse, because it is revolutionary – politically, ideally, but also cinematically. The obsessive repetition of the explosion from different angles destroys as well the rule for which – in the linearity of the 'institutional mode of representation' – an event should appear only as many times as it actually happens in the plot. Antonioni, therefore, takes part in the revolution: together with Daria, he breaks the established linguistic code of his medium, making a statement that visually hits the spectator.⁸⁹

Daria's boss plans to build a residential area in the desert by humanizing a human-less space: he is reinterpreting reality – I argue by borrowing Saba Sardi's terminology – through a scheme of 'quadracity' that exorcises the apocalyptic potential of the wilderness (33). Naturally, he fails. His house, which already embodies the desire to transform into something human what is not, explodes. If Daria and perhaps even the wild kids of the previous sequence might find their way in the post-establishment reality, a character such as her boss would lose his identity, his language and, therefore, his active role in society. Antonioni employs the same kind of character in his next film as well, where a long search for a lost identity begins, not surprisingly, in a desert.

4.2.6. The Late David Locke: *Professione: reporter* (1975).

The premise of *Professione: reporter* is similar to Luigi Pirandello's novel *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (*The Late Mattia Pascal*, 1904): a man receives the chance to change

⁸⁹ About the 'institutional mode of representation' (IMR), see Rondolino, Gianni and Dario Tomasi. *Manuale del film. Linguaggio, racconto, analisi*. Turin: UTET, 1995, chapter 3, and Bordwell, David. *On the History of Film Style*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997, chapter 4.

his life by faking his own death and assuming somebody else's identity, and he takes it. Antonioni's protagonist is David Locke, a journalist who takes on the identity of a dead businessman he met while working on a documentary in the Republic of Chad, and who will soon realize that David Robertson, the man he is now impersonating, is an international arms dealer with extremely dangerous connections. Locke's search for identity is the post-apocalyptic character's desperate and unsuccessful attempt to adjust his *persona* to a world that keeps alienating him.

The Saharan towns of the opening sequence – built in, with, and by the desert – embody the Western iconography of destroyed settlements of a post-apocalyptic landscape and go back to the Africanist figures for the “loss of directionality” typical of what Christopher Miller calls “backwards narration” (172). “The primitive world into which one penetrates is” writes Miller in regard to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), “a place where «backwards» and «forwards» have no more meaning” and where getting lost is inevitable (172). For Conrad's protagonist, Africa is indeed part of a distant dimension, temporal rather than spatial, and yet geographically within reach: “We were wan on prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet,” he tells his companions (Conrad 120).

Antonioni's protagonist, as Conrad's was, is “cut off from the comprehension” of his surroundings (120). He hardly adapts to the alien world he is visiting, he seems to know little about it, he is lost. He drives within these villages as a dusty survivor whose language is spoken by nobody and who himself does not speak any other language but his own. His journey towards a certain camp across the desert turns out to be a failure, which is why he must seek shelter in his ‘fortress:’ a hotel at which he arrives tired, apathetic, and resigned. At the edge of the world – if not directly at the end of it – it is hard for him to find his way, or to understand or be understood. When

he has the opportunity to change his identity with someone else's, he almost does it out of boredom and an immense fatigue, but also – and primarily – to better cope with himself and the world. He believes that the monotony of the world has been caused solely by the individual and rigid perception that everyone has of it. The world changes, while people do not, he explains to Robertson:

It's us who remain the same. We translate every situation, every experience into the same old codes. We just condition ourselves. [...] However hard you try, it's still so difficult to get away from your old habits. Even the way we talk to these people, the way we treat them. It's a mistake.

In spite of an 'objective' transformation of surroundings, the subjective interpretation of reality 'adjusts' it to familiar parameters. Thereby, man chooses – more or less deliberately – not to perceive the change at all. This concept summarizes Antonioni's grand theme, which is a *fil rouge* that embraces all his movies at least from *L'avventura* and that grounds them on a conceptual apocalypse.

Traveling around the world in disguise, while therefore escaping the people from his past who might impose back on him the identity he has chosen to abandon, Locke continues searching for something he will never find. Moving from one city to another, he looks for an identity that is impossible to single out in the post-modern and ungraspable reality in which he lives. Antonioni cinematically renders the alienating compression of time and space typical of a globalized and post-modern conception of the world by eliminating any of those transitional shots that traditionally imply an ellipsis (e.g. a plane landing or taking off, an establishing shot of a recognizable landmark, etc.). The protagonist is therefore everywhere and

nowhere at the same time, and his Pirandellian identity is consequently at once multiplied numerous times and reduced to nothing.⁹⁰

Antonioni ‘flirts’ with the apocalypse in all the movies he directs between 1960 and 1975. Apocalyptic elements in his films are implicit – ‘felt’ rather than ‘shown,’ in that they manifest in the search for identity, the sense of alienation, the impossibility of communication – or explicit – iconographic settings such as the desert, direct references to the nuclear war, and generational clash. In addition, the apocalypse conditions Antonioni’s cinematic codes themselves: for one thing, there is a categorical need for a new visual expression, because – as Frank Kermode does – Antonioni must believe that “it is wrong to speak of new things in an old language” (114). This concept alone is sufficient to explain Antonioni’s need to experiment, to find a cinematographic language that can adequately represent reality. Not the truth, for sure, and most certainly not an objective reality either. Antonioni rather aims at representing a point of view that can allow a grip on that unspeakable essence that Mallarmé tried to reach with poetry. The final cut of a film – the visual experience of Antonioni, himself an outsider to a post-apocalyptic world – is a subjective shot that the director filters through his protagonists’ gaze and that is similar in structure to Dante Virgili’s rabid stream of consciousness in *La distruzione*. Unlike Virgili’s character, however, Antonioni accepts the post-apocalyptic world – the world of modernity and post-modernity, the world of industrialization, the world of a socio-economic and aesthetic revolution – and he offers his pre-apocalyptic point-of-view to his fellow pre-apocalyptic viewers.

⁹⁰ German director Wim Wenders utilizes the same post-modern topos – the compression of time and space in an overcrowded and globalized world at the edge of its exhaustion – in his apocalyptic film *Bis ans Ende der Welt* (Until the End of the World, 1991).

Antonioni's most transparent attempt at making the apocalyptic metaphor explicit is *Il deserto rosso*. His first color film can actually, unlike his others, be considered a work of apocalyptic fiction and it is indeed an outstanding example of those narratives of postmodern science fiction that – borrowing once again Simona Micali's distinction – explains the apocalypse as a human 'condition' rather than as a merely external event (61). It is indeed not an exterior apocalypse to determine the aesthetic and linguistic form of *Il deserto rosso*, but an interior one.

4.3. A Post-Apocalyptic Film: *Il deserto rosso* (1964)

Critics have linked Michelangelo Antonioni's *Il deserto rosso* – the story of a woman who is trying to cope with an alienating, industrial world – to environmental and climatological themes. In her contribution to a recent anthology of essays, Karen Pinkus claims it to be a film “about ecological devastation,” and she also talks in terms of “post-nuclear ash” and “disaster” (263, 267-268). *Il deserto rosso* is indeed a very sophisticated example of post-apocalyptic fiction and counts among the extensive collection of cinematographic and literary works dealing with the consequences of the end of the world. Among these, one would certainly find Cormac McCarthy's novel, *The Road* (2006). McCarthy's tenth book has been widely interpreted as a tale about the decline of communication, the loss of meaning, and the process of “dislexification”.⁹¹

Like Antonioni's *Il deserto rosso*, McCarthy's novel does not simply portray the hypothetical destruction of both the natural and the human environment, but

⁹¹ See in the following order:

Danta, Chris. ““The cold illucid world”: The poetics of gray on Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*”. *Styles of Extinction. Cormac McCarthy's The Road*. Ed. Julian Murphet and Mark Steven. London and New York City: Continuum IPG, 2012. 15-16.

Keller Estes, Andrew. *Cormac McCarthy and the Writing of American Space*. Amsterdam and New York City: Editions Rodopi B. V., 2013. 189-213.

