The pursuit of harmony: Groups and communities in post-apocalyptic narratives

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Apocalypse. Community. Harmony. Post-apocalyptic fiction. Survivors. State of nature.

This article analyzes the challenges faced by survivors within the unforgiving environments of fictional post-apocalyptic worlds as they seek refuge, better living conditions, and the possibility of rebuilding civil society. Grounded in an interdisciplinary framework that merges literary criticism with social contract theory – particularly drawing on the concept of the state of nature – the article examines how the apocalyptic event itself influences the ideology, goals, and behavior of communities of survivors. By focusing on the social dynamics and background of these groups in various post-apocalyptic works, the study elaborates on recent academic literature which highlights harmonious relationships in post-apocalyptic contexts.

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Post-apocalyptic narratives, where conventional social structures no longer exist, create a unique setting for the formation and development of novel relationships among people. This potential has been explored in a number of scholarly works, with authors analyzing the potential for harmonious relations in the post-apocalyptic setting from specific theoretical perspectives. In her ecocritical study, Lidia María Cuadrado Payeras (2021) introduces the concept of "eco resilience" to examine nature's agency within contemporary Canadian apocalyptic fiction. Similarly, Andreas Nyström (2021), drawing on spatial theory, investigates the *haven* trope in stories about nomadic survivors seeking a physical refuge to escape the fear that follows them. José Duarte (2015) identifies a hopeful undertone in post-apocalyptic movies. On a similar note, road, a symbol deeply embedded in American culture, represents not only a dystopian landscape marked by violence and fragmentation, but also the promise of a new beginning. These studies illustrate a recent tendency to hint at subtly constructed instances of harmony among diverse entities in post-apocalyptic narratives, even as such stories mainly foreground the harsh consequences and challenges arising from societal collapse. Relationships defined by mutual understanding and coexistence emerge across multiple dimensions: between survivors and the drastically transformed environment, among the individuals, within communities of survivors and between the communities that emerged from the apocalypse. In gloomy portrayals of a post-apocalyptic world, however, survivors are often isolated from harmonious relations and are solely motivated by a desire to survive.

This article elaborates on the fragmented examination of relationships established in the aftermath of apocalyptic events, with a particular focus on the dynamics within and among survivor groups and communities that arise in fictional post-apocalyptic contexts. Here, the catastrophic event itself acts as a factor that shapes the identity of the groups of survivors, the goals which the groups strive to achieve, and the strategies they employ to navigate a hostile, resource-depleted environment. The discussion is grounded in the theoretical framework of the state of nature, a term of political and social contract theory which refers to the existence of people without an overseeing authority and which is often implemented in post-apocalyptic fiction. The argument is rooted in Claire P. Curtis's book *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract* (2010), in which she addresses the human fascination with the end-of-the-world narratives, blending literary criticism with political theory Curtis reconceptualizes the model of social contract as a tool to interpret the "elusive significance of human security and vulnerability" (Davis 2010) in a post-apocalyptic setting. In this spirit, the present analysis extracts and employs the concept of the state of nature from social contract theory to gain interdisciplinary insight into the dynamic interactions and harmonious relationships that emerge within and across communities of survivors, as well as in their engagement with the altered post-apocalyptic landscape.

Post-apocalyptic narratives have periodically reappeared throughout different historical eras, reflecting their societal anxieties toward technological advancements. In the first half of the 20th century, the depiction of post-apocalyptic sce-

narios, though scarce, echoed the emerging anxieties of technological misuse and global conflict in the wake of both world wars. Literary works such as Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912) or Stephen Vincent Benét's *By the Waters of Babylon* (1937) highlighted the likelihood of human extinction in the light of imperialistic ambitions and advancing technological warfare. In the later decades of the 20th century, the context shifted dramatically. Post-apocalyptic fiction came about as a response to the growing awareness of environmental degradation and the prospect of nuclear annihilation during the Cold War. *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959) by Walter M. Miller Jr. and Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957), among other post-apocalyptic works of the 1950s, address the problem of historical recurrence in the face of a devastating nuclear war, exploring the enduring search for meaning among the ruins of a collapsed civilization. In the present day, the resurgence of the post-apocalyptic genre often mirrors global concerns surrounding climate change, continuous technological development, and pandemics. Fluctuating between civilizational restoration and destruction, post-apocalyptic narratives may reflect contemporary concerns about the sustainability of human progress and the ethical use of technology.

