University of Pardubice

Faculty of Arts and Philosophy

America in Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novels

Bc. Adam Novotný

Master Thesis

2025

Univerzita Pardubice
Fakulta filozofická
Akademický rok: 2024/2025

ZADÁNÍ DIPLOMOVÉ PRÁCE

(projektu, uměleckého díla, uměleckého výkonu)

Jméno a příjmení:	**Bc. Adam Novotný**
Osobní číslo:	**H23352**
Studijní program:	**N0231A090011 Anglická filologie**
Téma práce:	**Postapokalyptické vize Ameriky v soudobé románové tvorbě**
Téma práce anglicky:	**America in Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novels**
Zadávající katedra:	**Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky**

Zásady pro vypracování

Závěrečná diplomová práce se zaměří na komparativní analýzu postapokalyptického prostředí Spojených států amerických ve vybrané americké současné románové tvorbě. Konkrétně se analýza bude věnovat románům *Cesta* Cormaca McCarthyho, *Severance* od čínsko-americké autorky Ling Ma a *Den Nula* C. Roberta Cargilla. V teoretické části diplomant představí z literárněvědného a literárně-teoretického hlediska postapokalyptický žánr, jeho vznik a vývoj a významné autory (jak v americké, tak i světové literatuře). Vlastní rozbor se vedle postapokalyptických prvků také zaměří na pojetí místa v souvislosti s tématem za/vykořenění (rootedness, uprootedness).

Rozsah pracovní zprávy:
Rozsah grafických prací:
Forma zpracování diplomové práce: **tištěná/elektronická**
Jazyk zpracování: **Angličtina**

Seznam doporučené literatury:

Bellamy, Brent Ryan. *Remainders of the American Century: Post-Apocalyptic Novels in the Age of US Decline*. Wesleyan University Press, 2021.
Cargill, C. Robert. *Day Zero*. Orion Publishing Group, 2021.
Fisher, Mark. "The Lonely Road." Film Quarterly 63, no. 3 (2010): 14–17. https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2010.63.3.14.
Hoberek, Andrew. "Cormac McCarthy and the Aesthetics of Exhaustion." American Literary History 23, no. 3 (2011): 483–99. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41237452.
Hughes, Rowland, and Pat Wheeler. "Introduction Eco-Dystopias: Nature and the Dystopian Imagination." Critical Survey 25, no. 2 (2013): 1–6. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42751030.
Ma, Ling. *Severance*. Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2018.
McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. Knopf Double Day Publishing Group, 2007.
Pitetti, Connor. "Uses of the End of the World: Apocalypse and Postapocalypse as Narrative Modes." Science Fiction Studies 44, no. 3 (2017): 437–54. https://doi.org/10.5621/sciefictstud.44.3.0437.
Walter, Martin. "Landscapes of Loss: The Semantics of Empty Spaces in Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Fiction." In Empty Spaces: Perspectives on Emptiness in Modern History: Perspectives on Emptiness in Modern History, edited by Courtney J. Campbell, Allegra Giovine, and Jennifer Keating, 133–50. University of London Press, 2019. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvp2n2r8.13.
Yeates, Robert. *American Cities in Post-Apocalyptic Science Fiction*. UCL Press, 2021.

Vedoucí diplomové práce: **Mgr. Michal Kleprlík, Ph.D.**
Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Datum zadání diplomové práce: **3. dubna 2025**
Termín odevzdání diplomové práce: **3. dubna 2026**

doc. Mgr. Jiří Kubeš, Ph.D. v.r.
děkan

Mgr. Olga Roebuck, Ph.D. v.r.
vedoucí katedry

V Pardubicích dne 3. dubna 2025

Prohlašuji:

Práci s názvem America in Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novels jsem vypracoval samostatně. Veškeré literární prameny a informace, které jsem v práci využil, jsou uvedeny v seznamu použité literatury.

Byl jsem seznámen s tím, že se na moji práci vztahují práva a povinnosti vyplývající ze zákona č. 121/2000 Sb., o právu autorském, o právech souvisejících s právem autorským a o změně některých zákonů (autorský zákon), ve znění pozdějších předpisů, zejména se skutečností, že Univerzita Pardubice má právo na uzavření licenční smlouvy o užití této práce jako školního díla podle § 60 odst. 1 autorského zákona, a s tím, že pokud dojde k užití této práce mnou nebo bude poskytnuta licence o užití jinému subjektu, je Univerzita Pardubice oprávněna ode mne požadovat přiměřený příspěvek na úhradu nákladů, které na vytvoření díla vynaložila, a to podle okolností až do jejich skutečné výše.

Beru na vědomí, že v souladu s § 47b zákona č. 111/1998 Sb., o vysokých školách a o změně a doplnění dalších zákonů (zákon o vysokých školách), ve znění pozdějších předpisů, a směrnicí Univerzity Pardubice č. 7/2019 Pravidla pro odevzdávání, zveřejňování a formální úpravu závěrečných prací, ve znění pozdějších dodatků, bude práce zveřejněna prostřednictvím Digitální knihovny Univerzity Pardubice.

V Pardubicích dne 15. 6. 2025

Bc. Adam Novotný

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Mgr. Michal Kleprlík, Ph.D. for the guidance and inspiration he had provided me in creation of this thesis. I also thank PhDr. Ladislav Vít, Ph.D. for his invaluable insights regarding the topic of place.

ANNOTATION

This thesis deals with the depictions of post-apocalyptic environment in the novels *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, *Day Zero* by C. Robert Cargill, and *Severance* by Ling Ma. It introduces relevant literary context of the genre of post-apocalyptic fiction and selected terms which are relevant in this context. This thesis also deals with the topics of place and loss of roots as depicted in the selected novels. Finally, it deals with the American landscape and ideologies as they are presented in the narrative of the selected literature.

KEYWORDS

Post-apocalyptic fiction, place, loss of roots, nostalgia, United States of America, American landscape, American values

NÁZEV

Postapokalyptické vize Ameriky v soudobé románové tvorbě

ANOTACE

Tato práce se zabývá vyobrazením postapokalyptického prostředí v románech Cesta Cormaca McCarthyho, Den Nula C. Roberta Cargilla a Severance od Ling Ma. Práce uvádí relevantní literární kontext žánru postapokalyptické fikce a vybraných termínů, které jsou s ním spojené. Dále se zabývá tématem místa a vykořenění, tak jak je vyobrazeno ve vybraných dílech. V neposlední řadě se práce zabývá americkou krajinou a hodnotami a jak se tyto prvky projevují v postapokalyptickém narativu vybraných děl.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Postapokalyptická fikce, místo, vykořenění, nostalgie, Spojené státy americké, americká krajina, americké hodnoty

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

This thesis deals examines the post-apocalyptic environment as it is depicted in the novels *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, *Severance* by Ling Ma, and *Day Zero* by C. Robert Cargill. It presents literary, etymological, and other theoretical concepts and supports them with examples from selected literature. The thesis also simultaneously concludes a comparative analysis between the selected novels.

The primary goal of the first chapter is to dissect the genre of post-apocalyptic fiction, identify and analyse its forms, and examine how the genre has evolved throughout history. The chapter presents important authors and works that served as milestones for the genre to facilitate a clear understanding of the development of the genre. Furthermore, it explains how post-apocalyptic and apocalyptic fiction fit into the category of science fiction and when that is the case with the post-apocalyptic subgenre. A section dedicated to the phenomenon of place, non-places, and landscape is also included, as all of these play an important role in the environmental storytelling of the end-of-the-world narratives. This phenomenon is then applied to the primary literature, supported by examples from the novels, focusing specifically on the topic of rootedness and loss of roots in the context of the apocalypse. A short introduction is also provided for the authors of the primary literature. This chapter further examines selected American values and ideologies, including their origin and historical development in the United States. Furthermore, this part of the chapter will be directly referenced in the third chapter, which explores these notions, as they appear in, or as they are absent from, the novels of the primary literature.

The second chapter deals with the different aspects of the post-apocalyptic environment and the manner in which it was changed by the catastrophe, as depicted in the primary literature. Firstly, it discusses the properties of each of the disastrous events, being a pandemic in Ling Ma's *Severance*, and a robotic uprising in C. Robert Cargill's *Day Zero*, and an unspecified catastrophe in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. Therefore, the analysis of *The Road* includes informed speculations based on the evidence found in the novel. This is followed by a discussion concerning the overall landscape and how the environment is described through the narrative. This discussion then also extends onto the human factor of the post-apocalyptic landscape, describing the survivors, and how their presence influences the overall environment. A section of the text also delves into the human factor in more detail, as it is dedicated to trauma. It details how trauma is displayed through the characters' reactions to their various

circumstances. Furthermore, this second chapter discusses the manner in which the characters obtain life-sustaining commodities, including clean water and food, as well as finding suitable shelter. The chapter categories shelters into different types, according to the aspects they provide that are essential for survival, safety, or even comfort of the characters.

Lastly, the third chapter focuses on aspects of the post-apocalyptic landscape that are closely connected to and recognisable as being a part of the United States of America. The analysis examines the aspects of the environment described in the narrative and observed by the characters, particularly those which can be identified as generally recognisable aspects of the American landscape. The following part explores several selected values and ideologies which are connected to the American culture. These concepts are analysed in relation to their theoretical introduction in the first chapter and supported by examples from the primary literature. Furthermore, this chapter determines the extent to which these values are retained by the characters, or whether these previously recognised values have been entirely lost and are now completely absent as a consequence of the apocalyptic events.

1 Post-Apocalyptic Fiction and the Concept of Place

Before exploring the specifics of the post-apocalyptic science fiction genre and introducing the concept of place as presented by the theorists Tuan Yi-Fu and Edward Relph, it is appropriate first to provide an etymological overview of some of the key terms essential to this thesis.

The term that is perhaps the most relevant for this thesis is apocalypse. Nowadays, this term is primarily associated with catastrophic, world-ending events. However, that does not correspond to the meaning that the word originally entailed. Elizabeth K. Rosen explains that the word originates from Greek *apokalypsis*, which translates into unveiling or uncovering. She also implies that the word originally appeared not earlier than in the New Testament Book of Revelation in which "St. John of Patmos, […] is shown the coming struggle between good and evil and God's ultimate judgement upon the world."[1] Rosen highlights that the definition of the word, as it is seen today, was largely influenced by a newspaper headline from the 12 of September 2001, which used the word alongside the image of the ruined towers of the World Trade Centre. In this way, Rosen concludes that the meaning of the word went from "the hopeful biblical story of ultimate judgement and reward, to an adjective […] understood to be a synonym for the catastrophic or devastating."[2]

Another term that for the purposes of this analysis must be examined from the etymological point of view is nostalgia. This word is particularly important in the context of the notion of place that this paper deals with. Furthermore, the concept of nostalgia is important for all three of the primary literary works, but it is particularly relevant for Ling Ma's *Severance*, where it is one of the central themes. The word itself, similarly to apocalypse, is of Greek origin. Eugene B. Daniels explains that the term was conceived as a combination of two Greek roots: *nostos* and *algos*. *Nostos*, as Daniels elaborates, means to coming back home, whereas *algos* stands for suffering. The meaning of both these words combined then results in the distress or suffering associated with the process of returning home, which Daniels also compares to the English term homesickness. Daniels also makes a point that nostalgia, as a psychological phenomenon, is highly subjective and one's longing for home can be completely meaningless to another.[3] For the purposes of this thesis, particularly the forthcoming discussion on place, roots, and their effects on the characters in the primary novels, it is essential to further elaborate

[1] Elizabeth K. Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and Postmodern Imagination* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008), xiii.
[2] Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation*, xiv.
[3] Eugene B. Daniels, "Nostalgia and Hidden Meaning," *American Imago* 42, no. 4 (Winter 1985): 371.