De Bruyn, Ben. “Borrowed Time, Borrowed World and Borrowed Eyes: Care, Ruin and Vision in McCarthy's *The Road* and Harrison's Ecocriticism”. *English Studies* 91.7 (2010): 781.

successfully represents a linguistic apocalypse: namely, the crisis of both language and cultural values that occurs when an epochal change is in progress. In *Il deserto rosso* there is no explicit reference to either the apocalypse or the end of the planet Earth. Nevertheless – one could say, repeating Perry’s definition of apocalypse (9) – the rational and predictable universe of most of its characters seems to be breaking up. Without actually addressing the apocalyptic event, both the novel and the film present the fundamental topoi of post-apocalyptic narrative – the basic patterns of Fortress and Journey (cf. 1.5), the generational clash, the reconstruction of society, and the re-establishment of communication. In addition, there is an impressive aesthetic linking factor connecting *Il deserto rosso* to the apocalyptic genre in general and to McCarthy’s *The Road* in particular: the color gray.

By comparing *Il deserto rosso* and *The Road*, I demonstrate Antonioni’s film belongs to the genre of post-apocalyptic fiction. More importantly, the proximity of *Il deserto rosso* to McCarthy’s postmodern novel allows me to show Antonioni’s apocalyptic tale as an example of outstanding innovation. Antonioni’s *Il deserto rosso* was so much ahead of its time, that only in recent years we see the apocalypse narrated with the style, the aesthetics, and the linguistic devices that the Italian director was already employing in the early 1960s.

4.3.1. Chromatic Choices: Antonioni’s Grey Desert.

As Chris Danta observes, the post-apocalyptic world of *The Road* has been “grayed out” (10), and the color gray – which occurs eighty-one times in the novel (9) – symbolically marks the apocalypse itself (10). In spite of its title, gray is also the dominant color in Antonioni’s movie, from the blurry opening sequence to the very last scenes.

The formalist abstractions of “vibrant blues, reds and yellows” (Brunette, Red Desert 157) that characterize the film are surrounded by a deep gray reality made of hyper-industrial landscapes, smoking wastelands, and walled windows. Antonioni does indeed his very best in order to literally gray out the pro-filmic. As he himself writes about the making of *Il deserto rosso*, he has the crazy idea to paint in gray an entire pine grove:

Sto osservando il bosco che a poco a poco diventa bianco. Ho anche altre occupazioni pratiche di poco conto, come controllare che tutti svolgano le loro mansioni, indicare agli imbianchini i punti del sottobosco e le cime dei pini ancora verdi, lo sanno che non voglio macchie scure ma qualcuna sfugge sempre, e se tingere un cespuglio è semplice, la cima di un pinus pinea alto quaranta metri, che da terra sembra uno spicchio limitato di verde, come la vede l'imbianchino dalla scala spinta più su dell'albero è un intrico di rami di vani che non si finisce mai d'imbiancare. [...]

Nel buio, o meglio alla luce dei proiettori, cerco di capire come saranno domani questi alberi bianchi, anzi grigiastri, contro il cielo grigio [...] vicino al cemento della fabbrica, alle sue torri. [...]

Una cosa infatti era certa, e cioè che quel verde andava eliminato. (Il bosco bianco 7-13)⁹²

The scene he refers to is never actually filmed, because the bright sun of the following day makes it impossible for Antonioni to achieve the chromatic result he has in mind. His determination, however, is indicative of a choice that is not merely aesthetic, but expressive: accidental colors must be removed, because they cannot randomly appear on screen as signifiers of something ‘other-than-gray’.

⁹² “I am observing the forest, which, little by little, is becoming white. I also have other minor practical tasks, such as to ascertain that every job is done properly, to indicate the points of the underbrush and the still-green tops of the pines to the painters – they know that I do not want dark spots, but one always escapes notice. Painting a bush is simple; but the top of a forty-meter-tall pinion pine which looks, from the ground, like a small patch of green, becomes, for the painter who sees it from the ladder pushed far up in the tree, a tangle of branches that you cannot finish whitewashing. [...] In the dark, or better, in the artificial light, I am trying to understand what these white – or rather dirty, gray – trees will be like tomorrow, against the gray sky [...], near the cement of the factory, near its towers. [...] In fact, one thing was certain: That green had to be eliminated [...]. (The White Forest 84, 87) Translated by Allison Cooper.

Antonioni's decision to have the color gray as the aesthetic foundation of the movie results in several complications, not just for the pine-painters, but also for the cinematographer Carlo Di Palma:

Il colore non poteva essere trattato in modo convenzionale. Antonioni aveva idee precise e rigorose. Prima di tutto il grigio, la nebbia come base di quasi tutte le sequenze del film mi posero problemi non indifferenti. Se inizi una scena con la nebbia non puoi pretendere di averla sempre. L'uso della nebbia artificiale mi obbligava al cambiamento dei filtri. La nebbia artificiale mi portava sul blu e filtrando per il blu ambiente ottenevo le facce rosse. Allora dovevo usare luce blu, salvo poi cambiare impostazione alla successiva inquadratura per l'arrivo della nebbia vera. Questo in una giornata accadeva molte volte. (Nicolini 36-37)

Nevertheless, no matter how hard it is for the crew, Antonioni thinks that a color film – at that point – is the only, honest way to represent reality. Color, he declares in an article written for *L'Europeo* in 1964, has a role in modern life that black and white productions can no longer play (78-79). Thirty years after Rudolph Arnheim's claim that colors, in a film, are "at best naturalistic" (77), Antonioni proves that it is high time for a director to employ them precisely as a non-naturalistic and yet effective expressive medium. His decision to depict a grayed-out world is, therefore, particularly significant: a gray world can be perceived only in a color film, as the lack of color becomes a choice of the director rather than a technical given.

Together with the spatial and environmental transformation that is dominant in Antonioni's film – where once again the *fondo* is a protagonist as much as the main characters of the movie—, the color aesthetics strongly link *Il deserto rosso* to apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction. There is indeed a sort of color-code determined by the genre, for which apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic films are generally gray. Particularly in the last fifteen years, when perhaps an aesthetic intent similar to Antonioni's has pushed new directors to make expressive use of colors,

many post-apocalyptic films have been based on a gray foundation. Rob Bowman's *Reign of Fire* (2002), Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006), Albert and Allen Hughes' *The Book of Eli* (2010), and of course John Hillcoat's adaptation of McCarthy's novel (2009) are a few examples. These and other films present the end of the world in shades of gray. The aim of their directors, of course, is to 'synchronize' their representations of a post-apocalyptic landscape with the 'emotional' point of view of both the characters and the viewers. According to Danta, gray is the color of "the sheer fragility of the post-apocalypse, in which everything appears to be heading [...] inexorably towards its death" (10). Antonioni's *Il deserto rosso*, therefore, is probably the one post-apocalyptic film that initiates such a successful trend: it is the very first film of post-apocalyptic fiction to make of the colors not a gimmick – such as those filmed in Technicolor between the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s –, but an essential, linguistic element of the filmic text. Antonioni inaugurated a color-codification that is now adopted worldwide and that has come to inherently characterize the genre.⁹³

4.3.2. No Journey, no Fortress, no Event: The (Apparent) Lack of Post-Apocalyptic topoi in *Il deserto rosso*.

In spite of such an evident aesthetic proximity to post-apocalyptic film and literature, *Il deserto rosso* lacks, as mentioned above, actual references to the end of the world: there is no indication of an apocalyptic event that would explain the grayness of the environment as Antonioni presents it. Moreover, the 'Journey' and the 'Fortress', two essential recurring patterns crucial in apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narrative (cf. 1.5 above) seem to be missing. As noted by Pinkus, elements such as the

⁹³ Among the few apocalypse-themed color films preceding *Il deserto rosso*, Rudolph Maté's *When Worlds Collide* (1951), Edward Bernds's *World Without End* (1956) are both filmed in Technicolor. Roger Corman's *Last Woman on Earth* (1960) is filmed in Eastmancolor, but only a faded color print is currently available.

alienating electronic soundtrack and the post-nuclear-looking locations would be sufficient in conferring a tangible apocalyptic atmosphere to Antonioni's film (267-268); but how can *Il deserto rosso* be a post-apocalyptic work of fiction when lacking both the patterns that I consider characteristic of the genre, and when never hinting at the apocalyptic event in the first place? In fact, neither element is missing: they are merely hiding beneath the surface of Antonioni's intimate postmodern tale.