The present article compiles a multimedia corpus to analyze the dynamics of communities of survivors in post-apocalyptic settings. It begins by examining the influence of the cataclysmic event on the ideologies and behavioral traits of survivors, with an initial focus on the video game *Fallout* (1997–) and *The Walking Dead* (both as comic book series [2003–2019] and television series [2010–2022]). Subsequently, Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978) and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) are used to illustrate how the catastrophic event is simply one of the elements which affect the ideology and social structure of the groups. The second section of the article is devoted to Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). The analysis of *The Road* centers on the survivors' elusive and shifting understanding of refuge, suggesting that in post-apocalyptic narratives, the idea of a safe haven may surpass physical, tangible locations and lack a precise definition.

DEFINING THE (POST-)APOCALYPSE

The term "apocalypse" has a range of connotations, from historical and theological meanings to contemporary predictions of global devastation. In contrast to the Greek word *apokálypsis*, meaning "revelation" or "disclosure", the modern understanding of the word is strongly influenced by popular culture, which narrows down the meaning of "apocalypse" solely to the devastating cataclysmic event that causes *the end of the world as we know it*, as the popular formula suggests (Rawles 2009). Narratives within the apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic genre may delve into the events preceding the apocalypse while critically illustrating how these catastrophic events contribute to the human impact on Earth's ecosystems (Baysal 2021; Ginn 2015). They may also examine the aftermath of such an event, typically by portraying survivors who have to adapt to the environment inevitably changed by the apocalypse.[1] Given that this concept *reveals* and *discloses* life in a world devoid of social, cultural, legal, economic, and moral norms, it can be argued that the narratives of contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction reflect the theological roots of the term (Yar 2015, 7). Such stories reveal

the fundamental character of humans (which might have been hidden until then), since the survivors are compelled to exist in a state of constant emergency and fear, evoking the Hobbesian notion of the state of nature.

The post-apocalyptic genre is frequently praised for its didactic potential (Curtis 2010; Mannix 1992; Wagar 1982), indicating that certain actions must be avoided to guarantee survival (or, better yet, to completely prevent the occurrence of a given cataclysmic event), while other actions are necessary for the very same reason; this approach ensures the survivors' future livelihoods, requiring them to carefully evaluate how to reach a more peaceful state than they currently find themselves in.

The exploration of harmonious relations within post-apocalyptic narratives, as mentioned previously, offers a fresh perspective to a genre traditionally dominated by stories of despair and destruction. Their sole focus on the fortitude of the human spirit, even in the most challenging circumstances, expands the genre's emotional and thematic range. Nevertheless, while the emphasis on hope and rebuilding brings an optimistic counterpoint to otherwise bleak stories, it does not fully encompass the post-apocalyptic condition. By focusing primarily on positive outcomes, there is a risk of underrepresenting the severity and permanence of the chaos that, as one can assume, would realistically characterize life after a cataclysmic event. The portrayal of terror and violence in the post-apocalyptic landscape has been of interest to many analyses, with critics praising fiction's ability to portray a devastated world and still retain its expressive qualities. According to Susan Sontag, film works that depict the total collapse of modern civilization follow "an aesthetics of destruction" (2013, 162) that evokes a sense of allure. As noted by Peter Yoonsuk Paik, such narratives flesh out an expansive range of horrors to offer a plausible, realistic idea of a transformed, post-apocalyptic world (2010, 22). Debbie Olson (2015) expands on both Sontag's and Paik's assertions, suggesting that to depict a violent post-apocalyptic landscape conveys the survivors' (often ultimately unsuccessful) struggle to either endure or recover what was lost in the wake of the apocalypse; in addition, Olson states that post-apocalyptic fiction induces a form of nostalgia in the reader by depicting a devastated landscape stripped off contemporary benefits and conveniences. Although the pre-apocalyptic world is not short of social issues – including the ones shared with its post-apocalyptic counterpart – the survivors still tend to romanticize such shortcomings and indulge in retrospection. The intensity of this nostalgia directly corresponds with the severity of the circumstances that survivors encounter. In a different piece, Olson (2015) also argues that children depicted in post-apocalyptic fiction express both extreme nostalgia for the past and, at the same time, an optimistic outlook for the future.

Sontag, Paik, and Olson acknowledge the devastating impact of apocalyptic events, particularly the destruction of the environment and the disintegration of social structures; in such heavily affected landscapes, survival becomes a challenging task. Scholars also contend that post-apocalyptic settings expose true human character, as survivors are prompted to act spontaneously and impulsively. The idea that the apocalypse is capable of revealing hidden realities leads back to its theological meaning; in an environment where moral principles are scarce, one's actions reflect

their true selves. Exposure to a lawless world causes the individual to reveal their core values, the nature of social relationships, and people's primary goals, including the great lengths to which they might go to attain them. A question arises as to why such essential truths about human behavior, actions, and objectives were not revealed in pre-apocalyptic society. What social constructs or norms were in place that kept such realities hidden?