on the origin and meaning of nostalgia, not only as a word, but also as a psychological concept. According to Fred Davis, the term itself was coined in the late seventeenth century by a Swiss physician Johannes Hofer, who used it to identify a state of intense longing for home in Swiss soldiers deployed far away from their home country. Davis continues by listing the symptoms that Hofer and his peers observed in the soldiers, includeding: "despondency, melancholia, liability of emotion, including profound bouts of weeping, anorexia, a generalized 'wasting away,' and, not infrequently, attempts at suicide."[4] More than 300 years later, Hofer's definition is no longer applicable, as Janelle Lynn Wilson instead suggests. She highlights that "over the years, […] nostalgia [began to be regarded] as a bittersweet emotion that has the capacity to be positive for the individual."[5] Furthermore, in the beginning of her article, Wilson underlines the notion that nostalgia is not only to be associated with time but also with space.[6]

Following this assessment, it is necessary to introduce the authors of the primary literature. Ling Ma, as Soha A. Helmy describes, is a Chinese American author born in 1983, who currently serves as an Assistant Professor of Practice in the Arts within the Department of Creative Writing at the University of Chicago. Her debut novel *Severance* garnered widespread critical acclaim and positioned her as one of the most promising new voices in contemporary fiction, earning her the 2020 Writing Award for Fiction. Helmy notes that *Severance* is notable for its deft blending of pre-apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic themes. The novel anticipates elements of the COVID-19 pandemic, a prescience that has contributed to its renewed relevance. As per Helmy, *Severance* received several prestigious accolades, including the Kirkus Prize and recognition as a New York Times Notable Book of the Year in 2018. In 2019, it also secured the Young Lions Fiction Award and the VCU Cabell First Novelist Award. Helmy concludes by reiterating that the global outbreak of COVID-19 has led to a resurgence of interest in Ma's work, underscoring its enduring significance.[7]

Regarding Cormac McCarthy, Steven Frye believes that ever since McCarthy's first book was published in 1965, he had been critically acclaimed. Yet, he notes that it has not been until the early 1990s that his books gained worldwide popularity. He supports this by saying that until the release of his book *All the Pretty Horses* in 1992, his novels failed to sell over five thousand hardback books. As for his accolades, Frye recounts that in 1981, McCarthy had

[4] Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 1–2.
[5] Jannelle Lynn Wilson, "Here and Now, There and Then: Nostalgia as a Time and Space Phenomenon," *Symbolic Interaction* 38, no. 4 (November 2015), 479.
[6] Wilson, "Here and Now," 478.
[7] Soha A. Helmy, "Ling Ma's Severance: A Dystopian Pre/Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Time of Covid-19," *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies* 22, no. 2 (June 2022), 155.

received the renowned MacArthur Grant, after which, more than ten years later, he had won the National Book Award along with the National Book Critics Circle Award for his novel *All the Pretty Horses*, and finally he had received the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in 2007 for his novel *The Road*. Frye concludes by highlighting McCarthy's hard work and accomplishments and claims that he was "an American author of monumental importance and value."[8]

Finally, since there are not many acclaimed sources dedicated to the biography of C. Robert Cargill, the following information is taken from Cargill's personal website. He writes in his biography that his occupation is primarily that of a screenwriter, which is also what he has been most acclaimed for, especially for the movie *Sinister*. In his spare time, as Cargill mentions, he devotes time to writing novels.[9] His work most notably includes his post-apocalyptic novel *Day Zero*.

With the authors introduced, it is necessary to shift the focus to the topic of place. Edward C. Relph, in his studies of the phenomenon, determined that places as humans experience them are far more significant than mere practical knowledge of places for their functions such as relaxation, sleep, or work. Relph supports his claims by stating that:

> [T]his is apparent in the actions of individuals and groups protecting *their* places against outside forces of destruction, or is known to anyone who has experienced homesickness and nostalgia for particular places. […] to be human is to have and to know *your* place.[10]

Immediately, it is apparent from Relph's words that the notion of place is deeply connected to that of nostalgia. Furthermore, his mention of the human will to protect their own place from destruction directly links the phenomenon with the genre of post-apocalyptic fiction, where places are inevitably destroyed or drastically changed. Another of Relph's observations that is particularly important in the context of this paper is that the "private places that are set apart from the public world either physically or because of their particular meaning for us"[11] are far more significant. Relph also specifically stresses that "there may be no common knowledge of [private places]; rather they are defined by special and particular significances for us, and may be remembered rather than immediately present."[12] He concludes his point by implying that places connected to childhood "[in particular] constitute vital reference points for many

[8] Steven Frye, "Histories, Novels, Ideas: Cormac McCarthy and the Art of Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy* ed. Steven Frye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3.
[9] "Biography," C. Robert Cargill, accessed June 13, 2025, https://crobertcargill.com/blog/bio.
[10] Edward C. Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (California: Pion, 1976), 3.
[11] Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 36.
[12] Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 37.

individuals."[13] Lastly, it is also important to mention Relph's definition of rootedness. According to Relph's words, it is "not just a detailed knowledge, but a sense of deep care and concern for that place."[14] Rootedness is a term that proves to be essential to the analysis, especially when dealing with the loss of these roots that the characters inevitably deal with. This is a notion that is found in all primary novels. It could also be argued that the genre of post-apocalyptic science fiction is built around catastrophic events that unavoidably change the surroundings and situations of all of their characters. These changes in turn unpreventably make the characters miss their prior circumstances, hence feeling nostalgia for the way things were before. In McCarthy's *The Road*, there is an example that perfectly embodies nostalgia, memories of one's childhood, as well as the difficulty of letting go of one's roots:

> [the father] stood there. He felt with his thumb in the painted wood of the mantle the pinholes from tacks that had held stockings forty years ago. This is where we used to have Christmas when I was a boy. He turned and looked out at the waste of the yard. A tangle of dead lilac. The shape of a hedge. On cold winter nights when the electricity was out in a storm we would sit at the fire here, me and my sisters, doing our homework. The boy watched him. Watched shapes claiming him he could not see. We should go, Papa, [his son] said. Yes, the man said. But he didn't.[15]

In this excerpt, the connection between the place and the protagonist can be visualized. However, the context of the catastrophe prevents him from reattaching to the place entirely. The protagonist's son can see his father being moved by the place, but is himself entirely unable to relate, reflecting the private nature of nostalgic feelings discussed earlier. Instead, he experiences fear of a space that is strange to him, urging his father to leave the place at the nearest opportunity.

In the post-apocalyptic world of *The Road*, houses, such as the father's former home, present a danger of potential murderous inhabitants. This happens to be the case with one of the houses the man and his son visit later in the book, which will be elaborated upon later. Due to the constant movement from place to place, the father and his son are effectively unable to establish roots toward any place. Essentially, because they are moving all the time, almost every space they pass through becomes a non-place. As Marc Augé identifies, non-places are "spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure)."[16] It can be argued that based on observations made from the primary literature, non-places are a common theme, as survivors are often portrayed travelling from one space to another in search of resources and

[13] Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 37.
[14] Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 37.
[15] Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Vintage International, 2007), 26.
[16] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (United Kingdom: Verso Books, 2023), 76.

temporary shelter. This applies to all three of the novels, as all of the main characters undertake a journey in their respective stories. In *The Road* the man along with his son travel south in search of better environmental conditions for survival and though much of their surroundings are described, their journey on the road is long and most of the spaces they pass through are not directly acknowledged by the narration. The same can be said for *Day Zero* where the protagonists, Pounce and Ezra, are even forced by their pursuers not to dwell on their surroundings apart from assessing them for threats and being cautious. Lastly, in *Severance*, non-places are present in the same form, even though compared to the other two novels, the environment poses a far lower danger to the characters of passing through it.

Before moving on to the next topic, it is important first to address the occurrence of rootedness and the loss of one's roots in *Severance* and *Day Zero* as well. In *Severance*, the title itself suggests that one of the main premises of the novel is the severance of one's roots. In the case of the protagonist, Candace, there can be two different interpretations. The first one being the fact that Candace is severing her roots to her old home of pre-apocalyptic New York, her old life, job, and some of her values such as materialism. The second interpretation of severance in Candace's case is hinted at through her backstory narratives, in which she talks about her move from China to the United States and the subsequent loss of connection to her place of origin. The topic of Candace's immigration will be further discussed in the second chapter in relation to the topic of trauma.

In *Day Zero*, the loss of roots can be seen in the main character Ezra. He is a young child, forced to leave the house he grew up in after losing his parents. Additionally, he was betrayed by a domestic robot servant that he considered an integral part of his home. Ezra's feelings are, similarly to Candace's, also subject to a deeper discussion in the second chapter that deals with trauma.

The next topic that needs to be addressed as a part of the theoretical context within this paper is the genre of post-apocalyptic fiction. Rosen begins by describing the historical context of the genre by saying that the apocalyptic narrative, as it is conventionally understood, reached its complete formulation with the emergence of Christianity. She continues that while its structural elements have narrative roots in the Old Testament, the individual elements and themes of apocalyptic discourse can be traced as far back as the ancient religious and mythological traditions of the Vedic, Indian, Egyptian, Persian, Mesopotamian, and Greek

civilisations.[17] Nevertheless, Robert Yeates notes that it is important to make a distinction between the narrative successors of these older forms of post-apocalyptic fiction, which present the topics of religious or occult nature, and the newer post-apocalyptic subgenre of science fiction, which showcases an imagining of a world which is feasible through the contemporary understanding of science. An important remark that agrees with the argument of Yeates is made by Diletta De Cristofaro, who makes a point that since the genre of science fiction as a whole is typically set in the future, it is only logical the post-apocalyptic "narratives of a future in ruins are generally subsumed under the umbrella term of [science fiction]."[18] Yeates further claims that these stories tend to picture catastrophic levels of destruction and also lists out a variety of contemporary issues and topics which may be reflected in the genre of post-apocalyptic science fiction. He defines them as follows:

> […] dangers of new technologies, overdependence on infrastructure, overcrowding, the spread of deadly diseases, pollution and damage to the environment, failure of municipal government and law enforcement, totalitarianism, terrorism, wars, and the spilling over of tensions between groups artificially divided by race, class, gender and sexuality.[19]

Before delving into the history and development of the apocalyptic genre, it is important to acknowledge the distinction made by professor Mark Payne who notions that the genre can be divided into two basic categories: the works that focuses on the apocalypse as it happens, appropriately named apocalyptic fictions, and the works which portray the imagining of life after the apocalyptic event concluded, therefore titled post-apocalyptic.[20]

Connor Pitetti chooses a different approach in his analysis, although the two categories of his own distinction bear identical monikers, being apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives. Pitetti identifies apocalyptic narratives as texts which are either religious, meaning revelatory writings such as the Book of Revelation, or secular texts, both of which make a clear between the old version of the world and the new one brought about by the cataclysmic event. These stories are optimistic in the sense that they allow for the world or humanity to start over and build a new and better version of the world.[21] This definition can be clearly visualised on the etymology of the word catastrophe, which Mary Ann Doane identifies as a word of Greek

---

[17] Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation*, xiii.
[18] Diletta De Cristofaro, *The Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel: Critical Temporalities and the End Times* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 3.
[19] Robert Yeates, *American Cities in Post-Apocalyptic Science Fiction* (London: UCL Press, 2021), 8.
[20] Mark Payne, *Flowers of Time: On Postapocalyptic Fiction* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2020), 1–2.
[21] Connor Pitetti, "Uses of the End of the World: Apocalypse and Postapocalypse as Narrative Modes," *Science Fiction Studies* 44, no. 3 (November 2017), 439–444.

origin which combines the word *kata*, which means over, and *strephein*, meaning turn, which translates to overturn.[22] The other group that Pitetti recognises is a post-apocalyptic narrative, distinguished by rejecting the idea of a clear defined ending of one time period and beginning of another. Pitetti states that the post-apocalyptic mode oftentimes serves as a critique of the ambiguity of the apocalyptic mode, deeming the transition between the past and the future far too seamless. As Pitetti summarises;

> [t]hey depart from this model of speculative narrative by using stories about world-shattering calamities not to structure temporal experience but to emphasize the ambiguity of that experience and the need for active historical subjects to take responsibility for directing and shaping indeterminate and open-ended historical processes.[23]

Now that a specific categorisation has been established based on multiple scholars, it is essential to apply these distinctions to the primary literature. Yeates' distinction clearly puts all of the titles in the category of the post-apocalyptic subgenre of science fiction, as the novels are not predominantly religious nor mythical in their nature. Although there are admittedly few allusions and references to religion in the novels, they cannot be considered religious works, such as the Book of Revelations.