The fact that the source of the disaster is never revealed is actually not an uncommon feature of recent apocalyptic fiction, as Teresa Heffernan points out. In post-modern post-apocalyptic narrative,

[the] present world is portrayed as exhausted, but there is no better world that replaces it – these narratives refuse to offer up a new beginning or any hope of rebirth or renewal; the end is instead senseless and arbitrary. There is no overarching critique, there is no cataclysmic destruction that promises to cleanse the world and separate the righteous from the damned, good from evil, and there is no resolution or salvation. In Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* [...] the source of disaster is never revealed, foreclosing the possibility that it might have been averted had another course been taken, and no vision of a better or more perfect world is offered up. (5)

As observed also by Gilles Deleuze (qtd. in Pinkus 263), Antonioni is not criticizing the new, gray world where the story is set. Nor does he warn about the precarious environmental situation, nor does he express in *Il deserto rosso* the dread of his society for an actual or metaphorical apocalypse yet to come. He does not provide any solution to prevent such a situation from occurring, because he thinks that the scenario presented is not just likely, but current, already in effect. Antonioni's movie is not the account of a grim prospect, but rather a description of a social reality that has neither the need nor the possibility to be changed (Brunette, *Red Desert* 159). He simply describes a situation that he considers ongoing: the epochal change, he thinks, has already happened— the apocalypse has occurred and we are now in its aftermath. As

we can read in Flavio Nicolini's journal – which the assistant director wrote during the postproduction of the movie – and as we have already seen about *L'eclisse* (cf. 4.2.3 above), the bomb has already exploded:

Si potrebbe essere tentati di stabilire un nesso con le angosce della nostra epoca atomica, ma si cadrebbe inevitabilmente in un'interpretazione mirante a ristabilire i termini di una influenza catastrofica dirimpetto alla quale l'angoscia condurrebbe, alla fine, ad una ribellione possibile [...] e alla identificazione del nemico. I personaggi di questo *Deserto Rosso* non predicano la catastrofe della bomba atomica, non sono legati all'orrore dell'essere sospeso alla minaccia di morte universale. Per essi la bomba è già scoppiata, non sulla città, ma all'interno del loro tessuto vitale. (27-28)

This post-apocalyptic story does not focus on the actions of its characters because – in Antonioni's view – there is nothing that can (or even should) be done in order to change the situation. Antonioni's post-apocalyptic world does not have any working shelter and there is no journey that is worth being taken. The bomb exploded, and everything has become gray. But, as Nicolini wrote in his journal, it actually exploded on the inside of people. Antonioni's apocalypse is thus intimate rather than exterior, and the usual patterns must be looked for in the intimacy of the characters, not in their actions. The Journey is not the adventurous attempt of some brave men and women to reach the provisions stored in a barn in the other side of a Southeastern town infested with zombies – as we see in *The Walking Dead* – but Corrado's existential need to be always somewhere else. The Fortress is not a U.S. base in Antarctica, where a handful scientists is struggling to keep man-eating creatures at bay – as in John Carpenter's *The Thing* – but Giuliana herself, who is locked in her dazzled subjectivity, incapable of understanding her own reality and unwilling to dialogue with it. Using Antonioni's words:

Giuliana è incapace di adattarsi alla nuova «tecnica» di vita e va in crisi [...] E poi c'è Corrado. È quasi giunto alla nevrosi e crede di poter risolvere il problema andandosene in Patagonia.⁹⁴

In Antonioni's post-apocalyptic scenario, there is no fighting and there is no surviving. All that his characters can hope for is the ability to surrender to the new reality by adapting to its rules.

For Antonioni, the end of the world therefore is a catastrophe that – borrowing de Martino's words – is more secret, deeper, and invisible even when compared to the horrors of Hiroshima (470). It is an apocalypse that lacks imminence – as Kermode points out (25) – and that consequently neither provides meaning nor gives sense to human life (Heffernan 4). The bomb, as Nicolini writes, explodes on the inside of the characters, and yet this is not sufficient for them “to enable” the end of their fictional narrative and “to confer organization and form on” their temporal structure (Kermode 45), because the apocalypse did not complete its supposed task: it did not end the world and it did not end the characters. They are alienated precisely because they feel the apocalypse and they see its consequences, and yet they did not hear any bomb go off.

4.3.3. Parent and Son: Survival, Generational Clash, and Loss of the Signified.

The color gray is the chromatic expression of a point-of-view that is, of course, subjective. Antonioni chooses to show reality through Giuliana's eyes, but while her anxious perspective is the only one the camera reproduces, it is not the only one *Il deserto rosso* represents. The story of the film is told ‘through’ the gaze of the mother, but the son's point-of-view – in several aspects the opposite of Giuliana's – is

⁹⁴ Maurin, François and Michelangelo Antonioni “Il deserto rosso.” *Fare un film è per me vivere*. Ed. Carlo di Carlo and Giorgio Tinazzi. Venice: Marsilio Editori, 1994. 252.

crucial in representing two dissimilar perspectives on reality, two different perceptions of the same surroundings, two opposite reactions to the end of the world. As a work of post-apocalyptic fiction, Antonioni's movie indeed portrays some characters able to adapt to the post-apocalypse, as well as others who are not (Pinkus 264).

Il deserto rosso, like any other work of post-apocalyptic fiction, is a story of survival and adjustment. Antonioni makes this very clear in an interview published in 1985: the only choice of man in modern society is whether to adapt or not, he claims (Antonioni, Lannes and Meyer, *Identificazione di un regista* 223). It is therefore not the environment that should be modified to fulfill human needs, as Antonioni believes, but the opposite: as it happens in many other examples of apocalyptic fiction, either the characters adapt to their new reality, or they (more or less literally) die. While the protagonist struggles with her surrounding in *Il deserto rosso*, her son Valerio seems extremely comfortable in the industrial, gray spaces of the movie. The language of the post-apocalyptic world, so unintelligible to Giuliana, is exactly the one by which he thinks and acts. A generational separation therefore indicates a tangible linguistic distance.

The parent/child comparison is central in *Il deserto rosso* as much as it is in *The Road*. McCarthy's novel, as Antonioni's movie, is the story of a parent who struggles through the post-apocalypse with his son by his side. *The Road* is set in an uninhabitable and almost lifeless America, a world covered in ashes that is a scenario much more dangerous than Antonioni's. However, the figures of the parents and of the children respectively share several features. Both Giuliana and the Father, unlike their children, are having tremendous difficulties in adjusting to the new reality; they both see the world as the gray ruins of a collapsed past; they both, lost in similar

stifling landscapes, have as their ultimate goal the protection of their kids. The children, on the other hand, do not suffer the same degree of physical and psychological pain of their parents, because they are both products of the world they live in. They are “in it, of it” (Pinkus 270). Valerio, therefore, calmly follows his mother through the gray and muddy fields around the factory, without being bothered by a squalor he cannot perceive; similarly, the Son from *The Road* never laments the lack of pre-apocalyptic commodities he knows nothing about. This is precisely what distinguishes Valerio and the Son from their parents: they do not know any other reality, but the one that has been established after the apocalypse.

Giuliana and the Father, instead, both measure the new world by pre-apocalyptic criteria, which are linked to a reality that for their kids is “not even a memory” (McCarthy 53-54). When, during their journey, McCarthy’s characters find a can of Coca Cola, the Son does not know what it is (23). Such a widely known and recognizable object – a symbol, even – becomes an anonymous “relic” in the hands of the boy (Keller Estes 198). While for the Father the can of Coke triggers a tangle of paratexts and side-memories, for the Son it is nothing more than a “cold metal cylinder” (McCarthy 23). The same discrepancy of reactions returns in several occasions throughout the novel: the smell of gasoline (6), the action of using a phone (7), a deck of cards (53). It is the awareness of a pre-event world that reduces the post-apocalyptic reality to the grayness by which both McCarthy and Antonioni represent it: the Father compares the world with a previous and long-gone state, and such a comparison disconcerts him, because the apocalypse has destroyed not only the ‘signifiers,’ but their Saussurean ‘signified’ as well. Therefore, same ‘sign’ has in the post-apocalyptic world the potential of saying very different things to different recipients. In the post-apocalyptic – and post-modern – world, reality loses its

univocal nature and the concept of Truth is dramatically questioned, as Giuliana realizes in *Il deserto rosso*.