LIVING IN HARMONY IN THE STATE OF NATURE

The characteristics of groups and communities, the influence of an apocalyptic event on their behavior, and the desire to achieve peace are all part of post-apocalyptic stories, usually paired with the survivors' struggle in a world overwhelmed by violence and terror. A considerable portion of this aggression can be attributed directly to the apocalyptic events themselves, especially when they result in the widespread destruction of the Earth's ecosystem. Another critical factor that contributes to post-apocalyptic violence is human behavior itself (Moon 2014, 192). Authors of post-apocalyptic fiction frequently utilize the cataclysmic event as a means to erase all traces of organized society – including infrastructure, healthcare, or governmental bodies – only to create a power vacuum where violence and terror can thrive, unrestricted by laws or social norms. Acts of cruelty become central themes, reflecting the raw human nature in the absence of legal or moral constraints. These fictional narratives resemble philosophical inquiries into the state of nature, a notion that contemplates the hypothetical behavior of individuals in the absence of structured social order. In this vein, Paul Williams notes that the post-apocalyptic landscape "mirrors the pre-colonial and 'pre-civilized' world" and that "[b]oth spaces are positioned outside human civilization, either awaiting its imprint or the result of its self-destruction" (2005, 304). While philosophers have speculated on human life before the formation of civil societies, post-apocalyptic narratives explore these themes in the context of their collapse. Furthermore, the concept of the state of nature explores how organized societies could possibly emerge from basic, primitive conditions; post-apocalyptic fiction provides a perspective on the development of groups and communities from such beginnings.

Thomas Hobbes' seminal treatise *Leviathan* (1651) posits that in the state of nature, where there are no natural inequalities among humans, no individual has significant power over another, which leads to a life filled with violence (2017, 96). Hobbes claims that the lack of a governing authority results in perpetual conflict (Thivet 2008). This view was met with criticism by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (*Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*, 1755) argues that Hobbes misinterpreted the behavior of individuals because he based his view on those who were already deformed by the ills of civil society. According to Rousseau, it was the impact of civilization on an individual that led Hobbes to envision the inherent wickedness of humans in a world devoid of rules or authorities. The philosophical investigation into the state of nature and its representation in post-apocalyptic literature has been discussed in several recent works (Curtis 2010; Duncan 2018; Kolpin 2014; Okung-

bowa 2019), which illustrate an ongoing discourse between political theory, social anthropology, and literary criticism. Such studies demonstrate how the post-apocalyptic landscape provides a unique framework for analyzing the raw, unmediated conditions of humanity stripped of its social structures.

How can survivors transition from a state of nature to the rebuilding of civilization under such harsh circumstances? According to Rousseau, humans, in their original state, embody the archetype of the noble savage, as they are peaceful and inherently good. In theory, the destruction of civilization following an apocalyptic event offers the opportunity for a return to this primordial state of happiness, unaffected by the injustices and corruption that Rousseau attributes to civil societies. Hobbes, on the other hand, perceives the state of nature along the seminal formula of *bellum omnium contra omnes* ("war of all against all"), where the absence of authority ensures that there is constant fear among all individuals and the constant threat of violent death. Hobbes contends that in order to escape this hopeless state, a civil state must be established through a social contract; according to this mode of thought, rebuilding civilization after collapse is not only advantageous but also necessary to bring safety and order back. Post-apocalyptic fiction more often than not conforms to Hobbes' view that civilization is essential for reducing the drastic consequences of social collapse rather than Rousseau's idealized portrayal of pre-social humanity. The crucial element thus lies in establishing a social contract, in which individuals within a group consent to unite under shared rules, laws, and moral principles – a fundamental step towards rebuilding what was lost in the wake of the apocalypse. The social contract also represents the initiative of a governing body to maintain control over individuals, ensuring that the authorities possess the means to enforce rules and manage society effectively, which is essential for the stabilization and restoration of civil order. While post-apocalyptic works may embrace the ideals of communities and their motivation to renew civil society (as opposed to solely focusing on their struggle to survive), they are still set in a lawless setting. The shift towards civil society is supported by the model of the social contract, in which individuals gain a certain degree of protection or rights in exchange for surrendering some of their freedoms (Curtis 2010, 9–10).