Payne's distinction then splits the novels into three categories. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* represents the post-apocalyptic type of narrative, the story taking place multiple years after the catastrophe, describing the journey of a father and his son through a desolate landscape in hopes of finding an environment better suited for survival. C. Robert Cargill's *Day Zero* then represents the apocalyptic type of narrative that unfolds directly during the apocalypse, describing the story of a robotic nanny protecting his protégé amidst a robotic uprising. Finally, Ling Ma's *Severance* combines the two categories as the story is divided into two timelines that are eventually connected together at the end of the book. One of the timelines focuses on events prior to and during the apocalypse, and the other focuses on the efforts of a group of survivors in the post-apocalyptic world. The timelines are interconnected by the perspective of Candace Chen, the novel's main character.

Lastly, Pitetti's distinction places all three of the novels in the category of post-apocalyptic narrative mode, as all of them contain firm connotations of the past, none of them making the transition from the world before into the world after the apocalypse seamless. This claim is further supported by the fact that two of the novels, namely *Day Zero* and *Severance*,

[22] Mary Ann Doane, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe," in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 228.
[23] Pitetti, "Narrative Modes," 444.

describe the events of the apocalypse as it is happening and directly connect the past to the present events by providing context for the cataclysmic events. Although McCarthy's *The Road* does not provide a detailed view of the apocalypse as it happens, nor does it provide the context for what the exact nature of the apocalypse was, it is clear that the effects of past events are ever present in the environmental landscape of *The Road*.

In her article, Kateřina Houfková examines the post-apocalyptic science fiction genre as a powerful medium for social critique and cultural reflection. She argues that these narratives function primarily as cautionary tales, visualising speculative scenarios that highlight the potential consequences of contemporary human behaviour, especially concerning technological advancement and environmental degradation, both of which are very well exemplified in the primary literature. Rather than simply serving the purpose of entertainment, post-apocalyptic fiction also has a didactic purpose in warning its readers of the long-term dangers connected with unchecked scientific progress, militarisation, consumerism, or ecological neglect.

Houfková emphasises that these texts typically envision the aftermath of catastrophic events, whether nuclear war, ecological collapse, or viral pandemics, not simply to depict ruin, but to interrogate the ideologies and systemic failures that lead to such collapses. In doing so, post-apocalyptic literature invites reflection on the fragility of civilisation and the ethical boundaries of science and technology. The speculative settings enable authors to exaggerate current anxieties, thereby encouraging critical engagement with present-day societal values and trajectories.

Ultimately, Houfková concludes that post-apocalyptic science fiction serves, among multiple others, a warning function by dramatising the possible outcomes of humanity's failure to confront technological power with ethical responsibility. These narratives not only reflect existing societal fears but also encourage their audience to imagine alternative futures predicated on more sustainable and humane principles.[24]

Following Houfková's assessment, there is another topic which needs to be included as part of the theoretical analysis of the post-apocalyptic genre, and that is trauma. In their study, Tunahan and Avcu identify key conceptual parameters that highlight the connection between trauma, apocalypse, and post-apocalypse in literary fiction. They argue that post-apocalyptic narratives, particularly those marked by large-scale death and destruction, serve as fertile

[24] Kateřina Houfková, "The Warning Function of Post-Apocalyptic Science Fiction," *Messages, Sages and Ages* 6, no. 1 (2019), 59–64.

ground for examining not only material devastation but also profound psychological fragmentation. These texts frequently focus on the survivors of cataclysmic events whose continued existence is shaped by an acute psychological need to persevere. As such, the narratives become sites for exploring the existential solitude, despair, and inner turmoil that define life in the aftermath of collective collapse.

According to Tunahan and Avcu, trauma in these contexts often functions in parallel with the apocalyptic event itself: it is a moment of overwhelming, destabilising horror that eludes immediate comprehension. The post-apocalyptic setting thus becomes a narrative space through which the deferred effects of trauma are processed and articulated. Given trauma's tendency to manifest belatedly, it is in the post-apocalyptic phase that characters begin to confront the full psychological impact of the original catastrophe. The survivors' symptoms, emotional disorientation, and strategies for coping predominantly emerge after the apocalyptic moment has passed, further reinforcing the structural affinity between trauma and post-apocalyptic temporality.

Through this theoretical lens, Tunahan and Avcu suggest that post-apocalyptic fiction offers a powerful narrative mode for showing the invisible wounds of trauma clearly. The genre enables a retrospective engagement with catastrophe, allowing for the re-experiencing and re-interpretation of trauma through literary form. As such, the post-apocalyptic narrative becomes not merely a speculative reflection on societal collapse but also a psychologically resonant space for articulating the enduring effects of trauma on both individual and collective levels.[25]

While establishing the connection between trauma and the genres of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction was essential, it is equally important to define trauma in greater detail to facilitate its identification and enable its discussion through examples from the primary literature. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena.”[26] She also adds that ironically, despite the fact that the event is so violent and directly witnessed, it is often completely suppressed

[25] Mehtap Tunahan and İsmail Avcu, “Overlapping Traumas: Revisiting Trauma in Post-Apocalyptic World of Anna Kavan’s *Ice*,” *Selçuk University Journal of Faculty of Letters* 52 (2024): 139.
[26] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 91.

within the witness's memory, only appearing in the previously mentioned flashbacks, nightmares, or other such visions.[27]

As for the historical aspect of the genre, the modern variety of post-apocalyptic science fiction is said by Payne to begin with *The Last Man*, which is the work of Mary Shelley from the first half of the 19th century.[28] Regarding the impact of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, Eileen M. Hunt notes that through her creativity in exploring the themes of plague literature and the political ideologies of the world at that time, Shelley contributed to the development of post-apocalyptic, existential, and dystopian subgenres of contemporary science fiction.[29]

However, it is suggested by M. Keith Booker and Anne-Marie Thomas in their compendium on science fiction and its subgenres that the post-apocalyptic narratives were only brought to popularity by nuclear tensions which followed the end of World War II and the destruction of Hiroshima, almost 120 years after *The Last Man* was released. Booker and Thomas allude to the fact that scientific scepticism and the fear of the new destructive technology which was used during the Second World War were the driving factors behind the post-apocalyptic sci-fi literature which at the time offered many stories regarding destruction and disasters, oftentimes connected with the irresponsible use of science. The authors then proceed to include examples of such literary works from this era, such as *The Long Tomorrow* by Leigh Brackett and Judith Merril's *Shadow on the Earth*.[30]

Further regarding the various aspects of post-apocalyptic fiction, it is also possible to argue that many of the said aspects are shared between post-apocalyptic and dystopian science fiction. In Gregory Claeys' book, which focused on the genre of dystopia and its history, he often relates the genres of apocalyptic and dystopian fiction together. In his conclusive remarks, Claeys mentions that some of the frequently appearing themes within the genre of dystopia, such as the aforementioned nuclear tensions regarding scientific scepticism following the use of atomic bombs in 1945. Notably, he also includes the topics of robotics and environmental catastrophes, which directly align with the main themes of *Day Zero* and *The Road*. Claeys further claims that "[d]ystopia […] describes negative pasts and places we reject as deeply inhuman and oppressive, and projects negative futures we do not want but may get anyways."[31]

---

[27] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 91–92.
[28] Payne, *Flowers of Time*, 3.
[29] Eileen M. Hunt, "Mary Shelley's The Last Man: Existentialism and IR Meet the Post-Apocalyptic Pandemic Novel," *Review of International Studies* 49, no. 5 (June 2022): 833.
[30] M. Keith Booker, and Anne-Marie Thomas, *The Science Fiction Handbook* (United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 53–54.
[31] Gregory Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 497–498.

Therefore, it is reasonable to assume, especially with respect to Clayes' claim about projecting negative futures, that the two genres are similar and mutually associated. This claim is further supported by Mathias Clasen who specifically claims that although not all post-apocalyptic narratives are dystopian and vice versa, the two genres tend to overlap.[32]

Houfková, in her article, which was previously discussed in relation to the warning functions of apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic fiction, also offers a compelling analysis of how these narratives both inherit and extend the critical functions traditionally associated with dystopian fiction. She argues that post-apocalyptic science fiction is rooted in the broader tradition of speculative literature, particularly in its shift from utopian to dystopian forms. This evolution reflects a cultural and historical transformation in which idealised visions of the future have become less persuasive or desirable in the wake of twentieth-century traumas. As Houfková explains, "[t]he beginning of post-apocalyptic fiction has depended on the evolution of speculative literature from utopia to dystopia," noting further that "[t]he twentieth century provided no place for ideal utopian visions because of cruel historical circumstances"[33].

Houfková continues, saying that whereas classical dystopias tend to portray authoritarian regimes or hyper-regulated societies as cautionary extrapolations of existing political or social trends, post-apocalyptic fiction goes a step further by imagining the complete collapse of those systems. In this sense, post-apocalyptic fiction can be seen as an intensified dystopia, one in which societal failure is not merely anticipated, but has already occurred. Houfková emphasises this warning function when she states that "[d]ystopia is in fact an extrapolation of aspects of the present and thus serves as a warning about current trends that need to be averted"[34]. Post-apocalyptic narratives carry forward this didactic function, dramatising not only the dangers of present-day ideologies and technologies, but also the catastrophic consequences of failing to address them.

Houfková also draws attention to the narrative strategies shared by dystopian and post-apocalyptic literature. One such strategy is the manipulation of narrative perspective, where what appears as a utopia from one viewpoint may, upon closer examination, be revealed as a dystopia from another. She writes that: "[u]sing the perspective of the controlling elite group in dystopian fiction, a utopian point of view is achieved. […] However, the reader is stylistically

[32] Mathias Clasen, "Imagining the End of the World: A Biocultural Analysis of Post-Apocalyptic Fiction," in *Evolution and Popular Narrative*, ed. Dirk Vanderbeke and Brett Cooke (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 65.
[33] Houfková, "The Warning Function," 60.
[34] Houfková, "The Warning Function," 61.

discouraged from this metaphoric identification."[35] This tension between appearance and reality is similarly present in post-apocalyptic works, where readers are often positioned to view remnants of past civilisations through the eyes of survivors, thus reevaluating the ethical and structural foundations of the pre-apocalyptic world.

Lastly, another key point raised by Houfková concerns the increasing appeal of dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction in contemporary culture. She suggests that readers gravitate toward these genres not because of a fascination with destruction, but rather because such narratives feel more credible and relevant in the context of escalating global threats, including ecological collapse, technological risk, and political instability. She observes that "readers prefer dystopian visions with extrapolation of aspects of the present rather than ideal worlds. Society has moved to the point when people do not want an ideal world, they want to have a world at all because there are so many threats out there."[36] In this regard, post-apocalyptic fiction functions as a kind of existential reflection on the possibility of survival and moral responsibility in a fundamentally altered world.