A particular sequence of Antonioni's movie is representative of the linguistic distance that separates mother and son and of the loss of signified of reality. It takes place in the little boy's aseptic room, full of the most recent toys and of many scale models of scientific tools. The sequence opens with a close-up of a robot, which appears in the movie more than once, always indicating the space belonging to Giuliana's son – and therefore, designating a space alien to her. When Giuliana enters the room, Ugo – her husband – and their child are playing with a microscope. The wife wants to know how long her husband is going to be travelling. After he answers, she is about to leave, as their son asks her an apparently very simple question:

Bambino: Mamma, quanto fa uno più uno?

Giuliana: Che domanda: due.

Il bambino ride furbescamente soddisfatto della risposta.

Bambino: Non è vero. Guarda.

Mentre Giuliana si avvicina, il bambino prende un contagocce e un vetrino e fa cadere sul vetrino una goccia di liquido scuro.

Bambino: Una...

Ne fa cadere una seconda sopra la prima.

Bambino: ...e una due.

Il bambino mostra trionfante il vetrino, sul quale le gocce si sono naturalmente sommate.

Bambino: Quante sono?

Giuliana guarda il vetrino con una certa perplessità come chi sia costretto a constatare una verità alla quale non aveva mai pensato. Poi ammette:

Giuliana: Una. È vero. Ma guarda un po'

Si china, bacia il bambino sui capelli. La sua espressione diventa di colpo seria.

Valerio is bearer of a language system of which she is not aware. Even a universal codification such as mathematics here is different, new, and unpredictable. Giuliana is

puzzled when facing a truth she did not expect possible and that now seems even obvious. After kissing her son's head, she looks straight at the camera, breaking the fourth wall and therefore sharing with the spectator her estrangement.⁹⁵

Exactly as Giuliana feels she is losing grip on reality, her son Valerio has little or no connection to the pre-apocalyptic world that his mother represents and the moral and aesthetic values of which she carries. "We shall never again know what anything was before disappearing into the fulfilment of its model," writes Baudrillard (*The Illusion of the End* 6), and it will be equally impossible, for the children who have never seen them, to picture how things used to be before the apocalypse struck. The destruction of the common code – the end of a shared cultural background, the loss of the pre-apocalyptic signifier-signified linkage – provokes the collapse of meta-discourse, and therefore triggers the impossibility to pass an image from the past without altering its form or its meaning.

In *The Road*, the Father is constantly trying to have his son apprehend elements from the pre-apocalyptic world – tasting a sip of Coca Cola being a very trivial and yet significant example. In *Il deserto rosso*, Giuliana is also trying to pass to her child an image from the past: an image, as the famous sequence of the pink beach, that aesthetically belongs to her alone and that her son Valerio would probably be unable to understand 'chromatically.' There exists a linguistic barrier between the two characters that is not meant to be overcome. Both Antonioni and McCarthy seem to claim that when the parental figure ceases to exist, the pre-apocalyptic elements

⁹⁵ Direct references to the script are taken by Antonioni, Michelangelo and Tonino Guerra. "La sceneggiatura." *Il deserto rosso*. Ed. Carlo Di Carlo. Bologna: Nuova Casa Editrice Cappelli, 1978. 116-117.

will survive in the post-apocalyptic world as crystalized unities, deconstructed ruins perhaps detached from their original meaning.⁹⁶

The Stoic apokatastasis envisages a world always equal to itself, after each apocalyptic cycle (de Martino 233). In Antonioni and McCarthy's post-modern apocalypse, instead, the new world – although not created *ex nihilo* – is different from its predecessor, which, in the post-event reality, only continues to exist as a mythical component, a pre-text always on the edge of vanishing. In these terms, the post-apocalyptic world is a simulation of the pre-apocalyptic world. It is a new stage masked as a linear continuation, and it is precisely the awareness of such a rupture in the cultural and aesthetical linearity that grays out Giuliana and the Father's world (Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End* 10-11).

Both Giuliana and the Father move towards what Baudrillard calls the “vanishing point,” where their reality will be replaced by its very imitation (*The Illusion of the End* 4-6). Both characters are aware of the inauthenticity of their surroundings. Especially Giuliana, whose angst seems caused precisely by her realization of being fulfilling a social cliché and whose apathy derives from her deep alienation towards anything happening to her: “Sono persino riuscita ad essere una moglie infedele,” she tells her lover, estranging herself from the role she is ‘supposed’ to play and, ultimately, from her own life, which she sees as a mere and inconsistent compilation of empty actions: “Devo pensare che tutto quello che mi capita è la mia vita” is her meager consolation. There is a world preceding the apocalypse, an “initial state” where perhaps the bourgeois social values do not call for a reconsideration, but

⁹⁶ Some of the most fascinating passages of the *The Road* deal with the linguistic inheritance that the boy is receiving from the outside world and from his father. The way some odd idiomatic expressions enter the boy's vocabulary, while others don't (McCarthy 95, 156, 160-161) repeats in scale the evolution of languages and the often unpredictable history of words. The Father's attempts to hand down his linguistic knowledge succeeded in the manner a dying language gives way to the new one: leaving its traces on it. The Son refuses music and grammar (159, 245), but he accepts and then even improves his father's pragmatism (268-269).

in Antonioni's modernity – as in Baudrillard's vision – that original condition is fading away. To retrace it will soon be as impossible as to retrace the first of many apocalypses (The Illusion of the End 33). Being unaware of the apocalypse – like Giuliana's husband – or entirely belonging to the post-apocalypse – as her son Valerio – are the only two functional ontological modalities: Giuliana, who belongs to the pre-apocalypse but who is also aware to be living in the aftermath, is instead trapped into a liminal and frustrating condition of deep alienation. Still unable to recognize her function in the post-event world, she already feels the dramatic obsolescence of her pre-event self in relation to the new reality.⁹⁷

Antonioni, who decides to complete his visual 'collection' of reality from his character's perspective, poses a question of language and method, a question of cinematic technique that he raises by drawing the post-apocalyptic theme out of the narrative and by applying it to his medium. Antonioni as a director and as a filmmaker is, like Giuliana, prisoner of a cultural belonging, and – like she does – he feels the desuetude of the representational forms at his disposal. His answer naturally constitutes of a renovation of such models, a stylistic change – as Pier Paolo Pasolini suggests – from prose to poetry (Il «cinema di poesia» 182-183).

4.3.4. Alienation Sharing: Cinema of Poetry and Pre-Apocalyptic Gaze.

The desire to speak an unspeakable language is what demands poetry, which allows an author to approach and eventually convey an otherwise unknowable and inexpressible reality. In *Il deserto rosso*, Antonioni aims at the representation of a world to which he does not belong but that he feels, in which he lives, and that he wants to capture nevertheless. He does so by creating a geometric visual experience –

⁹⁷ "I even managed to be an unfaithful wife." "I must think that my life is everything that happens to me." [My translations].

and therefore achieving poetry in a film, as theorized by Shklovsky – and by having the viewer constantly ‘feel the camera’ – as Pasolini deems necessary in a cinema of poetry. By breaking up the linearity of filmic codes, Antonioni underscores the ruptured continuity of sociohistorical values and he poetically states the ongoing post-apocalyptic condition of modern man.

In *Il deserto rosso*, Antonioni deliberately performs a crucial transformation of the language of film. Nicolini writes in his diary that

[Antonioni] imposta la struttura del film proponendo nel discorso segni e nessi anticonvenzionali, operando una rottura con la routine cinematografica corrente, analoga all’atteggiamento dell’occhio fenomenologico che riscopre la realtà in una sequenza imprevedibile di immagini e connessioni inusitate. (29)⁹⁸

The director’s goal, explains Nicolini, is to propose an anticanonical code, which determines a phenomenological approach to reality. In particular, Nicolini seems to stress Antonioni’s unusual montage choices, which consists of a succession of images, shots, and even sequences that overturn the conventions of cinematographic narrative.