The discourse on eternal peace – spanning political theory, international relations, and sociology – offers guidelines and strategies from influential thinkers; it is believed that following these instructions will pave the way to achieving peace. Immanuel Kant, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or, more recently, Immanuel Wallerstein have proposed specific steps towards achieving this objective. The overarching goal of their strategies is to create an equilibrium that, if disrupted, endangers peace efforts. For Kant (1795), this balance involves the synergy of republican governance, a federation of free states, cosmopolitan rights, and gradual disarmament. Meanwhile, Rousseau (1782) emphasizes the harmony between a political authority and the public that endorses it, which in turn creates a social framework where legal and moral practices support peace. According to Wallerstein (2004), the key to preventing wars is achieving a balance in the distribution of power and resources on a global scale. The pursuit of equilibrium – defined by distinct steps that aim

for harmony – first requires the cultivation of harmony between individuals, communities, and their surroundings. Only after the interdependent entities establish compatible relationships can the resulting harmony make way for the emergence of peace. Therefore, peace does not merely rise as a goal that is directed at higher levels of governance; it develops organically as a result through the collaborative and harmonious actions of social entities, both on an individual and group level.

Applied to a post-apocalyptic setting, this line of thought indicates that it takes more than to form strong interpersonal relationships and communal bonds to achieve harmonious balance. It involves a wider range of alignments, such as harmony between survivors and nature or between individuals and particular ideologies shaped by the catastrophic events. Forming groups can greatly improve the capacity to accomplish its members' goals, as harmony within these groups and between them and their environment, or in their dedication to a shared ideology, enhances their effectiveness. Nevertheless, a harmonious state can only facilitate peace as long as it extends inclusively across all segments of society and integrates external considerations – whether economic, environmental, or governmental – as well. The exclusion of any of these considerations disrupts the equilibrium and makes peace unattainable. For instance, a group of survivors may seek to achieve harmony in a drastically altered environment, perceiving the new state of nature as superior to the pre-apocalyptic world. The harmonious relationship of a specific group with the transformed environment may be advantageous and beneficial; however, if other communities resist the transformation of the environment and, instead, work to reinstate the pre-apocalyptic social structures, the pursuit of harmony by one group, guided by an ideology that is in contrast with others, can lead to a conflict.

In the view of such a conflict of interests, J. Derek Lomas and Haian Xue emphasize that harmony poses a considerable conundrum (2022, 10); accordingly, harmony aims for sameness and is, therefore, "morally suspect" (7) because it marginalizes the spectrum of human diversity. Instead of perceiving differences as incompatible, the focus should be on combining diverse elements in a manner so that "both the parts and the whole are mutually strengthened. Harmony is a theory of fitness – describing the fitting of parts with each other and their fitness within a whole" (6). The concept of harmony encompasses multiple levels, including individual, communal, economic, and environmental aspects. In this vein, post-apocalyptic works that tell of hope amidst destruction explore a complex harmonious relationship between humans and nature; the works may further criticize the alienation of humans from the natural world or highlight the strengthening of this relationship following the cataclysmic event. Post-apocalyptic stories about survivors who strive for a return to cosmopolitan life may illustrate the need for harmony among individuals (Drake 2018). Furthermore, the portrait of post-apocalyptic terror and violence may emphasize the significance of remaining in harmony with the moral principles of the pre-apocalyptic world. These narratives advance numerous ways of interpreting the pursuit of harmony; each story offers a unique perspective on how survivors handle the challenges of their new reality.

APOCALYPSE AS THE SHAPING FACTOR

There is a direct and discernible connection between the type of apocalyptic event that ends the old world and the ideological and behavioral characteristics displayed by the post-apocalyptic groups or communities that form in its shadow. In the *Fallout* videogame series (1997–), the religious movement "The Church of the Children of Atom" emerges in the aftermath of a global thermonuclear war between the US and China. The movement's followers hold the atom, visually represented by nuclear weapons, in the same regard as a god. The survivors have found refuge in the ruins of Washington, D. C.; at the center of the wasteland lies an undetonated atomic bomb, which they consider sacred. According to existing scholarship, the worship of atomic energy does not represent a religious, post-apocalyptic tradition in itself, but is a testimony to the immense trauma of the nuclear holocaust that the individuals experienced (de Wildt et al. 2018, 6). Nevertheless, the presence of an undetonated bomb positioned in a landscape ravaged by nuclear destruction takes on a divine significance for the cult's members. Gregory B. Sadler identifies religious communities, along with families, gangs, or clans, as groups in which mutual cooperation, authority, and rules come together to forge bonds among members, resulting in relatively stable and peaceful coexistence (2010, 9). "The Church of the Children of Atom" exemplifies such a community, as it embodies a hierarchical, cult-like structure. At the top of this hierarchy stands a prophet who issues commands and has control over others. Since the group considers atomic energy and radiation as divine gifts – regardless of their adverse effects – their bond of faith guarantees that the members typically refrain from aggressive behavior towards other survivors and rather commit themselves to worship alone.