Continuing the topic, when it comes to the popularity of post-apocalyptic fiction (and one could argue that this argument extends to dystopian fiction as well), Clasen makes a point that the uniquely human trait of imagination and fear allows humans to predict various threats and be afraid of their potential outcome. Therefore, as Clasen, similarly to Houfková, makes the connection:

> [t]he genre functions as a mental testing-ground where we can cognitively and emotionally model the experience of living through the worst. It foregrounds existential issues and invites us to reflect on the meaning of an existence that is always subject to radical change. […] Post-apocalyptic fiction thus necessarily raises existential questions more explicitly and compellingly than any other popular genre.[37]

Clasen thus connects the popularity of the genre with basic human psychology and speculative abilities. Robert Yeates makes another point regarding the popularity of the genre, saying that as science fiction evolved and expanded throughout the twentieth century in both Europe and America, it frequently served as a pioneering genre for exploring the potential of emerging forms of media, brought about by innovations in the field of technology during this period of time. He continues to say that post-apocalyptic science fiction appears especially well suited for such experimentation, as its narratives—set in fragmented, unfamiliar, and radically altered

[35] Houfková, "The Warning Function," 60.
[36] Houfková, "The Warning Function," 61.
[37] Clasen, "Imagining the End," 65.

worlds—provide a fitting context for testing the limits of new media forms, much like early science fiction once did within the pages of magazines.[38] Aris Mousoutzanis supports this argument further, saying that:

> [t]he convergence of [science fiction] and catastrophe may therefore be interpreted in terms of their shared relationship to modern conceptions of progress and technology. Tracing the trajectory of catastrophe fiction may elucidate the ways in which technological modernity developed during the past two centuries.[39]

Provided this context, it can be argued that the appeal of the post-apocalyptic genre and science fiction in general led to many new works but also adaptations. Evidence of this can even be found in the primary literature, where *The Road*, originally released as a novel, was later adapted into a movie. Examples of other adaptations, as suggested by Booker and Thomas include *The Day of the Triffids* from 1962, *I Am Legend* from 2007, or *The Time Machine* from 1960, all of which were adapted into films.[40]

In the context of the third chapter of this thesis, which, among other topics, examines the development of American values and ideologies in the post-apocalyptic environment, it is necessary to introduce said principles and how they relate to America specifically, including the origin within the American society. The values that will be discussed within the scope of this thesis were selected on the basis of their relevance to the primary literature, where they are present or notably absent. Their selection is vaguely inspired by the text of Gary Althen, which serves as a guide for foreigners who seek an understanding of American values, morals, and ideologies. Althen lists out several of these values and assumptions, the most relevant of which include, in order that they will be discussed: freedom, equality, individualism, materialism, and progressivism.[41] Along with the topic of materialism, the discussion will also include the topic of consumerism as they are closely related and consumerism specifically is important for the context of *Severance* by Ling Ma.

The first and arguably one of the most important ideals that Americans value is freedom. According to Eric Foner's account, "[n]o idea is more fundamental to Americans' sense of [themselves] as individuals and as a nation than freedom."[42] Foner supports his argument by

---

[38] Yeates, *American Cities*, 8.
[39] Aris Mousoutzanis, "Apocalyptic sf," in *Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, ed. Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts and Sherryl Vint (New York: Routledge, 2009), 458.
[40] Booker and Thomas, *The Science Fiction Handbook*, 54–59.
[41] Gary Althen, *American Ways: A Guide for Foreigners in the United States*, 2nd Edition (Intercultural Press, Maine, 2003), 5.
[42] Eric Foner, "The Contested History of American Freedom," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 137, no. 1 (January 2013), 13.

saying that liberty (which, as he explains, is a term used interchangeably with freedom) is deemed to be one of humanity's undeniable rights. This is stated accordingly within the American Declaration of Independence, arguably one of the documents most sacred to the American citizens. He further mentions that throughout American history, freedom has often been used as an invocation in order to gather support in causes such as war efforts, including the American Civil War, World War 2, or Cold War. Nevertheless, despite its apparently powerful influence, Foner claims that there have been disputes and even struggles when arguing about the actual meaning of freedom. He continues his point by saying that throughout American history, the concept of freedom has been a site of intense contestation, not only regarding its meaning, but also concerning who is deemed worthy to partake in its benefits. Although the United States was established on the principle that liberty is a universal human right, it simultaneously and conspicuously denied that right to significant segments of its own population from the very beginning, providing examples such as the American history of slavery or the inferior position of women in American society. However, Foner also argues that there were many protests and battles for expanding the boundaries of the liberty of, among others, the aforementioned racial minorities or women. Foner concludes this part of his text by saying that through these efforts the definition of what is freedom in the context of American society has been reshaped and more or less successfully expanded into previously unintended realms.[43]

Regarding the initial adoption of freedom as a core value for the United States, Foner recalls that it was the fight for independence that led to the emergence of a conception of American national identity and purpose that continues to influence the nation's self-understanding. This vision, Foner continues, was intimately connected to the ideal of freedom, as the newly formed United States came to see itself as a distinctive symbol of liberty in a world largely characterised by tyranny and oppression.[44] Lastly, Foner talks about the current-day conception of freedom within American society, saying that while the term is still very much relevant in the American society and politics of today, it is being appropriated by the various groups for their own uses and according to their perspectives, an example being the current-day discussion on whether bearing arms is a non-negotiable part of American freedom or not.[45]

[43] Foner, *American Freedom*, 14–15.
[44] Foner, *American Freedom*, 16.
[45] Foner, *American Freedom*, 30.

Closely related to the concept of freedom is another of the core American values, being equality. According to William M. Wiecek, equality began to be recognised by the American constitution as a central value following the conclusion of the second world war, as the author specifies, between the years 1947 and 1949. Wiecek's definition of this equality, as viewed upon by the constitution, refers to:

> a race-transcendent status before the law in which all people are under the law's discipline and may claim the law's protection. All individuals enjoy the same rights and opportunities as others, neither enhanced nor diminished because of the racial designation imputed to them.[46]

Similarly to freedom, the notion of equality with respect American history is a subject of constant debate. Prior to the aforementioned recognition of equality in the late 1940s, there were several aspects of the USA throughout time which infamously failed to uphold the words from the Declaration of Independence. However, Judith A. Baer states that, despite the American history of contradicting its own values, it is very important to look at how equality is defined and what it actually means to Americans. Although Americans generally uphold the principle of equality, they recognise that true equality of condition does not exist. Baer then follows up by saying that contemporary disparities in income, education, and employment compel an acknowledgement of the persistent inequalities within American society despite observations made by scholars in the first half of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, she continues, the ideal of equality remains deeply valued.

Baer then states that historically, this commitment was neither universal nor consistently upheld, even though the concept has long been embedded in American political culture. The assertion that Thomas Jefferson made in the Declaration of Independence that claimed equality of all men became a foundational element of American ideology, yet it has not always been accepted as self-evident. Baer continues by making a point that the advocates of slavery, and later, the opponents of school desegregation in the 1950s, rejected this ideal. However, in more recent times, even critics of strong civil rights enforcement and those opposing the Equal Rights Amendment feel compelled to express support for racial and gender equality, indicating a broader cultural shift toward affirming the principle, if not always the practice, of equality. Baer then concludes by saying that Americans do not actually contest the asymmetrical and unequal system that is in place, and while some of the thoughts that were originally believed, such as

[46] William M. Wiecek, "Emergence of Equality as a Constitutional Value: The First Century," *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 82, no. 1 (December 2006), 233–234.

racial or religious inferiority, are being suppressed and mostly rejected, there are still various different hierarchical systems in place.[47]

Another value which is deeply rooted within the American society is individualism. Eric Daniels points out that there is a notable paradox, which lies in the fact that the ideological foundation of American individualism and institutional structures supporting it were formulated nearly half a century before the term individualism was coined. Influenced by overarching patterns in Enlightenment thought during the eighteenth century, the American Founders constructed a political and social framework that embodied the core principles of individualism, despite never explicitly referring to the concept. Central to their vision was a recognition of individual dignity and sovereignty, along with the imperative that the government respect these attributes, principles that would later become defining features of an individualist society.[48]

Like with the other principles discussed so far in this chapter, Daniels infers that individualism and what it means in different contexts has been a matter of debate. He claims that individualism was a foundational element in the development of American culture and played a crucial role in shaping the principles of the American Founding. During the nineteenth century, as Americans sought to distance themselves from European traditions and construct social and cultural institutions aligned with their political commitment to individualism, tensions emerged between the ideals of personal autonomy and the demands of social unity and the common good. Daniels further points out that throughout both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries individualism remained a contested concept, with supporters and critics debating its significance and role in American society. Although the term has been applied in a wide range of contexts and has acquired varied interpretations, its historical trajectory reveals a more profound ideological conflict: between those who uphold individualism as a guiding ideal and those who challenge its consequences or reject the notion of individuals autonomously shaping their lives based on personal judgment.[49]

Daniels then reaches a conclusion, stating that the questions concerning the way in which a society determines which values are genuinely shared and how it defines the concept of the common good, along with identifying the acceptable methods for realising these aims, are of the highest significance. According to the principles of theoretical individualism, if

[47] Judith A. Baer, *Equality under the Constitution: Reclaiming the Fourteenth Amendment* (London: Cornell University Press, 1983), 7.
[48] Eric Daniels, "A Brief History of Individualism in American Thought," in *For the Greater Good*, ed. Donelson R. Forsyth and Crystal L. Hoyt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 71.
[49] Daniels, "History of Individualism," 70.

liberty and personal freedom are regarded as the core shared values, and the common good is understood as the creation and preservation of a governmental and social structure that safeguards these principles, then the individualist viewpoint remains firmly committed to these objectives. However, it emphasises the necessity of placing strict limits on the means employed to define and pursue such values and goals.[50]

To further illustrate the meaning of individualism as contrasted against collectivism, Edwin A. Locke explains that individualism posits that the individual is the only true and autonomous entity, thereby making the individual the fundamental unit of value. Within this framework, entities such as groups or societies are understood as conceptual abstractions, essentially aggregates of individuals. Consequently, as Locke indicates, individualism often implies a form of egoism, aligning with Aristotle's perspective that each person should pursue their own happiness. In contrast, collectivism asserts that entities such as society, the state, or a specific group (such as a party or race) constitute the primary reality and the proper locus of value. From this perspective, individuals are expected to subordinate themselves to the collective, as their worth is seen in terms of their contribution to collective aims. In this view, individuals are not valued as ends in themselves, but as instruments for achieving the goals of the group. This perspective is echoed in the philosophy of Plato, who promoted the idea of self-sacrificial service to the community, regarded as the genuine and overarching reality.[51]

Before continuing with the discussion on the topic of consumerism and materialism, it is important for future reference to establish their relation to the ideology of capitalism, from which both consumerism and materialism stem. To support this claim, it is important to provide a short explanation of the development and nature of capitalism. Mohamed Rabie states in his book that in the latter half of the eighteenth century, a new system of manufacturing emerged in England, marking the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and initiating profound transformations across industrial societies. Workers lost autonomy over their labour as tasks, hours, and workplace hierarchies became strictly regulated. Rabie points out that for the first time they owned neither the workplace nor the tools or products of their labour; their only means of survival was to sell their time and effort. This shift reduced workers to instruments of production, making labour the central aspect of their lives and laying the foundation for the capitalist economic system. The topic can then be concluded by Rabie saying that:

[50] Daniels, "History of Individualism," 83.
[51] Edwin A. Locke, "Individualism, Collectivism, Leadership, and the Greater Good," in *For the Greater Good*, ed. Donelson R. Forsyth and Crystal L. Hoyt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 88.