The plot is indeed secondary in Antonioni’s in *Il deserto rosso* in particular. There is not a real story to tell, but rather an emotion to convey, and the elements of filmic language – sound, color, camera angle, etc. – are all employed to the expression of the characters’ subjectivity. As Pasolini foresees already in 1965, in

Deserto rosso, Antonioni non applica più [...] la sua propria visione formalistica del mondo a un contenuto genericamente impegnato (il problema della nevrosi da

⁹⁸ [Antonioni] sets up the structure of the movie by proposing in its discourse unconventional signs and connections, by breaking the current cinematographic canon as the phenomenological eye that re-discovers reality in an unpredictable sequence of images and unusual transitions. [My translation]

alienazione): ma guarda il mondo immergendosi nella sua protagonista nevrotica, rivivendo i fatti attraverso lo “sguardo” di lei [...]. (184)⁹⁹

As Antonioni decides to identify his gaze with the protagonist – and since Giuliana’s perspective ideally is the subjective shot of the camera –, the language of the film immediately becomes the language of the character. Opposed to the canon, the language of the film does not tell the story of its protagonists, but visually represents the synthesis of her interiority and her surroundings. The language of the film expresses the protagonist’s perception of reality – which is the director’s as well:

Per mezzo di questo meccanismo stilistico, Antonioni ha liberato il proprio momento più reale: ha potuto finalmente rappresentare il mondo visto dai *suo*i occhi, *perché ha sostituito, in blocco, la visione del mondo di una nevrotica, con la sua visione delirante di estetismo*: sostituzione in blocco giustificata dalla possibile analogia delle due visioni. (184-185)¹⁰⁰

The director is no longer compelled to narrative, which ceases to be the goal of filmic representation. Free from the restrictions of cinematic storytelling, Antonioni can finally leave prose for poetry.

‘Plotless’ cinema is ‘verse’ cinema, states Viktor Shklovsky in a short essay originally published in 1927 (89). A cinema that is not concerned with the satisfaction of a narrative canon allows an aesthetic composition that is art per se. Prose and poetry, Shklovsky argues, can exist in cinema side by side or constitute two separate genres (89). They differ from one another

⁹⁹ “In *Red Desert* Antonioni no longer superimposes his own formalistic vision of the world on a generally committed content (the problem of neuroses cause by alienation) [...]. Instead, he looks at the world by immersing himself in his neurotic protagonist, reanimating the facts through her eyes [...].” (Pasolini, *Cinema of Poetry* 179)

¹⁰⁰ “By means of his stylistic device, Antonioni has freed his most deeply felt moment: he has finally been able to represent the world seen through his eyes, *because he has substituted in toto for the worldview of a neurotic his own delirious view of aesthetics*, a wholesale substitution which is justified by the possible analogy of the two views.” (Pasolini, *Cinema of Poetry* 179-180)

not by rhythm, or not by rhythm alone, but by the prevalence in poetic cinema of technical and formal over semantic features, where formal features displace semantic and resolve the composition. (89)

Shklovsky's description of poetic cinema indeed applies not only to *Il deserto rosso*, but to Antonioni's cinema in general. Several of Antonioni's visual choices seem to be aiming at an arrangement of reality based on formal abstractions, in which the disposition of figures and lines within the framing is prominent on other filmic elements. Antonioni, Shklovsky would say, resolves his visual composition by following a drive that is formal and geometric rather than arbitrary and semantic (88). In *Il deserto rosso*, proxemics never gives the impression to be random: on the contrary, the characters move within a space that is always carefully organized and that always organizes the meaning of what is shown on screen. Doorframes, girders, pipes: virtually every element of the visual experience is controlled and precisely outlined, and it is a necessary guide to read the movie.

The formal abstraction of the filmic composition becomes even more significant when considering what Pasolini called the "free indirect point-of-view shot" (Cinema of Poetry 176-177). If the film concretely consists of a shared subjective shot that includes, like the free indirect speech in literature, the view of both the author and the character, then the geometric composition of the frames will be a constant physical representation of an interior condition. If the gaze is necessarily subjective and if any shot intrinsically belongs to both director and protagonist, then every plastic figure on screen will represent this union of points-of-view more than it represents itself.

As the apocalypse destroys the expected link between signifier and signified, Antonioni deletes the 'normative' connection of an object and its meaning and he subverts the canonical expressive methods of cinema, by breaking rules of camera

movements and montage. His gaze, therefore, moves against the expectations of those who are watching and who are prepared to traditional meaning-making cinematographic devices, and the cuts from one shot to another bring the viewer through an unpredictable arrangements of images. The camera, therefore, does not disappear in the narrative of the plot, but it is instead felt, constantly and for good reasons:

[I]’alternarsi di obbiettivi diversi, un 25 o un 300 sulla stessa faccia, lo sperpero dello zum, coi suoi obbiettivi altissimi, che stanno addosso alle cose dilatandole come pani troppo lievitati, i controluce continui e fintamente casuali con i loro barbagli in macchina, i movimenti di macchina a mano, le carrellate esasperate, i montaggi sbagliati per ragioni espressive, gli attacchi irritanti, le immobilità interminabili su una stessa immagine ecc. ecc. (Pasolini, *Il «cinema di poesia»* 189)¹⁰¹

In the sequence of the preparation for the trip to Patagonia in *Il deserto rosso*, there is for example a “stupendous close-up of a distressingly ‘real’ Emilian worker” that is followed “by an insane pan from the bottom up along an electric blue stripe on the whitewashed wall of the warehouse” (Pasolini, *Cinema of Poetry* 178): a shot that does not make sense, according to canonical narrative paradigms. Similarly, as a coda to the ‘1+1=1’ sequence that finishes with the already estranging image of Giuliana looking into the camera, Antonioni cuts from Ugo’s gaze, which follows Giuliana walking away from the frame, back to her, who is now collecting his shirts from a small closet. Once again, Antonioni plays with the cinematic language and again he disregards the expectations of the viewers, who think Giuliana is still in her son’s room, when she is no longer there – as Antonioni reveals a few seconds later, by

¹⁰¹ “The alternation of different lenses, a 25 mm and a 200mm on the same face; the proliferation of wasted zoom shots, with their lenses of very high numbers which are on top of things, expanding them like excessively leavened bread; the continuous, deceptively casual shots against the light, which dazzle the camera; the hand-held camera movements; the more sharply focused tracking shots; the wrong editing for expressive reasons; the irritating opening shots; the interminable pauses on the same image, etc.” (Pasolini, *Cinema of Poetry* 184)

showing Ugo joining her in their bedroom. The visual experience of cinema, Antonioni seems to claim with his abrupt linguistic transformation, requires the same adaptation process that a post-apocalyptic reality demands. As he himself declared, the theme of man adapting to a certain environment is indeed the theme of *Il deserto rosso* (Identificazione di un regista 223), and if men have to endure changes in “morphology, physiology, in behavioral patterns,” there is no reason to think that language would not be involved in such a total transformation as well. There is no reason to think that cinema, as a form of language itself, would be safe from the consequences of the apocalypse it is representing.

Antonioni breaks up the canon and makes up a new one, and he does so “almost out of an irregular and provocative freedom, out of an otherwise authentic or delicious enjoyment of anarchy” (Cinema of Poetry 184), and most of all out of the necessity to express the new reality using a language other than the one passed-on by tradition. A necessity deriving from the encounter of his cultural extraneity to the world he decides to depict and the sudden realization of the total and yet generally unnoticed collapse of his own. The canonic cinematographic language is insufficient to portray a reality that has changed so much, and Antonioni must adopt a new one in order to put his representation in actual contact with the reality it is supposed to simulate and in order for the post-apocalyptic condition of modern man to be finally perceived.

Like Giuliana, Antonioni is aware of an apocalypse that not everyone seems to see: he is aware of the “unsuited and inadequate” baggage of values, moral codes and “emotional traits” by which modern men and women blindly conduct their lives (Brunette, *Films of Michelangelo Antonioni* 50) in spite of the substantial changes the environment has gone through. By overthrowing the language of cinema, Antonioni is

therefore commenting on the broken continuity of outdated sociohistorical principles that are ill-suited to experience reality as much as a pre-apocalyptic set of codes is inapt in describing the post-apocalyptic world. Once again like his *Giuliana*, however, Antonioni does not belong to the post-apocalyptic world: he is an outsider. In spite of his complete, honest openness towards new techniques and technologies (Pinkus 265), and besides his deep appreciation for the alienating formalism of modernity (Tassone 180), Antonioni – as he himself explains to fellow-director Jean-Luc Godard – belongs to the pre-apocalyptic world (Jean-Luc Godard rencontre Michelangelo Antonioni 77). Here lies the necessity to use not any linguistic register, but poetry alone: poetic language allows the possibility of an understanding of the alien, modern reality, also to those who do not speak its language ‘natively.’ In spite of the entangled net of confusing signifiers/signified threads, poetry is what can produce meaning out of the pure collision of images and it is therefore the only possible way for a pre-apocalyptic author to retell the post-apocalyptic reality by using its language and not his own.