However, the impact of an apocalyptic event shapes not only the ideologies but also the behavioral characteristics of individuals, which may reflect their ability to adapt to the altered environment around them. *The Walking Dead*, as both a television (2010–2022) and comic book series (Kirkman, Moore, and Adlard 2003–2019), centers around the struggles of survivors in a zombie apocalypse, effectively demonstrating the adaptation of survivors to a transformed landscape. Zombies, referred to as "Walkers", constantly chase after living humans, who they identify by scent and hearing. One of the antagonistic groups, "the Whisperers", manages to blend in with the Walkers by wearing skin suits and communicating in a low voice (Venable 2022). In addition to the ideological principles observed by "The Church of the Children of Atom", the Whisperers' community is also shaped by behavioral practices.

Having established a group hierarchy similar to that of a wolf pack, the Whisperers exhibit hostility towards other survivors (non-members) and continuously make an effort to maintain the natural order, even at the expense of eliminating any sign of a civilized human community. Graeme J. Wilson highlights a notable shift in zombie narratives; while early portraits of zombie apocalypses related the undead to a colonial discourse, depicting them as dangerous, irrational beings, recent zombie fiction subtly reflects Western tropes, mainly individualism and conservatism, within the groups of survivors (2019, 41). Although the Whisperers defy conservative symbols, they do possess non-interventionist tendencies, as they purposefully refrain

from engaging in conversation and interaction with other groups of survivors. Although the Whisperers' avoidance of direct conflict might imply that they are a group working towards achieving peace, this is not the case. While they coexist in harmony with their environment, including the Walkers, and thrive in the primitive state of nature, the other groups do not share this harmonious relationship with their surroundings, which leads to the emergence of tensions and hostilities. The Whisperers also frequently and deliberately encounter life-threatening situations when blending in with a horde of zombies. Yet, their goal is merely to survive without establishing any form of organized community.

Alpha, the leader of the Whisperers, asserts that the group lives in harmony with nature, which entails recognizing zombies as part of the fauna. The Whisperers not only tolerate the Walkers, but also use them to their advantage. Disguised as zombies, they steer a massive horde of Walkers to demonstrate their power to other groups of survivors. Their prioritization of maintaining the current state of nature and staying in harmony with their surroundings rather than returning to pre-apocalyptic norms leads to actions that harm survivors outside their community. In this case, harmony trumps peace.

Although there is a link between the essence of apocalypse and the subsequent actions and ideologies of the groups that emerge in its wake, there are more contributing factors which predetermine their characteristics. Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978) and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) both explore the aftermath of a deadly pandemic that wipes out a vast majority of the world's population. There are, however, significant differences in the way survivors think and act in these novels. In *The Stand*, the devastated US becomes a battleground for the struggle between factions, thus representing binary concepts of good and evil. The character of Randall Flagg, personifying pure vice, creates a society based on tyranny and control. This community is an antithesis to the "Boulder Free Zone", which, despite the moral transgressions of some of its members, strives to become the bedrock of renewed civilization. The antagonism between Flagg's community and the "Boulder Free Zone" corresponds to Brettwag Samuel Stifflemire's notion of a dichotomy that naturally arises between opposing groups in post-apocalyptic works (2017, 246). The basis for this division stems from the fundamentally conflicting moral principles that each group adheres to. In contrast, the novel *Station Eleven* depicts a post-apocalyptic landscape that is less hostile; it follows the "Traveling Symphony", a group of actors and musicians who journey through the Great Lakes region, performing Shakespeare's plays and classical music. Their mission – to preserve art in a desolated world – greatly differs from the survivalist mentality in *The Stand* even though both novels narrate the same type of a cataclysmic event.

The difference between King's and Mandel's stories boils down to the former's desire to write epic fantasy reminiscent of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955) set in contemporary America; in *The Stand*, the deadly superflu virus causes the immediate breakdown of civil society, spurring chaos and oppression. *Station Eleven*, on the other hand, depicts a post-apocalyptic world with less violence due to the pandemic seeming to have a less drastic effect on culture and human relation-

ships. This allows the nomadic actors and musicians to bring hope through their performances, which would be hardly possible in King's harsh and chaotic America. Graham Wolfe describes Mandel's novel as theater fiction rather than strictly post-apocalyptic (2022), which reflects the novel's interest in showing the lasting connection of humans with art, as opposed to *The Stand*'s focus on the conflict between civilized people and terror. Therefore, in addition to the essence of the apocalyptic event, it is also the magnitude of its impact on the world – including the environment, society, individuals, or culture – that predetermines the attributes of post-apocalyptic factions. As shown in the case of a devastating pandemic, its severity has a direct influence on how the formed communities act and behave.