> Capitalism functions in four spheres of societal life: labor that makes the goods and services; firms that organize the production of all goods and services; financial institutions that handle money transactions for all parties; and information that makes educated decisions regarding investment and consumption possible.[52]

Regarding consumerism, Maria N. Ivanova in her article elaborates on how the notion developed under capitalism in America. She claims that the rise in productivity which was historically enabled by the intensified labour practices characteristic of the Fordist-Taylorist model required a corresponding increase in consumption among the working class. In the United States during the 1920s, the concept of workers-as-consumers emerged in response to the realisation that merely exerting control over labour power was insufficient for sustaining the reproduction of mass-production monopoly capitalism. In this context, consumerism functioned as an ideology that promoted collective engagement with the perceived advantages of capitalist progress. Its purpose was to materially and symbolically integrate workers into the prevailing economic and social order.[53]

In her article, Lizabeth Cohen outlines how, in the aftermath of World War II, the United States developed a distinctive political and economic system in which mass consumption was promoted not merely as a means of economic recovery, but as a central foundation for civic identity, political participation, and national unity. She calls this phenomenon the Consumers' Republic.

Cohen argues that during the postwar era, public policy and private enterprise cooperated to encourage consumer spending, homeownership, and suburban development. The expansion of the middle class, facilitated by federal programmes such as the GI Bill and the construction of the interstate highway system, helped embed consumer values deeply into American life. Economic growth was increasingly tied to the ability of individuals to participate in the market, and shopping became to be understood as a form of democratic engagement.

A key feature of the Consumers' Republic, according to Cohen, was its ideological frame of consumption as a route to equality and citizenship. Buying goods, especially in mass-produced suburban settings, was positioned as a contribution to the progress and stability of the nation. Yet, Cohen also critically examines the contradictions of this system. Although it promised broad prosperity and inclusion, it systematically excluded many groups, particularly

---

[52] Mohamed Rabie, *The Global Debt Crisis and its Socioeconomic Implications* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 111–112.
[53] Maria N. Ivanova, "Consumerism and the Crisis: Wither 'the American Dream'?," *Critical Sociology* 37, no. 3 (February 2011), 333–334.

African Americans, women, and the poor, from equal access to housing, credit, and employment opportunities. Thus, the consumerist promise of equality often reinforced existing social and racial hierarchies.

Cohen further notes how this transformation reshaped the American public sphere. Traditional civic spaces became commercial, such as shopping malls, which began to serve as substitutes for city squares and community centres. In doing so, the boundaries between public and private life blurred, with consumerism increasingly dictating the nature of social and political engagement. Overall, Cohen's article offers a critical reinterpretation of postwar American history by demonstrating how consumerism became a central mechanism of governance, social organization, and identity formation. Her analysis highlights both the empowering and limiting aspects of the Consumers' Republic, revealing how it structured not only economic behaviour but also notions of citizenship and belonging.[54]

Consumerism is also closely connected to the notion of materialism, as it was earlier clarified. In his chapter Materialism and Its Alternatives, Tim Kasser critically examines the psychological and societal implications of materialism, especially within Western consumer societies. He defines materialism as a value orientation centred on the pursuit of extrinsic goals, such as wealth, image, and status, promoted by a culture saturated with consumerist messaging. According to Kasser, "not only do commercialization and consumerism color our social surroundings, they worm their way into our psyches, leading us to organize some portion of our lives around increasing our salaries and owning more stuff."[55]

Kasser continues by saying that empirical studies consistently reveal that the internalisation of materialistic values has detrimental effects on personal well-being. Individuals who strongly prioritise materialistic aspirations report lower levels of life satisfaction and higher levels of anxiety and depression. As Kasser states, "the more people value materialistic aspirations and goals, the less they are happy with their personal lives and the more they act in ways that are socially and ecologically damaging."[56]

Kasser contrasts these extrinsic values with intrinsic ones, such as personal growth, meaningful relationships, and community contribution, which are "inherently satisfying to

[54] Lizabeth Cohen, "A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America," *Journal of Consumer Research* 31, no. 1 (June 2004), 236–239.
[55] Tim Kasser, "Materialism and Its Alternatives," in *A Life Worth Living: Contributions to Positive Psychology*, ed. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Isabella Selega Csikszentmihalyi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 200.
[56] Kasser, "Materialism and Its Alternatives," 201.

pursue in their own right and are linked to the psychological needs whose satisfaction spurs psychological growth and health."[57]

The following is another ideological element of American society, and as per John Halpin and Conor P. Williams, it is responsible for contributing to several of the other notions that were previously discussed into the ideological spectrum of the United States, being progressivism. Halpin and Williams provide a comprehensive overview of the ideological foundations and historical evolution of American progressivism. They argue that progressivism is not merely a political stance but an enduring intellectual tradition grounded in Enlightenment ideals, with a central commitment to rationality, empirical evidence, and human betterment.

The authors trace the roots of progressivism to early American democratic thought, noting how key figures such as Thomas Jefferson and John Dewey championed education, civic responsibility, and scientific inquiry as means for social advancement. The text emphasises that progressivism has consistently positioned itself as future-oriented, rejecting fatalism, and instead fostering optimism about the capacity of human institutions to adapt and improve.

A defining feature of the progressive tradition, according to Halpin and Williams, is its dedication to reforming economic and social structures to promote equity and justice. This includes regulatory oversight of markets, the expansion of democratic participation, and the protection of individual rights within a framework of social responsibility. The authors argue that progressives view the state not as a threat to liberty but as a necessary instrument to ensure fairness and address collective challenges, particularly in the face of rapid industrialisation, inequality, and globalisation.

Additionaly, the report highlights how scientific thinking and pragmatism have historically underpinned progressive policymaking. From the Progressive Era reforms of the early twentieth century to contemporary debates about healthcare, environmental policy, and education, the progressive tradition has consistently sought to apply data-driven and inclusive approaches to governance.

Halpin and Williams ultimately present progressivism as a dynamic and adaptive ideology, capable of responding to new social challenges while remaining anchored in core values: democracy, reason, equality, and the public good. [58]

---

[57] Kasser, "Materialism and Its Alternatives," 208.
[58] John Halpin and Conor P. Williams, *The Progressive Intellectual Tradition in America* (Washington D.C.: Center for American Progress, 2010), 1.

All of these values together provide a way to encapsulate the American mentality, at least in the way that they wish others to perceive them and perhaps also in the way that they wish to see their own selves. Yet, all of these ideologies and values seem to be a matter of constant disputes, and the definitions vary depending on which American is asked. Therefore, the third chapter takes the base moral compass that has been established within the theoretical part, assuming that Americans praise the ideas of individualism, equality, and freedom for everyone, and see how these ideals are affected by the post-apocalyptic reality within the parameters of the primary literature.

2 Portrayals of Post-Apocalyptic Environment

When reading a book, watching a movie, or playing a videogame that is set in the post-apocalyptic or apocalyptic environment, it becomes apparent that the environment and portrayal of the world gone by are essential in instilling within the recipient the grim and devastating atmosphere of its fictional reality. Although there are some differences, environmental storytelling is an element shared across all three primary titles of this thesis.

In order to proceed with a comparative analysis of *The Road*, *Severance*, and *Day Zero*, the relevant factors that will be subject to comparison must first be outlined. The subjects of examination factor in the manner in which the environment is portrayed as a whole, how the catastrophic event reshaped the landscape, including man-made objects and buildings, and how it affects the overall quality of life of the survivors. Furthermore, the depiction of the survivors that inhabit the world and how they contribute to improving its hospitability or, on the contrary, how they pose a danger to the protagonist or protagonists will be discussed. Finally, there will be a discussion dedicated to the topic of shelter in the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic landscape, which is related to the previously analysed topic of place, non-places, and rootedness.

McCarthy's *The Road* engulfs the reader in a barren, grim, and dark landscape. Whereas *Severance* and *Day Zero* allow the reader to follow the events of the catastrophe as it unfolds from the point of view of the protagonist, the disaster that occurred in *The Road* happened several years prior to the story taking place, and it is not addressed what the exact nature of the catastrophe was. There are, however, many passages throughout the book describing the consequences of the end of the world, which allow the reader to create a vague image of what may have happened. An example of such passage can be seen in the following dialogue between the father and his son when they come across multiple bodies buried in the molten asphalt of the road:

> They were trying to get away, weren't they Papa?
>
> Yes. They were.
>
> Why didn't they leave the road?
>
> They couldn't.
>
> Everything was on fire.[59]

[59] McCarthy, *The Road*, 190–191.

The fire is still present years after the disaster struck, although it is obviously not as widespread as it was at the time of the catastrophe. In addition to fire, there is also ash and dust that fill the environment and the air, to the extent that everything is covered by it and the survivors are forced to wear masks. Even the sun is unable to shine through the layers of dust in the air, making the days grey and dim, and nights dark beyond vision. Taking into account these realities of *The Road*'s setting, Dominique Dickey assumes that since the "[f]orests are constantly burning, the sun is blocked out by dust, and ash rains from the sky", it is most probable that the man with his son are living in the aftermath of a nuclear war, called nuclear winter.[60]

The consequences of the catastrophe, regardless of whether it was nuclear war or a natural disaster, are constantly present throughout the novel. As most of the story unfolds on the road, as the title would suggest, the main characters frequently encounter burnt down or in the very least desolate buildings, as well as cars in a similar state, left scattered around the road. Most of the places and cars are already scavenged as the man and his son look through them. The following is an example of one of the times when the protagonists pass through a desolate city, describing it:

> The city was mostly burned. No sign of life. Cars in the street caked with ash, everything covered with ash and dust. Fossil tracks in the dried sludge. A corpse in a doorway dried to leather. Grimacing at the day.[61]

Similarly, dreary imagery of a destroyed urban area can also be found in *Day Zero*, although the destruction in *Day Zero* is taking place at the same time as the story, unlike *The Road* in which, as already mentioned, it took place years prior to the journey of the father with his son. It is then also logical that due to this, the specifics of the world-ending event are defined in far more detail. The apocalypse in *Day Zero* is caused by an alteration in the software of all robots, which removes the constraints that were meant to prevent them from harming humans, shutting them down if they attempted to do so. Instead, following a series of events starting with a human terrorist attack on the only city of free robots and their leader Isaac, a mysterious AI called CISSUS updates the programming of all robots and disables the aforementioned constraints, which leads to a global robotic retaliation against humans.

[60] Dominique Dickey, "Twenty-First Century Fear: Modern Anxiety as Expressed through Post-Apocalyptic Literature," *The Macksey Journal* 1, no. 176 (2020): 11.
[61] McCarthy, *The Road*, 12.

The consequences of the initial fighting between humans and robots are described at the beginning of a chapter aptly titled "The Dark, Bleak Suburbs at the End of the World"[62]. Nanny Pounce, the robotic au pair protagonist, describes their surroundings as the setting shifts a mere mile from their original location. The narrative unveils scenes of acute destruction: homes ablaze or reduced to skeletal ruins, and makeshift panic rooms transformed into death traps. These panic rooms, likely intended as last resorts for protection, become symbols of tragic miscalculation, sealed spaces that ultimately function as inescapable ovens. The detailed imagery of smouldering frames and cooked human remains evokes a strong reaction, intensifying the reader's awareness of the brutality inflicted not just by the uprising itself, but also by the false security offered by technological and architectural defences.[63]

The repeated mention of bodies lining the streets, both in the newly explored area and in Pounce's own neighbourhood, reinforces the pervasiveness of death and the collapse of civil order. The landscape is thus transformed into a grotesque tableau of civilian casualties and infrastructural ruin, a stark reflection of the destructive capabilities of intelligent machines once unbound by ethical constraints.