4.4. Conclusions: The Relentless World of Words.

Poetry is the tool using which the exploration of the language of crisis becomes possible, and it is at once means of expression and object of reflection: a meta-linguistic hermeneutical instrument to talk about the post-apocalyptic world in intelligible terms. This is what both McCarthy and Antonioni do in their works. Both authors look at the world they describe from the point of view of outsiders, but determined in escaping the restraints of their ‘natural’ language. Modern artists, they

portray a post-apocalyptic world using pre-apocalyptic eyes, and yet trying to employ post-apocalyptic ‘measures’.¹⁰²

Antonioni, as discussed above, chooses to abandon the prosaicism of standardized filmic language in favor of a cinema of poetry that depicts a crumbled world by the use of a ‘crumbling’ code system. Cormac McCarthy’s is too very concerned with the way an apocalypse might change language (Pryor 29), and his intentions are to depict the rapid, ongoing transformation of cultural and linguistic certainties.

When the world is devastated – claims Ben De Bruyn – not only man but also language itself becomes a fragile animal (783). Like Antonioni, McCarthy does not give any solution to this problem: his apocalypse is current, and his novel is not a warning, but – again – a synchronic description. Exactly like Antonioni, McCarthy’s apocalypse begins in the language he chooses to employ, and the author deliberately adopts a prose that ignores chapters and confuses points of view, that mixes direct and indirect speech, and that abolishes angle brackets and quotation marks. He does so, in addition, by often choosing outmoded words, and having the reader perceive the ‘mortality’ of language. All of this, observes Sean Pryor, with an incredible attention to rhythm and meter, so that *The Road* may be defined not just a manual of lexical archaeology, but even a book of poetry (30, 27-28).

The ontological liminality of the two authors – in their condition of pre-apocalyptic artists portraying a post-apocalyptic world, and in their choice to use the liminal language of poetry as their medium – determines the grayness of the world they depict. Gray is the color of decay: the color of the decadence, of deep crises, the

¹⁰² I borrow the image from Robert Tally Jr., by paraphrasing his words about Kurt Vonnegut, who is “a modernist in a postmodern condition” whose novel depicts a world that is “decidedly postmodern” (Kurt Vonnegut and the American Novel. A Postmodern Iconography xii-xiii).

blurry color of the ineffability. As Chris Danta writes, however, gray is also the color that marks eventuation and transformation (13), and it is precisely because of this that *Il deserto rosso* and *The Road* are not only the stories of two lost parents, but of two strong children as well. In the apocalypse of language overwhelming their parents, the two kids are the Adamic figures that contribute to the eventual rebirth of the world (Chabon 112). While the parents will be stopped by the unspeakability and even unimaginability of the very world they ended up living (Masters 115), the children will go forward, even beyond the end of their fictional existence, naming things and speaking the new language (Kunsa 67). The language that neither Antonioni nor McCarthy could speak or understand, but tending towards which they both reinvented their own with the goal to show the relativity of reality and the multiplicity of the new, relentless world of words. A new genesis comes after the apocalypse.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ About the language of the post-apocalyptic world, see Meijer, Bart. *Determining the Plausibility of Future Language in (Post-)Apocalyptic Fiction*. MA Thesis. University of Utrecht, August 2011. Without going into science fiction, however, it would be sufficient to read Thucydides, who relates the ways in which the plague that broke out in Athens in 430 BC spawned disorder and how it corrupted the language itself (Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* 41).

Conclusions: Zombie Metaphor Aside.

In this work, I argued how apocalyptic fiction, which takes off during the *fin de siècle* atmosphere of the late 19th century, is already a protagonist – in its aesthetics, in its structures, and in its themes – thru the transitional years from the Middle Ages to Humanism. The fundamental paradigms that I found in Boccaccio's *Decameron* are the same that, in slightly different forms, survive until today's apocalyptic fiction and that, in Italy, have taken several shapes throughout the decades. It is but a short step from Boccaccio's epic of the rising merchant class to the post-modern comic books of the 21st century.

In a way, I must claim, there is something apocalyptic in the arts of any grand period of change: any literary transformation includes elements of catastrophe, of great shock, and of utter scandal. I am thinking – among others – about Dante's vernacular turn and about the signs of a looming end bleeding through the lines of Aretino's plays. I am certainly referring to the Italian Baroque explosions, echo of the scientific revolution. When literature has changed drastically, it was because an apocalypse of languages and ideas mirrored the transformation of societies, of their fears and dreams.

Any apocalypse – metaphorical, literary or actual – has always come with a precise eschatology: with the rhetoric of a winning side and of a defeated faction. A schism that, however, would always be meaningless if losing its “reference to some prior condition”. The “absolutely New is unintelligible,” writes Frank Kermode (116), and it is therefore certain that the language of the most extremist innovation will eventually rejoin the vernacular it was meant to part (118). In order for art not to be mere noise but real communication (102), some of what the world was before the apocalypse must survive the cataclysm. “The study of post-apocalypse,” claims James

Berger, is indeed “a study of what disappears and what remains, and of how the remainder has been transformed” (After the End 7). But if for millennia such a transformation had offered up meaning, by the end of 19th century – and certainly after the Second World War – the feeling is that the end of the world can no longer offer a sense of completion (Heffernan 29) and that modern reality cannot or does not rely on revelation as an organizing principle (7). Apocalypse is no longer “the key of things past, the knowledge of things to come,” as Joachim of Fiore had envisioned it, and it is neither the “opening of what is sealed” nor the “uncovering of what is hidden” (qtd. in McGinn 19).¹⁰⁴ The disease of the Western world is an apocalypse emptied of its eschatological essence (de Martino 465) where history loses its linearity and never comes to a meaningful conclusion (Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End* 10-11, 27). In postmodern literature and cinema, the angst of such a condition pervade at once the characters and the medium – the writing or filming style adjust to the existential anxiety of modernity, as I have explored in the previous two chapters. Outside of its representation, however, history proceeds: incomprehensible and ultimately meaningless to many, but not to all.

Terrorism, suggests Baudrillard, is a way to conjure up the end of history (8), to give it meaning while rejecting the chaotic melancholia of the alienated Western man, but so are American neoconservatism and the European new right movements. These forces place themselves on the opposite sides of the eschatological battle, but they ultimately speak the same language and in the same terms: they are indeed fighting an apocalyptic war, but not to each other – as it might seem. Perhaps unaware

¹⁰⁴ I used the English translation I found in McGinn’s essay for in-text quotations, but my main source is the Latin original published by the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies in 1986 and edited by Edward Kilian Burger: “Quocirca non immerito Apocalypsis dictus est liber iste, eo quod occulta detegat et revelt archana. Est enim clavis veterum, notitia futurorum, signatorium apertio, detection secretorum” (Joachim 12).

of their great proximity, they share instead a common enemy: modern Western society.

In his controversial *Le premier sexe* (2006), French journalist Éric Zemmour claims that the feminization of Western society is the cause of its decline, and that male chauvinism is inevitably fighting back (Sii sottomesso 140-141). The downfall of patriarchal values has caused a tangible reaction, as it has been perceived by many as an apocalyptic threat to the existence of their world. Both “Make America Great Again” and “Remaining and Expanding” – the slogan of Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign and the Islamic State’s motto – come as an answer to the fear of cultural extinction and – in many ways – as nostalgic drives aimed at the full restoration of a possibly collapsing apparatus. After all, to “Make America Great Again” means to revert to a previous condition: to go back to the pre-apocalyptic stage, before feminism and other nonconformist ideals changed the status quo. It means to hold on the principles of a shrunken society and to rebuild the world around it – a common topos of post-apocalyptic narrative, as we have seen.¹⁰⁵ For its part, the rhetoric of the Islamic State is as apocalyptic as Trump’s, if not more: *Baqiya wa-Tatamaddad* ultimately means to endure the toxic influence of the West while expanding their own values around (Ballardini 89); it means to survive and to rebuild, which are two fundamental passages of post-apocalyptic societies in fiction, at least since Boccaccio’s *brigata*. Moreover, we cannot forget that – as William McCants points out in his *The Isis Apocalypse* (2015) – there is an actual apocalyptic

¹⁰⁵ It might be also worth adding that Steve Bannon – originally considered by many to be the theoretician of Trumpism – believed in William Strauss and Neil Howe’s apocalyptic theories, according to which the history of American people proceeds in cycles. Basing his calculation on Strauss and Howe’s, Bannon concluded a catastrophic event was oncoming. More details can be found on the February 12, 2017 article Loretta Napoleoni published on the website of *Il Fatto Quotidiano*: “Trump e la rinascita dell’impero USA, la teoria apocalittica che potrebbe avverarsi.”

schedule behind the proclamation of the Islamic State, behind its strategic decisions, and within its recruiting system (15, 32, 147). Several among the men and women involved with ISIS truly believe that the end of the world is nigh, and many of the so-called ‘foreign fighters’ have indeed left their home countries and joined the war with the goal “to fight in the final battles of the apocalypse” (98).