APOCALYPSE NOW, PEACE TOMORROW

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* features a unique depiction of maintaining moral values in the face of survival challenges. Unlike previous narratives where larger groups seek harmony, the protagonists in McCarthy's novel are a small family unit, which enhances the intimate theme and hardships they confront. The unforgiving environment prevents the survivors from settling in one location, in contrast to the relatively spatial stability granted to communities in previously mentioned works. *The Road* follows the bleak journey of an unnamed father and his son as they journey through a devastated, ash-covered North America, a few years after an unnamed apocalyptic event. The novel effectively captures the anxieties concerning an imminent threat to Western civilization after the tragic events of the September 11 attacks (Hicks 2016, 83), depicting a pervasive sense of grave danger that the protagonists need to repeatedly confront. Through a series of flashbacks, the narrative briefly touches on life before and shortly after the disaster, including the pregnancy of the son's mother. Their journey is a quest to reach "the coast", where the father hopes to survive the next winter. Hoping to find a place that is more hospitable, they follow deserted country roads while hiding from marauders and cannibals, scavenging for food and medicine. In the recurring conversations between father and son ([2006] 2009, 5, 24, 35, 92), the coast represents a potentially safe haven, a location that may be less savage and vicious than the circumstances which they currently find themselves in. Despite the father's remaining doubts about their destination, he recognizes the hope to be a driving force that helps them endure the challenges along the way. At the end of the novel, the freshly orphaned boy is approached by a man (172), who, armed with a shotgun, invites the boy to join him. Skeptical, the boy wonders if the man is "carrying the fire", a phrase not only representing the hope and righteousness of Western civilization (Hicks 2016, 79) but also a common trope in post-apocalyptic narratives that depict the heroic acts of survivors. After finding out that the man has two children with him (indicating that they were not killed to serve as nutrition), the boy choses to trust the man and joins their group.

Phillip A. Snyder interprets the ending of *The Road* as a continuation of the legacy of "carrying the fire" (2008, 84). McCarthy closes the story without departing from the raw tone that is consistent throughout the entire narrative; his style emphasizes

a bleak and unfiltered view of reality, where brief moments of hope and humanity are overshadowed by the relentless danger and brutality. Towards the end of the novel, the father and the boy fail at finding better living conditions, as the town they reach is inhabited by hostile survivors who injure the father mortally. Yet, the encounter between the boy and the unknown man suggests that striving towards a harmonious state – the driving force behind father and son's journey – was not interrupted. The boy finds a new footing in a family of survivors, who embody the hope and moral principles his father taught him, and who did not give in to inhuman, primitive practices despite the harsh realities of their world. John Kloosterman views this new group as a reflection of the father's skepticism and isolationist tendencies, a precursor to a future focused on familial bonds rather than the rebirth of society (2015, 9). Therefore, while the father and the boy do not discover a tangible shelter in the shape of a secure community, the novel implies that such a sanctuary does not necessarily have to be physical. The dire consequences of the apocalyptic event prompt the survivors to continuously seek peace. In the bleak and barren world that McCarthy populates with cannibals, thieves, and marauders, any form of harmonious living, such as discovering safe bunkers, food shelters, or meeting other survivors who mean no harm, can only be temporary. To maintain such states of peace for a longer period of time, the survivors must persistently seek them and stay on the move.

Throughout the novel, the father and the boy also experience moments of joy; nevertheless, it would be an exaggeration to regard these moments as peaceful. Rather, they momentarily lift the main protagonists from their grim circumstances and grant them a brief distraction from the constant struggle for survival. One of such moments occurs when the father crafts a flute for the boy:

> The father carved the boy a flute from a piece of roadside cane and he took it from his coat and gave it to him. The boy took it wordlessly. After a while he fell back and after a while the man could hear him playing. A formless music for the age to come. Or perhaps the last music on earth called up from out of the ashes of its ruin. (McCarthy [2006] 2009, 45)

The father not only gives the boy a flute to distract him but also seeks to provide him with a connection to the values and virtues of the old world. The father is successful as his son, while playing the flute, is "lost in concentration" (45). Yet such moments are only transient; as the story progresses, when the father asks about the flute, the boy declares that he "threw it away" (94), only to point out that such temporary distractions cannot truly distract from the oppressive reality of the post-apocalyptic setting. This scene also demonstrates how the father and the boy's need to be constantly on the move prevents them from fixating on any non-survival activity for too long, arguably the precondition to develop a minimal degree of cultural life. Another instance of a momentary distraction indicates the obstacles the father must overcome to achieve a harmonious state. As the father-son duo wanders through the woods near a river, they come across morel mushrooms and camp by the river. Yet the father understands that what drew them to this site could also draw other, potentially hostile survivors to the same spot, which would possibly entail a violent confrontation. Furthermore, the worsening weather conditions prompt the father to decline the boy's request to spend an additional day by the waterfall.