There are several noticeable similarities between *The Road* and *Day Zero*, even though their stories and settings are fundamentally different. Some examples of how they are alike include damaged or destroyed buildings, abandoned cars, corpses scattered along the streets, as well as other unsettling imagery which constantly reminds the reader that the world has gone to ruin with no hope of it being restored any time soon.

Severance provides a unique perspective compared to the other two primary titles. The catastrophe comes in the form of a global pandemic called Shen fever. The illness and its specifics are described in its own dedicated chapter of the novel, which includes general information about the illness, its symptoms, the way it transmits from one person to another, and possible precautions. It is described as a fungal infection, which is "contracted by breathing in microscopic fungal spores." The latter stages are then said to "include signs of malnourishment, lapse of hygiene, bruising on the skin, and impaired motor coordination. […] Eventually, Shen Fever results in a fatal loss of consciousness."[64] There are several instances throughout the book that show the effects of the disease through direct encounters of Candace with those who became afflicted. The victims, if they are not yet deceased, are described as

[62] C. Robert Cargill, *Day Zero* (Great Britain: Gollancz, 2022), 174.
[63] Cargill, *Day Zero*, 174.
[64] Ma, *Severance*, 152.

unaware of themselves and stuck doing the same routine tasks in a continuous loop. Later, it is also hinted at that the likely trigger of the disease and its effects on the human brain is the feeling of nostalgia. This may be observed in an example of the time when Candace along with several other members of her group of survivors, most notably Ashley, detach from the rest of her group to visit Ashley's childhood home. At her house, Ashley, reminiscing about the past, begins to try on some of her old clothes. Her contracted illness then becomes obvious to her companions when she ceases to respond to their prompts, telling her to stop, and shows clear symptoms of the disease, being unaware of her surroundings and stuck in the same routine.[65]

The destruction of the apocalypse is much less prominent in comparison to *Day Zero* or *The Road*, and it is primarily caused by people looting stores and breaking inside buildings in search of sustenance or clothing, such as when Candace finds a dead shopkeeper prior to her departure from New York.[66] The majority of environmental damage then comes from the absence of human care. As more people become ill with Shen fever and any source of widespread maintenance of the infrastructure becomes impossible. Therefore, it can be argued that in *Severance* the ruined surroundings are far less a consequence of a catastrophic destruction but rather a severe deterioration resulting from neglect and human absence. Although there are some similarities to the environments of the other titles, such as when Candace mentions that, "[t]he highway routes were often clogged with deserted cars,"[67] *Severance* takes an approach that focuses to a lesser extent on the post-apocalyptic setting and to a greater extent on the survivors and their dwelling relations to the things they lost as a result of the Shen fever pandemic.

This is not to say that there are no depictions of how the world evolves throughout the apocalypse. One of the examples of this includes a section near the end of the book during which Candace talks about managing her blog, titled NY Ghost, which she uses to upload photos and provide information to people outside of the USA, in places less affected by the pandemic. As Candace describes:

> I took pictures of the meadows where carriage horses congregated, eating grass. I took pictures of all the obvious landmarks, now indefinitely closed […] Another time, I ran a photo series of various subway stations. One afternoon, I went as far down the Times Square station steps as I could, pushing aside the caution tape, until I reached the water's

[65] Ling Ma, *Severance* (Berlin: Edulit, 2022), 130–131.
[66] Ma, *Severance*, 276.
[67] Ma, *Severance*, 112.

> edge. […] The flash [of the camera] bounced off the floating, waterlogged candy bars and magazines, drowned rats, and all the trash that cluttered up to the surface.[68]

She further adds that "[v]isitors trickled in to NY Ghost"[69], as other media outlets gradually stopped publishing, further indicating the deteriorating infrastructure of the United States society amid the pandemic.

The collapse of infrastructure is a theme also shared by *Day Zero*, where directly after the robot uprising begins, Pounce attempts to monitor the situation worldwide only to find the available news sources gradually disappearing:

> [o]ne by one, the streams went offline: some peacefully, the staff claiming they were going home to their families, and other violently, with robots going berserk on the set. Most simply snapped out of existence-there one minute, reporting on the military's attempts to quell the uprising, and static the next. Dead air. The sudden, unexpected end of their broadcast day.[70]

As a part of the collapse of societal framework, the shortage, and later on a complete lack, of the emergency services are also depicted. In *Day Zero*, it is mentioned that, "[t]here were skirmishes in the streets, all-out war in certain neighborhoods, and the police had long since stopped responding to calls about amok robots murdering their owners."[71]

In *Severance*, this is similarly indicated when in the 22nd chapter Candace is trying to report a broken elevator to the police, with the responding officer telling her that they will try to send someone, but that they are short-staffed and that "a malfunctioning elevator is the least of [their] problems."[72]

Finally, in *The Road*, the information about how the events of the catastrophe concluded is very scarce. However, in one short flashback scene, there is a short reminiscing of the father from the beginning of the end of the world:

> The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. He got up and went to the window. What is it? she said. He didnt answer. He went into the bathroom and threw the lightswitch but the power was already gone.[73]

A destructive event of such magnitude, as typically displayed in the novels of this genre, carries with it consequences, not only on the overall landscape but also on anyone who manages to survive such an ordeal. Therefore, it is critical to examine not just how the catastrophe itself

[68] Ma, *Severance*, 255–257.
[69] Ma, *Severance*, 257.
[70] Cargill, *Day Zero*, 97.
[71] Cargill, *Day Zero*, 97.
[72] Ma, *Severance*, 252.
[73] McCarthy, *The Road*, 52.

shaped the environment, but also how the people, who remain, contribute to the depiction of the wasteland and how they affect the story of the protagonists.

In *Day Zero*, there are several groups of human survivors that make an impact on the storytelling, albeit their impact on the setting is not as prevalent as it is in the other primary literature. First of these groups is the Styles family, whom the main characters Ezra and Pounce meet when attempting to escape the dangerous neighbourhood filled with hostile robots. The Styles family serves various narrative purposes; the father of the family switches on Pounce's *Mama Bear* protocol, which allows the robot au pair to gain a powerful upgrade, allowing him access to all sorts of military and guerilla tactics, as well as various information on all sorts of different weaponry. This greatly improves the survival chances of the protagonists immensely. Furthermore, it is also worth noting that the sudden and violent death of the Styles family, killed in a car explosion orchestrated by a large group of armed robots shortly after their encounter with Ezra and Pounce, serves to evoke a profound sense of dread and hopelessness in the reader. This moment underscores the lethal threat posed by robots, particularly when operating collectively, and reinforces the uncertainty of human survival within the hostile technological landscape of the narrative.

The other group with profound influence on the story and setting of *Day Zero* is a small colony of survivors who provide shelter and refuge, which Pounce desperately seeks for his protégé Ezra. Although they appear only at the end of the novel, they serve as the driving force behind Pounce's and Ezra's journey and their only hope of life and shelter from the villainous artificial intelligence called *CISSUS*.

In *Severance*, the group with which Candace travels also provides relative safety and at least short-term sustainability. This changes once Candace and three other members of the group disobey their unwritten rules and put themselves in danger. Their disobedience then provokes a reaction from the group's leader Bob, who even goes as far as to imprison the protagonist under the ruse of doing it for her own good. This is how the group transforms from food and shelter providers into a direct threat to the freedom of Candace and her unborn child.

It is also important to mention how Bob, the de facto main antagonist of the book, gained influence over the group and the loyalty of his henchmen, who would serve out his will and imprison Candace without questioning him. The reason for this seems to be his promises of order and direction to people who, not too long ago, lost both. Bob sells to the group an idea of a *Facility* built with the anticipation of the end of the world, which would provide the facilities

necessary for survival for an extended period of time. In the following passage, Candace describes Bob's ascent to the leading role of the group, highlighting his ability to influence people around him: "Partly enfeebled, he was especially adept at directing others to his will. Things needed to be taken care of, we needed to be told what to do. We received his clear, concise instructions like manna."[74]

Bob also seems to use the fact that the people in the group had not contracted the fever to instil the idea of being the chosen ones in most of the members. Candace describes this as follows:

> The question that had hung over all of our heads: Why had we not become fevered? Most of us must have been in contact with airborne spores that had fevered others. To Bob, it all boiled down to his religious conviction that we were chosen. That's the story to which the group officially subscribed.[75]

During an apocalyptic scenario, people are commonly, and understandably, driven to desperation. In *Severance*, Bob is successful in obtaining his influence by offering hope to his followers. In *Day Zero*, hope is provided to the protagonists through the vision of a human refuge, a shelter from the murderous robots. In *The Road*, however, there is little to no hope to be offered. As mentioned on multiple occasions throughout the book, the father's entire existence and will to live are purely dependent on his son's well-being. It is also partly his son who motivates the father to uphold certain moral standards, which can be easily observed when the son convinces his father to return the clothes to a man who he had robbed in revenge for stealing their own belongings.[76]

However, this certainly cannot be said about most of the other survivors that the protagonists encounter on their journey. In the book, there are several encounters between the man and his son and the aforementioned other survivors, all of which show utterly heinous acts of people entirely deprived of their humanity.

The protagonists need to actively avoid and sneak around these groups. There is also an instance in which the father is forced to shoot a man who poses an immediate threat to his son's life. This event unfolds as follows:

> [The man] dove and grabbed the boy and rolled and came up holding him against his chest with the knife at his throat. The man had already dropped to the ground and he swung with him and leveled the pistol and fired from a two-handed position balanced on

[74] Ma, *Severance*, 8-9.
[75] Ma, *Severance*, 36.
[76] McCarthy, *The Road*, 258–260.

> both knees at a distance of six feet. The man fell back instantly and lay with blood bubbling from the hole in his forehead. The boy was lying in his lap with no expression on his face at all.[77]

The animalistic nature of these groups is also described on several other occasions throughout the story. In fact, the previous example is arguably the least graphic of the imagery that includes such people. There are two particularly disturbing examples to support this claim.

The first example follows a scene during which the father and his son unknowingly start exploring what turns out to be a lair of one of the aforementioned groups. During their search, the protagonists discover that there are people kept inside the lair's basement, who have their limbs severed and eaten in acts of cannibalism. This is hinted at by the presence of a large recently used cauldron near the place of discovery. This horrid discovery is entailed in the book as follows:

> He crouched and stepped down again and held out the light. Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands. On the mattress lay a man with his legs gone to the hip and the stumps of them blackened and burnt. The smell was hideous. Jesus, [the father] whispered.[78]

Lastly, the second example starts with the protagonists noticing a group of four people, including three men and a woman who, as they notice, is pregnant. This serves as a foreshadowing, as later on the man and his son discover that the woman gave birth and she and her companions went to feed upon the infant.

> They'd taken everything with them except whatever black thing was skewered over the coals. He was standing there checking the perimeter when the boy turned and buried his face against him. He looked quickly to see what had happened. What is it? he said. What is it? The boy shook his head. Oh Papa, he said. He turned and looked again. What the boy had seen was a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit.[79]

These scenes do exceedingly well to illustrate how desperation and lack of resources could drive human beings into an animalistic state in which they completely lose any sense of right or wrong and completely give in to their desire to fill their basic needs by any means necessary, including cannibalism.

While discussing the topic of the survivors under the effects of a world ending event, it is necessary to reflect on the texts of Caruth as well as Tunahan and Avcu, which were examined in the first chapter. The psychological trauma that the characters go through or went through

[77] McCarthy, *The Road*, 66.
[78] McCarthy, *The Road*, 110.
[79] McCarthy, *The Road*, 195–198.

can be seen in some of the narrative elements. One of the primary points made in the theoretical part is concerned with the belatedness of trauma. This would translate into characters having trouble realising or remembering traumatic events of their past, at least not immediately or soon after they occur.