The reason why someone would leave the West in order to fight it back has very much to do with a deep sense of social redress. Already in the 1960s, Ernesto de Martino had observed the apocalyptic dynamism of the Third World’s post-colonial awakening (465), which would extend its influence to the suburbs of the largest European cities. In 2006, Zemmour identified the ‘apocalyptic battlefield’ precisely in the French *banlieues*, where the process of islamization, both demographic and cultural, had begun a rigorous sex segregation that was a response to the egalitarian morality of the West (Sii sottomesso 141). By 2018, the frontline has moved dramatically, and several hundred men and women have left the West to join the Islamic State as foreign fighters. The jihad attracts especially the cultural ‘dropouts,’ claims Bruno Ballardini, those who either refuse the Western world or feel refused by it, in spite of having spent there their entire lives (97). Fundamentalist Islam offers those strong patriarchal values that modern Western society currently rejects, and by 2016, about 4,000 EU citizens had left Europe to join the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Like the protagonists of many works of science fiction, these young men and women are – or they believe they are – escaping a brutal contamination.¹⁰⁶

Contamination is certainly a key term of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction, and the apocalyptic contagion par excellence – the plague – becomes crucial

¹⁰⁶ According to the International Center for Counter-Terrorism’s 2016 report - “The Foreign Fighters Phenomenon in the European Union. Profiles, Threats & Policies” – a percentage between 90 and 100% of the total number of EU foreign fighters (3922-4294) foreign fighters come from urban or built-up areas. The 17% of foreign fighters are women and up to 23% of them are convert.

to understand the present scenario as much as it was critical to read Boccaccio's *Decameron*. I have already stated in this dissertation that the apocalypse, rather than being the end of the world, is the encounter of two mutually exclusive systems of thought: when one of these two systems begin to contaminate the other, a reaction is inevitable. European and American radical Muslims despise the Westernization of their customs as much as American conservatives and European rightists perceive immigration as an invasion. They are all fighting a deadly plague that comes from somewhere else – as it is always the case (Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors* 47-48) – and that brings a horrifying mutating factor. A cultural contamination has the power to change the dynamics of a society forever, and both groups – Western ultraconservatists and radical Muslims – fear nothing more than that.

European and American conservatives, however, do not actually fight radical Islam: they nominally oppose the 'Muslim contamination' of their culture, but their real war is against those Westerners who are carriers of a worldview different from their own – those who, unlike them, would welcome the 'Other' willingly.

Paradoxically, this is the enemy of fundamentalist Muslims, too: a feminine act of hospitality as opposed to a more virile assimilation, writes Zemmour, is a sign of weakness that pushes the young Muslims closer to the 'law' of their transfigured and idealized fathers, and that makes them look for social revenge (Sii sottomesso 125). Eventually, both Western ultra-conservatives and radical Muslims are fighting to

avoid the contagion from the weak, feminized leftist, against which they are unconsciously allied.¹⁰⁷

The eschatological battle between West and East, which has echoed for millennia, comes today with the traditional and necessary dosage of xenophobia – an essential emotion when it comes to contamination, as the plague, AIDS, and other deadly pandemics have taught us (Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors* 62, 80). Although the sentiment is real – as proven by the current European political scenario, with the rightist parties gaining more and more consensus one election after the other – the result is irrelevant. No matter the winner, the world would have his eschaton: history would continue intelligibly, because based on known parameters. The two eschatological adversaries overlap indeed almost perfectly, one mimicking the other symmetrically, and the success of one side would ultimately mean the success of the other. The white French blue collars who vote Le Pen en masse, writes Zemmour, are unwarily imitating the same young Muslims they would like to see out of France (Zemmour, *Sii sottomesso* 116). The young “Blacks” of the Parisian banlieues behave exactly as their political and social opponents would like to, and they carry the very same ‘masculine’ values that their white antagonists would love to see reinstated in society: prosperity, power, war (141-142).

For its part, Italy is participating actively to the current and most advertised eschatological battle, both by politically intersecting the ultra-conservative and far-right impulses of a conspicuous portion of population and by joining the radical

¹⁰⁷ “Leur père fut ouvrier chez Renault ou Michelin; il est devenu chômeur vivant de la charité publique; dès que ce père diminué, humilié trois fois, parce qu’il était arabe, ancien colonisé, ouvrier, leur mettait une rousse, le voisinage, les assistantes sociales, la justice arrêtaient la main vengeresse. La loi de leur père fut donc humiliée, bafouée, interdite. Leur mère, qui craignait et admirait leur mari au pays, a vécu cette castration de la puissance virile non comme une libération, mais comme une suprême humiliation. La famille maghrébine a explosé. La loi du père a été foulée aux pieds. Le père est absent physiquement — il a abandonné sa famille pour une autre femme, une autre vie, un autre pays parfois — ou symboliquement : dévirilisé par le chômage, il a renoncé à imposer sa loi de fer, à ses garçons en tout cas.” (Zemmour, *Le premier sexe* 115) – All the other references to Zemmour’s book present in the text refer to the Italian edition of the same essay (2015).

Islam's anti-West campaign. According to Amnesty International Italia's director general Gianni Rufini, who presented their annual report on Italy on February 22, 2018 – less than two weeks before the political elections of March 4 – the Country is currently “steeped in hate.” Italy, said Rufini “seems to focus more than other European countries the dynamics of the tendency towards hate.” By analyzing the candidates' statements on social media during the long electoral campaign, Amnesty concluded that 8% of the contenders (117 out of 1400) systematically employed expressions of hatred. The 42% of such statements came from party leaders themselves. No less than half of the statements were to be attributed to candidates of the Lega party, 27% to candidates of Fratelli d'Italia, and 18% to candidates of Forza Italia – the three right-wing parties that ran their campaign together as allied (the so-called *Coalizione*). The 79% of the statements targeted migration, 12% were islamophobic, 5% attacked the Rom community, and 4% were discriminatory on ground of gender. These statistics say something about Italy's future leaders, but they say even more about the electors, who ‘demanded’ such violent tones and who eventually awarded them with their consent (the *Coalition* collected more votes than any other political group, 37%). A large number of Italians – perhaps the majority of those who voted on March 4, 2018 – feel threatened by an imminent social apocalypse, of which they can see the signs and predict the horror. It is of little

importance whether they are right or not. What does it matter if the apocalypse actually comes in the end? That has never been the point.¹⁰⁸

As Ernesto de Martino observes (383), most millenarian movements that predicted the end of the world have actually survived the unfulfillment of their own prophecies, either becoming formally established – as a sect or a church – or simply making up an excuse for the missing apocalypse (miscounting the days being a very common one since the Middle Ages). It is therefore irrelevant whether the cultural contamination feared by Italian electors is real – whether or not Muslim immigration is to change the aspect of Italian society, or whether it is the actual cause of poor occupation and wastefulness of public funds. What matters is what people believe, what they perceive: for the rest, excuses can be made up. Although the “contingent of Italy’s jihadists who have travelled to Syria and Iraq appears to be fairly small, with a little over 100 individuals having left the country” (Marone), Italians’ perception of the issue is inevitably magnified by a cultural shock due to the proximity of two historically distant images. An ‘Italian Muslim terrorist’ is something that did not

¹⁰⁸ Amnesty International’s annual report on Italy can be found at <<https://www.amnesty.it/rapporti-annuali/rapporto-annuale-2017-2018/europa/italia/>>. Online articles that discussed the topic are the following: Today. *“Italia razzista e xenofoba”, così la politica diventa mandante morale della spirale di odio*. 22 February 2018. Website. 22 March 2018. <<http://www.today.it/politica/elezioni/politiche-2018/amnesty-candidati-incitano-odio.html>>. Cadalanu, Giampaolo. “Rapporto Amnesty International: In Italia crescono razzismo e xenofobia.” *Repubblica.it* 22 February 2018. Website. 22 March 2018. <http://www.repubblica.it/solidarieta/diritti-umani/2018/02/22/news/amnesty_international_rapporto_italia_razzismo_xenofobia-189439443/>. The Local. *Italy is 'steeped in hate', Amnesty warns amid toxic election campaign*. 22 February 2018. Website. 22 March 2018. <<https://www.thelocal.it/20180222/italy-election-campaign-hate-amnesty-international-italia>>.