We could stay one more day.
It's not safe.
Well maybe we could find some other place on the river.
We have to keep moving. We have to keep heading south. (24)

The father's isolationist tendencies compel him to remain on the move, avoiding prolonged stays in one location in order to avoid hostile encounters. As Claire P. Curtis observes, "[s]ecurity, which is essentially absent, can only be glimpsed in continuing to move down the road, in the luck of a found cache of food, or the discovery of a cistern of water untouched by the ever present ash" (2010, 25). The dialogue between the father and the boy – related by an omniscient narrator – reveals the former's thought process in evading danger and seeking safety. In the post-apocalyptic world of *The Road*, safety, relative comfort, and food resources are the essential aspects that cause the survivors to regard a certain location as a peaceful refuge appropriate for settling. However, when determining whether a location is suitable, the father does not consider only these factors; he also assesses the potential appeal of the location for other survivors. A paradox arises: if a place seems too ideal, the father avoids it, as others might find it attractive and decide to occupy it as well. For this reason, the father-son duo avoids locations that are roadside or easily accessible.

While the hope for finding the ideal refuge – according to the father's overprotective requirements – might appear utopian, the protagonists find solace in places and situations that meet even just one or a few of the criteria. Nevertheless, McCarthy's novel does feature a single instance of genuine sanctuary, a small underground bunker, which illustrates the dynamic nature of peace (Hicks 2016, 86), which the survivors struggle to achieve. The moment when the father and the boy discover the hidden bunker filled with supplies marks a rare pause in their continuous journey. This discovery presents them with an opportunity to experience both physical and psychological solace, diverging from their pursuit of safety without ever truly reaching it. Driven by desperation, exhaustion, and the acute pressure of dwindling supplies, the father discovers the bunker. As he walks across the lawn of a deserted house in a devastated town, he contemplates their dire situation and decides to deviate from his usual course of action:

How many days to death? Ten? Not so many more than that. He couldn't think. Why had he stopped? He turned and looked down at the grass. He walked back. Testing the ground with his feet. He stopped and turned again. Then he went back to the shed. He returned with a garden spade and in the place where he'd stood he chucked the blade into the ground. (78)

Remarkably, the father finds the physical shelter only after he decides to stop moving and pursuing the elusive idea of such a refuge. Hidden underground, the bunker is stocked with all the necessary provisions (81), bearing the strongest resemblance to a peaceful refuge described in the novel. Although meeting many requirements for a safe haven, the father insists that they can only stay in the bunker for a few days. Andreas Nyström explains this decision by interpreting the underground sanctuary as a Foucauldian heterotopia, marking a spatial turn from mind to body and from time to space:

> [T]he bunker in *The Road* vacillates between a safe place of rest and a dead end: the haven can potentially be turned into a dark underground cellar where marauding cannibals might easily trap the man and his boy. As such, it can be read as a heterotopian mirror in which the man sees the utopian promises of a place of true rest, but since the utopian impulses of the bunker hinge on the existence of a vanished world, it simultaneously reflects a place of death – a grave (2021, 73–74).

Elaborating on Nyström's perception of the bunker as a grave (both in metaphorical and very possibly literal sense), the unfavorable post-apocalyptic setting compels all survivors to maintain constant vigilance; therefore, staying in the bunker is detrimental in the father's view. If moving down south towards the coast works to the protagonists' advantage – that is, their survival – then stopping is akin to giving up the will to survive and surrendering to the post-apocalyptic horrors.[2] The phrase "carrying the fire", the father's mantra, encapsulates the need to preserve moral values and sustain hope even in uncertain times. It implies that in order to survive, one must remain on the move, as if the chaos and violence of the world are always one step away, waiting to catch up. This continuous movement is both a physical tactic and a metaphor for the ongoing struggle against the decline of moral values. The father and the boy's journey is a paradox: in order to find harmony, one must avoid safe locations.