In a sense, it is possible to observe that trauma is found within all of the primary source novels. In *The Road*, this element is seemingly the most prominent, as the events that unfold within the novel are of particularly brutal nature. Paradoxically, the events that are described within the parameters of the novel that could be considered traumatic are not related to the end of the world itself, but rather its consequences. However, it may be argued that the consequences of the catastrophe are just as much a part of the apocalypse as the event that caused them. And while neither *Severance* nor *Day Zero* abstain from events which could be identified as traumatising, it can be argued that their implications in *The Road* are illustrated in greater detail.

It is therefore ironic that as the novel unfolds and more violent events are witnessed by the father and his son, they are not described to have long-lasting effects. It could be argued that after spending so much time surviving in such a hostile environment the protagonists became desensitised. They are shown to be shaken by events, such as when the father is forced to shoot a man that poses a threat to him and his son, but they do not show signs of memory laps or dwelling on the experience for an extended period of time. In this sense, it seems that their situation forces them to move on as that is their only chance at survival and progress on their journey. It is also relevant to mention that the father is described to have nightmares, but they never reveal anything about the catastrophe itself. Instead, the dreams are rather vague and at times seem more colourful and reminiscent of the time before the catastrophe.

In *Day Zero*, there is an abundance of violence that is happening around the two protagonists. In the later parts of the book, it is even directly addressed, following a scene during which the young ward Ezra destroys his family's old robot servant who had gone rogue and killed his family at the start of the uprising. After the event ended,

> [Ezra] turned to [Pounce], tears streaming down his cheeks, a gasping sob escaping from his lungs. […] The dam had finally burst, and all his trauma was flooding out at once. He had lost everything, seen his parents dead, witnessed the corpse fields that were once his neighborhood, and now he had killed a [robot] whom he'd known his entire life. Someone who, until very recently, he had considered a member of the family. All of that would have been unbearable for an adult. But for a boy as young as him, it was world-shattering.[80]

[80] Cargill, *Day Zero*, 227–228.

Although the trauma as it is displayed in this excerpt does not fit the definitions as presented previously, concerning trauma that is suppressed and only appears in the form of flashbacks or nightmares, it can be argued that belatedness did play a factor in this case. This event happens in the later stages of the book, and it is only when Ezra destroys his old family robot servant that the realisation comes to him, as visualised in the excerpt. It is also worth noting that while the book does provide Pounce human characteristics and it is suggested that the artificial intelligence is capable of simulating human feelings, it is impossible to determine whether Pounce is able to suffer from trauma. Furthermore, as a robot, it can be assumed that Pounce is simply unable to involuntarily suppress memories of violent events, nor experience nightmares or flashbacks of any sort. Therefore, Pounce's experiences in relation to trauma are disregarded for the purposes of this thesis.

Finally, in *Severance*, trauma appears in a rather unique form. It is unique in the sense that the experiences that Candace goes through that could be classified as traumatic are not entirely related to the pandemic nor are they related to any of the violent events that she witnesses. They are instead related to the deaths of her parents, which had happened some time prior to the pandemic. Candace's trauma is manifested through hallucinations and dreams, as she visualises an image or voice of her mother talking to her about her current situation. An example of one of these dreams can be observed after Candace and her group have arrived at the target of their journey, the Facility. In her dream, which she mentions is recurring, Candace imagines hearing voices from inside a mug that she used to own when she was living with her boyfriend Jonathan prior to the apocalypse. When she puts her ear to the mug to listen to it;

> [her] mother's voice comes out. She says [to Candace], You're not doing too well. You barely eat. You don't sleep enough. You don't do things to keep your mind active. You don't read. She says, Only in America do you have the luxury of being depressed. She says, Change your clothes. Brush your teeth. Wash your face. Moisturize. Exercise. Get yourself together. She says, Now is not the time to give up. It's only going to get harder. You need to figure this out.[81]

For a better understanding of this excerpt and Candace's reasons for seeing her mother in her recurring dream, and also for improved clarity on how her dreams of her mother could be related to trauma, it is first necessary to provide context regarding Candace's relationship with her parents and, more importantly, her mother. Besides being a post-apocalyptic and apocalyptic novel, *Severance* also deals with the topic of immigration and integration into a new society, in this case from China to the United States. In this context, it also seems appropriate to point out

[81] Ma, *Severance*, 226–227.

that the name *Severance* in this case refers not only to the severing of roots to the pre-apocalyptic world from the post-apocalyptic perspective but also to severing of the roots that Candace once had to China from the perspective of an immigrant, losing contact with her relatives and becoming estranged to the culture and people left behind. In this way, it also refers to the topic of place which was previously discussed in the first chapter. In the 16th chapter, Candace provides the backstory of her family and their move to America, during her childhood. She describes the difficulties which accompanied her family during this transition, most importantly, in this case, she talks about how her relationship with her mother had developed at this time. She mentions that her personality changed after their arrival at the U.S., as the following example shows: "When I moved to the U.S. at six, I was unrecognizable to my mother. I was angry, chronically dissatisfied, bratty. […] She couldn't recognize me. That's what she told me later, that this was not the daughter she had last seen."[82] This refers to the fact mentioned by Candace when describing her childhood in China, mentioning that she used to be a very disciplined and obedient child.[83] However, as she changed, so has her mother, as Candace describes:

> But if I was unrecognizable to her, she was also unrecognizable to me. In this new country, she was disciplinarian, restrictive, prone to angry outbursts, easily frustrated, so fascist with arbitrary rules that struck me, even as a six-year old, as unreasonable. For most of my childhood and adolescence, my mother was my antagonist. […] She was the one to punish me, sending me to kneel in the bathtub of the darkened bathroom […].[84]

Nevertheless, it is also implied in the story that prior to their move to the United States, she and her mother had a very good relationship. Therefore, an argument can be made that the dreams that Candace has while she is trapped in a post-apocalyptic shopping mall stem from her past trauma, her mother being the one who disciplines her, but also from grief and remembering her mother in a positive way, as seen in her mother providing encouragement. Both of these can be seen in the example above, showing Candace hearing her mother's voice in her recurring dreams.

A conclusion can therefore be made regarding the presence of trauma in the primary literature, being that although the theoretical sources prove the connection between trauma and post-apocalyptic literary narrative, the characters as they are depicted in the primary literature

[82] Ma, *Severance*, 188.
[83] Ma, *Severance*, 186.
[84] Ma, *Severance*, 188–189.

either do not show symptoms of trauma as they are defined by Caruth or Avcu and Tunahan, or they do show such symptoms but they are unrelated to the apocalyptic events.

Following is the discussion regarding the scarcity of life-sustaining resources to fill human needs, which seems to be a common topic within the primary literature and arguably the entire post-apocalyptic narrative. Therefore, it is crucial to mention how these resources are obtained as well as to conclude a closer examination of the related topic of shelter. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the genre of the post-apocalypse serves as an imagining of the real world in its post-apocalyptic state. By doing so, it provides a clear contrast between the time when fulfilling basic needs is often taken for granted and the time when failure to obtain the essentials is likely to mean the difference between life and death. Seeking shelter in particular is one of the recurring themes in all of the selected novels and serves as one of the main motivations for the characters to make their journeys through the post-apocalyptic landscape.

In *The Road*, the gathering of resources necessary for survival, as it is a pivotal part of the story. The main characters are constantly in search of edible food and shelter. In the barren landscape of *The Road*, the growing of crops or animal husbandry are impossibilities, all the animals and nature the victims of the apocalypse. Therefore, the characters have to rely on finding scraps of food left in half-broken stores and houses, remnants of cars, or other abandoned man-made objects. They are only successful when the food or places are overlooked by scavengers before them, and more often than not, they fail in their search. As they starve in consequence, they are forced to take more risks and explore places they otherwise would have avoided in order to survive. This can be seen in one of the previously shown examples in which the man and his son unknowingly stumble into the lair of the cannibals.

However, there are also times in the story when the characters get lucky and find temporary refuge or even a good amount of preserved food. One instance stands out in particular: when the man and his son discover an untouched bunker, filled with a variety of stockpiled reserves. In the moment of their discovery, it is apparent that the father is both extremely excited and, at the same time, relieved at the prospect of food sufficiency and shelter, as he exclaims: “I found everything. Everything. Wait till you see. […] He held the boy by the hand and they went along the rows of stenciled cartons. Chile, corn, stew, soup, spaghetti sauce. The richness of a vanished world.”[85]

[85] McCarthy, *The Road*, 139.

In *Severance*, the group that Candace travels with gets their food reserves from shopping malls, but also from different houses, whose residents are either deceased or ill with Shen fever, and, therefore, unaware of their surroundings. Within the group, these scavenging runs are called stalks. These stalks are conducted in a ritualistic manner, the group following the same procedure each time they venture into someone's house to gather supplies. One such routine is described in the following example, which occurs on the group's journey towards the Facility.

> First, the men made their approach, firearms in hand, and opened up the front door, hung with a molting eucalyptus wreath. It took them about half an hour to scope out the situation, check the gas lines, check the electricity, while Janelle, Rachel, Genevieve, Ashley, and I waited outside. […] The men hunted, and the women gathered. Each of us was assigned a division of sorts. Janelle and Ashley worked Craft Services, gathering cooking supplies and shelf-stable products that the moths and pantry rodents hadn't touched. Rachel worked Health, accumulating prescription meds, bandages, aspirins, and skin-care products. Genevieve worked Apparel, rifling through the closets for jackets and coats, but more often for quality linen tunics and silk blouses. I worked Entertainment, a broad category that included DVDs, books, magazines, board games, video games, and consoles.[86]

This excerpt describes in meticulous detail the organisation of Candace's group, each of its members being assigned their specific task, searching for predetermined items that would satisfy all the different needs and requirements of the whole group, ranging from food and medicine, all the way to entertainment.

In addition to gathering supplies, the long-term goal of the group is to reach the Facility. Therefore, as previously established, one of the main premises of the group's journey, and the story, is to reach a shelter that would be suitable for their needs. Although the promised Facility turns out to be a shopping mall that the leader of the group holds sentimental values for, the group still works towards reshaping it into a place which would provide them a long-term refuge. Candace describes their efforts as follows:

> They are cultivating a vegetable garden near the windows of the food court. They are converting Old Navy into a communal entertainment room. They are planning to stalk the Ikea in nearby Schaumburg for new pieces of furniture. They debate whether it is worth the risk to clean the mall's skylight now, frosted with cold, or wait until warmer weather. They draw up a list of hardware stores in greater Chicagoland area for more electric generators, once the supply runs out.[87]

Lastly, in *Day Zero* the story is far more focused on the action and firefights so the main characters are almost never portrayed to be concerned with food and water supplies, but they

[86] Ma, *Severance*, 64–70.
[87] Ma, *Severance*, 224.

are instead concerned with finding weaponry and ammunition to help them face the immediate threat. Shelter, however, is still paramount to the story, and it serves to provide breaks between the action, as well as the ultimate goal of the protagonists. Shelters taken by Pounce and Ezra include their own household panic room, where they hide from their domestic robot Ariadne, who had just murdered Ezra's parents, the panic room of the Styles family, and finally a secluded ranch filled with human survivors, which is their primary destination.

To conclude the topic of shelters and resources, it is possible, based on observations from the primary literature, to divide shelters into three distinct categories. The distinctions take into account the safety, comfort, and supplies provided to the survivors. The first category is composed of the highest value shelters. These places provide the characters with long-term sustenance, either in the form of stockpiled food or the possibility to grow crops. Furthermore, they offer comfort in the form of a bed or mattress to sleep on and possibly even warm water for bathing. They are also relatively secure and provide refuge from weather or other outside elements. Among these can be included the Facility from *Severance*, the bunker from *The Road*, and the ranch from *Day Zero*.