belong to the common imaginary of the nation, and that is therefore rejected twice: first as a terrorist, second and foremost as an Italian one.¹⁰⁹

Similarly, it is not important whether the chiliastic prophecies of ISIS will come true, or whether the Mahdi will actually rule his people all the way to the apocalypse: history has known several Mahdis already, and the failure of each of them has not determined the end of such a proliferation. ISIS is trying to deceive the West, writes Ballardini, by making the World ‘miscalculate’ their military power (40), but it is deceiving its own members as well, because a few thousands terrorists will never be able to conquer the planet (41). The Islamic State’s answer to the ethnocentrism of the West is a caliphate outside which no other culture exists: their response to imperialism is a globalized Islam, observes Ballardini (36). As theorizing a total assimilation of immigrants seems unfeasible (other than dangerously inhumane) in modern Western society, the solipsistic and yet totalitarian project of the Islamic State cannot happen in a globalized world. Both groups, therefore, shout at each other passionately, while actually attacking the real threat: the one dangerously floating in the middle, the real apocalypse. Modernity.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ The emblematic case of Maria Giulia Sergio, who joined ISIS in Syria, is analyzed by Francesco Marone, who gives an account of Sergio’s story within the scenario of Italian jihadism. The full article’s reference is Marone, Francesco. *Italy’s Jihadists in Syria: The Case of Maria Giulia Sergio (“Lady Jihad”)*. 28 September 2016. Website. 22 March 2018. <<https://icct.nl/publication/italys-jihadists-in-syria-the-case-of-maria-giulia-sergio-lady-jihad/>>. The chilling recording of Sergio’s attempt to convince her parents to join her in Syria can be found on YouTube or in the website of La Repubblica. Sergio’s phone called was tapped by the *Polizia di Stato*: <<https://video.repubblica.it/edizione/milano/le-intercettazioni-maria-giulia-sergio--papa-prendi-mamma-per-i-capelli-e-vieni-in-siria/206021/205126>>. More information about Italian foreign fighters can be found in the following sources: ANSamed. *Syria: EU Eyes Potential Threat from Volunteer Fighters*. 19 June 2013. Website. 22 March 2018. <http://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/news/sections/generalnews/2013/06/19/Syria-EU-eyes-potential-threat-volunteer-fighters_8893641.html>; Vidino, Lorenzo. *Home-Grown Jihadism in Italy*. 29 April 2014. Website. 22 March 2018. <<http://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/home-grown-jihadism-italy-10309>>; Boncio, Alessio. *The Islamic State’s Crisis and Returning Foreign Fighters: The Case of Italy*. 3 November 2017. Website. 22 March 2018. <<http://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/islamic-states-crisis-and-returning-foreign-fighters-case-italy-18545>>.

¹¹⁰ According to the glossary Carlo Panella includes in his *Il libro nero del califfato* (2015), the Madhi is a Messianic figure of Islam (744) who “will appear in years leading up to the apocalypse” (McCants 22).

How things are going to go this time, we don't know yet. There is a good chance – if I must judge from history – that the apocalypse won't show up this time either. Better yet, it will arrive, it will change things – as it always does – and it will leave the contenders waiting and unaware that it came and went. The sudden realization of having been left out of time, in the aftermath of 'something,' is precisely what made Antonioni's characters so anxious and Virgilio's protagonist so angry. It is what made Boccaccio write the *Decameron* and Marinetti break up with the past. These are all stories of the afterwards, as we have seen: stories about the world as it is after the apocalypse, although perhaps looked from behind – from the pre-world, whatever that was. If you are fighting an eschatological war now, instead, you know nothing about the future and even less about the present: all you know is the past, and the bad news for you is that it is gone.

Nowadays, Italian authors are participating once again artistically to the representation of reality in the framework of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narrative. I have mentioned some examples of very recent publications and of new cinematographic productions in Chapter Two (cf. 2.5.4.), while some others did not find the space they perhaps deserved. Bruno Arpaia writes cli-fiction novels, for instance, which are perhaps worth of more attention. Lorenzo Sportiello directed a film, *Index Zero* (2014), that I am dying to watch, but that seems impossible to get anywhere – even after having contacted the production company and the filmmaker himself. Italian cartoonists are doing excellent things: Roberto Recchioni wrote the first Italian post-apocalyptic comic-book series, *Orfani* (2013-present) and created a post-apocalyptic universe within the cult-series *Dylan Dog*.

Skimming some of these works, however, I have not yet found any real innovator, any new groundbreaking narrator. There does not seem to be a new Fulci among these authors, but it is perhaps too early to determine it conclusively: my eyes are so tired to be staring at such a gloomy sequence of catastrophes, that I might have very well missed some good apocalypse. It is perhaps going to be the goal of my next study to retrieve them. As for now, this would do.

An Afterword

One of my students once wrote me that the biggest takeaways from my ‘zombie class’ (that’s how she called my course on Italian apocalyptic cinema) was learning that she’d rather die in the apocalypse than be forced to rebuild society. She asked me whether I would rather fight and survive or – and I quote – “go horribly but not have to deal with the trauma of surviving.” I replied that, if there were a zombie-apocalypse, I would be very disappointed to die immediately. After all the reading and all the watching, I have grown nerdishly curious of the world of the aftermath, and I would want to be part of it. As long as one of my fellow-survivors is a dentist, I told her playfully, I am glad to try out a few good years in the PA-world.

Then I thought about Livio Horrakh’s *Dove muore l’astragalo* (1971).

Horrakh wrote this rather intense short story while hitchhiking all the way to Iraq in 1969, and the reader can easily feel the realism of its details and the strength of its images. There is a great sense of precariousness, in Horrakh’s pages, mixed with a feeling of urgency and necessity – as one can find in Ungaretti’s war poems. It is a first-person narration written in the form of a diary, and it tells the last days of the unnamed protagonist. The narrator is travelling east, escaping the radiation that will ultimately and surely reach him and kill him. Half of the world is already dead and the rest is inexorably dying. The protagonist perfectly knows that he is doomed to a horrible end, but this does not stop his journey towards the origin of life and culture (“Ci rimettiamo in marcia. È l’alba. A mezzogiorno arriviamo a Babilonia” 100). He travels through a world that is no longer his own (“Non è questo il mio mondo” 96), and looking at the stars at night he feels the crushing melancholy of the sudden termination of progress and civilization (“La Via Lattea è meravigliosa. Il cielo si cruva, e le ultime stele sembrano toccare il suolo. La nostalgia di mondi mai visti e

che nessuno vedrà bagna il mio volto” 96). Nevertheless, he wants to move on. In Horrakh’s story, there is no society to rebuild, but the protagonist is resilient in his desire to stay alive as much as possible, to see as much as he can, to exist as long as it is possible.

If that student of mine and I will ever talk again about the end of the world, I will use the words of Horrakh’s protagonist to give her my new answer (90):

Voglio riempirmi gli occhi del mondo, di ciò che ne resta, e non pensare più a niente. Fino a che ne avrò il tempo.

Figures



Figure 1 - In several sequences, Antonioni creates beautiful *tableaux vivants* with 'clusters' of actors who dialogue with each other while facing different directions.



Figure 2 - Exactly like the trunks of the trees, they are unable to get in real contact in spite of their physical proximity.



Figure 3 - The alienating presence of the city is sufficient – in Antonioni's film – to underline the 'otherness' of the characters walking through it: the protagonists are little more than superfluous addition to an esthetically self-sufficient image.



Figure 4 - As Aprà observes, the mushroom-shaped building that the protagonist Vittoria sees from a window at the beginning of the movie and that will return several times throughout the film, relocates the plot in an unfamiliar dimension.



Figure 5 – There is just one clear reference to the apocalypse in Antonioni's first entirely English-language film: a pacifist, anti-nuclear rally in London, where some protesters silently carry around boards against the war and the atomic bomb.

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