The Road is a specific example of a post-apocalyptic work that focuses on the importance of a family's ability to survive in a barren world. The novel depicts several groups of survivors, but it is only the family unit that, although not thriving, does manage to endure the challenges surrounding it. In the post-apocalyptic setting, every individual has to face the terrible consequences of the cataclysmic event, but it is the "good guys" – as McCarthy terms them – who must display extra vigilance over the threats posed by marauders, cannibals, and road agents. Compared to the protagonists, the antagonistic groups in *The Road* face fewer difficulties when dealing with the apocalyptic aftermath. What is it that distinguishes these two factions, and on what basis can the groups in the novel be categorized as either good or bad? Moreover, what criteria, for example, does the boy rely on to classify the family group he encounters at the end of the novel as "good guys"? In this regard, moral principles play a major role and also explain why life in a post-apocalyptic setting is more challenging when adhering to "good guy" norms. Given that the state of nature allows for behaviors that would be considered immoral or illegal in a pre-apocalyptic society, maintaining moral integrity entails greater challenges. It is much simpler to pursue one's goal – that is, survival and sustenance – in a lawless environment without regard to ethics, for example by imprisoning people to ensure a steady supply of nutrition. The relatively minor struggles faced by the antagonistic groups in *The Road* should not hide the fact that their objectives further accelerate the prevailing terror and violence. Likewise, the tougher challenges encountered by the father and the boy should not compromise the profound virtue of their goal: to reach a safe haven and survive the surrounding chaos and brutality, all while maintaining their humanity and civility.

CONCLUSION

Post-apocalyptic fiction presents a variety of goals that groups of survivors aim to achieve. This includes the ambition to harm others' existence and endeavors that unite survivors for a better future. Striving for peace without harmonious relationships between individuals and groups is pointless, since the post-apocalyptic setting is hostile to all forms of life as well as to the very fabric of civil society. Cataclysmic events fundamentally reshape social norms and the goals of survivors, which leads to the formation of communities with particular ideologies. The motivations of the groups and the behavior of their members are not only responses to the power vacuum or the absence of civilization, but they are significantly influenced by the type and scale of the apocalyptic event itself. This forces individuals to form groups by shaping their core identities, beliefs, objectives, and ways of life. Nevertheless, reaching a harmonious state is a foundational step towards achieving peace. Post-apocalyptic narratives emphasize that harmony needs to be extended to all segments of society to establish an equilibrium; without harmonious relationships, the balance is endangered, and conflicts emerge.

The post-apocalyptic genre frequently reflects a Hobbesian state of nature as it depicts the necessity for organized communities with distinct authority and rules. Such organization is vital for survival; individuals sacrifice some independence in return for the semblance of security and social order; however, to achieve lasting peace requires that the notion of harmony is not isolated. The establishment of groups in the wake of the apocalypse does not nullify the present state of nature. Instead, it allows members – whether they form part of religious cults, familial units, warring factions, or peaceful communities – to rely on the group's established moral norms, rules, and authority for security. This provides survivors with a degree of safety in an otherwise cruel and ravaged world. Nonetheless, the essence of the goals they pursue is often futile. While post-apocalyptic fiction may depict survivors who find peace within specific spatial and temporal confines, such as physical shelters, it may also portray characters who, struggling with constant challenges, are compelled to lead a nomadic life and endlessly search for peaceful refuge.

Through the lens of social contract theory, post-apocalyptic fiction thus offers insights into survivors' pursuit of harmony and the importance of an organized community that enables its members to achieve desired goals. This perspective suggests that the father's excessively vigilant, almost paranoid behavior in *The Road* prevents him and his son from finding stable and permanent refuge. Immediately following the apocalyptic event, survivors find themselves freed from any laws or rules but their own. At the same time, the very same freedom leaves them exposed to the ever-present fear of violence. This vulnerable state causes individuals to form organized groups and select a new arbiter of justice, who in turn provides them with a degree of safety. Depicting harmony as a state that is elusive and temporary in adverse circumstances underscores that it is often mere hope or the idea of harmony that sustains the groups and allows them to carry on. Examining the dynamics within post-apocalyptic narratives not only enhances the comprehension

of the genre, but also offers an original take on the state of nature, the foundations which safe communities and the reconstruction of civil society must build upon.

NOTES

[1] Originally, post-apocalyptic narratives may also portray cataclysmic events that are unavoidable and beyond human influence or tales of heroic characters who prevent the apocalypse (ideally at the last moment). Such stories, categorized as genre fiction, typically lack the kind of layered, well-narrated plot that would lend itself to a closer analysis (e.g., John Barnes's *Directive 51* [2011] or James Wesley Rawles's *The Coming Collapse* series [1998–2014]).

[2] According to Curtis, the option to give up the will to survive – that is, "a failure of will and love" (2010, 29) – is shown by the son's mother, who commits suicide. Her decision to end her life follows a conversation on the struggle to live in a cruel, barbaric world. Moreover, the mother explicitly rejects the label of a survivor and instead refers to herself and her husband as "the walking dead in a horror film" (McCarthy [2006] 2009, 32). In refusing to identify as a survivor, the mother rejects the idea of overcoming the misery that surrounds them, as it would only confront them with unmitigated violence.

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