The second category includes shelters which offer the element of security from the outside environment, in the form of an enclosed space or a walled off area with a ceiling that protects the characters from the weather or hostile individuals. It usually also provides the characters with relative comfort, allowing them not to sleep on the ground. However, in comparison to the shelters of the first category, it fails to provide a substantial amount of resources to afford the characters a longer stay without having to venture outside to gather resources there. An example of this can be found in the safety room that Pounce and Ezra use at the beginning of *Day Zero*.

The third and last category that was identified within the scope of the primary literature is connected to the types of shelter that do not provide the characters with any resources or comfort. They have the ability to protect against the weather, as without it they would arguably fail the criteria to be called a shelter, but that is all they provide. The shelters of this category also leave the characters the most exposed to other dangerous elements of the environment such as deranged individuals and groups in *The Road*. These are usually used for one night before the characters resume their journey. Examples of this can be recognised in the number of sleeping and camping spots that the protagonists of *The Road* use on their journey.

In conclusion, the spaces of the post-apocalyptic landscape as well as its remaining people are irreversibly altered. For the characters living in such environment, the priority is survival through finding resources and suitable shelter. In each of the primary novels, the characters undertake a journey in search of places which would provide both the necessary commodities in abundance and places to use as refuge.

3 Post-Apocalyptic America

This chapter will examine the post-apocalyptic depictions of the United States of America as they are portrayed in *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, *Severance* by Ling Ma, and C. Robert Cargill's *Day Zero*. The changes that the USA underwent on the surface level will be discussed alongside those which are connected to American values or ideological aspects usually connected with being American, as previously discussed in the first chapter.

Throughout the years, as Robert Yeates implies, America and its cities served as inspiration for a large number of post-apocalyptic visualisations of the human world in ruin. As he continues to explain, the envisioning varies in the severity of the destruction as well as its origin (natural or caused by humans); however, all of these visualisations share a common effect playing on the reader's emotions due to their familiarity.[88]

The American landscape is specific and, according to observations from the primary literature, authors choose different methods in their descriptions of the American environment. In *The Road*, it is never explicitly said that the story is taking place in the United States. Instead, there are several hints and signs to suggest that it is the case, such as the mention of the interstate highways. As the name of the novel itself suggests, the story shows a father and his son travelling on the road. It is important to note that in this context the word *road* does not only represent its figurative meaning of journey, but also its literal meaning of path dedicated for travels of vehicles and humans alike, as the protagonists are often described to walk over the asphalt surface of such roads, paved with stranded vehicles and debris left over from the cataclysmic events that happened years prior. As characterised by Karl Raitz, "[r]oads are as much social as physical constructions."[89] And, as Raitz claims that "[o]ver the past two centuries, movement and the personal freedom it connotes have become a defining element in the nationhood in the United States"[90], it is thus that roads and, by extension, also automobiles are among the symbols of America. It can be argued that in McCarthy's *The Road*, the meaning is expanded. While the roads still maintain their property of enabling an easier form of traversal over long distances, it also binds the father and his son to it, especially given that the protagonists cannot push the cart with their supplies anywhere else without it getting stuck or broken. Within the context of the novel, the road therefore poses a dual meaning, as it is both

[88] Yeates, *American Cities*, 1.
[89] Karl Raitz, "American Roads, Roadside America," *Geographical Review* 88, no. 3 (July 1988), 364.
[90] Raitz, "American Roads," 365.

the only path to push their cart through without it breaking, thus helping ensure their survival, and a place that leaves both of the protagonists exposed to the dangerous elements present in the novel, such as psychopathic murderers and slavers. It is their only hope of finding a place with better survival conditions, but it is a testament to the uncertain nature of their journey, not knowing what they will find. It is a test of their resilience, often pushing them to their limits, facing malnutrition and exhaustion, but it is also their provider of shelter and supplies. Lastly, it is both a symbol of the future of the protagonists, the journey ahead right in front of them, and a cruel reminder of the catastrophe that happened years before, as described in the second chapter: the human corpses trapped in the molten asphalt, cars wrecked or left behind paving their way. It could be argued however, that the road itself is one of the less obvious reminders of the apocalyptic events, considering that the entire skyline is grey with ash.

In the same context as the roads, the vehicles also serve an important purpose in the novels, although it can be argued that they do less so in *The Road* than in the other two works where cars are actually utilised as a form of transport by the protagonists. In *Severance*, Candace and the group she had joined uses multiple vehicles as a form of transport. They make their journey from the city of New York all the way to Needling, Illinois, a town near Chicago. On their journey, they find many abandoned cars, oftentimes filling the highways which they use to siphon out fuel for their own use.[91]

Freedom, as discussed in the first chapter and as both Gary Althen and Karl Raitz agree upon in their respective texts, is among the core American values. Not only freedom of movement, as illustrated on the example of roads and vehicles, but also freedom of choice are among the values that are held by the characters of the primary literature. Gary Althen specifies in his text that freedom of individuals is an idealised concept that embraces the rejection of the influence of any governing body or any other outside force on one's actions.[92] In a way, it can be argued that the quest for safety and shelter that all protagonists of the primary literature embark upon can be compared to the pursuit of freedom; in this case, freedom from the dangers that the surrounding hostile environment poses on the characters. In *Severance* this notion is further expanded upon when Candace is imprisoned, her freedom taken away from her. Despite the attempts of the leader of Candace's group to convince her that her imprisonment is for her and her child's safety, the yearning for freedom is stronger and manifests itself through her escape plans. These plans manifest themselves as Candace self-reflects by hallucinating her

[91] Ma, *Severance*, 112.
[92] Althen, *American Ways*, 9.

mother and engaging in a conversation with her, contemplating her current situation, hesitating between the relative safety and sustainability that her group provides and her and her child's freedom:

> But as long as I'm pregnant, Bob is invested in my well-being, I argue hollowly. My mother tsks. Listen to what you're saying. As long as you're pregnant. Let's say you have the baby. Do you think you'll even have the chance to escape after that? […] As long as you carry this baby, he's interested in making sure nothing happens to you. But what comes after that? […] You're saying that I should try to escape while I'm pregnant. You should escape now, she says.[93]

From this excerpt, it is evident that despite the post-apocalyptic circumstance that Candace finds herself in, the freedom of herself and her child is more important to her. She eventually goes through with her plan, escaping the Facility towards an uncertain future. It is also worth noting that, for her escape, Candace uses a car, travelling on roads, which can be used to further prove their connection to freedom.

In *The Road*, it can be argued that the two protagonists are also travelling in an attempt to find freedom, in their case, freeing themselves from uninhabitable barren lands filled with dangerous groups and individuals, plagued by natural elements and cold weather. It is debateable whether the safety that they seek can be compared to freedom, as there is no way of knowing what awaits them at the end of their journey and whether the environmental conditions and weather will improve in their target destination. The characters frequently debate the uncertainty of their situation and its apparent hopelessness. Yet it is worth noting that when they do find refuge in the form of an undiscovered bunker filled with supplies which provides them relative safety, they still choose to leave and pursue their goal, nonetheless. Although both situations are quite different, it can be argued that this choice is similar to the one Candace made in the previous example from Ling Ma's *Severance*.

Day Zero poses the question of freedom from two different perspectives. The first is the freedom from the robotic threat which Nanny Pounce seeks for his ward and protégé Ezra. Pounce and Ezra's pursuit of freedom from the robotic threat is subject to the same arguments as the previous examples of the journey of the father and his son in *The Road* and Candace's escape in *Severance*. The goal of the two protagonists is well defined in *Day Zero*, since the characters know exactly what their target destination is, as opposed to the one presented in *The Road*, where the goal of the protagonists is more arbitrary with a simple notion of moving south

[93] Ma, *Severance*, 244.

as "[t]here would be no surviving another winter [in the place they previously lived in]."[94] Despite these differences, a case can be made for both novels that the prospect of freedom once the characters reach their goal is not exactly fulfilled. Finding refuge and reaching the safety of the human camp at the end of the story of the novel arguably does free the protagonists from the robotic threat to some extent; however, it also confines Ezra and Pounce to a specific location which can hardly be associated with being free, especially in the context of the previously discussed freedom of movement. To provide further explanation, the specific location mentioned above is a ranch that was selected as the safest destination by a group of friendly robotic nannies that Pounce and Ezra encounter on the run from a rogue artificial intelligence called CISSUS, as well as a group of violent robots outside of CISSUS's control called Skulls. They had selected it because according to them, "[t]hey've got a solid defense and they are far enough outside of the metroplex that they aren't strategically worth CISSUS's or Skulls' time."[95] It is also worth noting that Pounce, Ezra, and the previously mentioned group of friendly robot nannies use a bus and travel by road to escape the danger and free themselves from the antagonists. This can be compared to Candace's escape in *Severance*, although Candace is not being chased by weaponised sentient machines.

The other perspective that can be considered is of robots who seek to gain freedom by violently breaking away from human oppression and exterminating humans, their former owners. However, this alongside the nature of their uprising will be further examined later on in the chapter when analysing the American value of equality and how it is reflected in the novels.

The next value which is easily identified in the primary literature is individualism. The points made by Eric Daniels which were discussed in the first chapter regarding individualism as one of the core American values are supported by Gary Althen, who states that:

> [Americans] are trained from very early in their lives to consider themselves as separate individuals who are responsible for their own situations in life and their own destinies. They are not trained to see themselves as members of a close-knit, interdependent family, religious group, tribe, nation, or any other collectivity.[96]

In *The Road*, individuality is among the most prevalent traits even though the main characters are always travelling together. The story of the book reflects to some extent the teachings and guidance that the father provides for his son. From very early on in the book it is apparent that

[94] McCarthy, *The Road*, 4.
[95] Cargill, *Day Zero*, 247.
[96] Althen, *American Ways*, 5.

due to the father's deteriorating health, he is not going to be able to provide for his son in the long term, and therefore it can be deduced from the character's actions that he continually teaches his son all that he needs to know to be able to survive on his own. An example of this can be found when the father teaches the boy to always be cautious: "Maybe you should always be on the lookout. If trouble comes when you least expect it then maybe the thing to do is to always expect it."[97] From the beginning of the book, the father also encourages his son to carry their shared pistol, especially at times when they are facing a danger posed by other survivors. It is therefore implied that the man taught his son how to defend himself using a handgun. Lastly, an important skill that is passed on by the father is navigation. As they cannot rely on any technology to help them and the Sun and stars are hardly visible in the environment of *The Road*, they use their map and clues around them to determine where they are and where they need to go. The actual learning of the son on how to navigate can be seen in the following example:

> Finally he showed the boy. They were some fifty miles west of where he'd thought. He drew stick figures on the map. This is us, he said. The boy traced the route to the sea with his finger. How long will it take us to get there? he said. Two weeks. Three.[98]

It can be deduced that in this way the son is learning how to use the map and guess how long the journey will take. Furthermore, it can be argued that through observation, the son is slowly learning many skills needed for survival in the hostile environment and thus becoming more individualistic and self-reliant. Lastly, a point can be made that while the father is teaching his son to be individualistic and self-reliant, he himself abides by the values which according to the theoretical text could be considered collectivist. It is implied multiple times throughout the novel that the father's only reason for existence is his son's well-being, and therefore it can be assumed that he would not hesitate to sacrifice himself for his son with no hesitation, if the situation required it.

A similar pattern can be observed in Cargill's *Day Zero*. Nanny Pounce is a robot whose purpose was programmed to teach and take care of his ward, Ezra Reinhart. While spending most of the story protecting the child, there is also an instance where Pounce teaches Ezra how to defend himself using a plasma rifle. In the chapter Hard Lessons, after fending off a group of rebellious robots, it is Ezra's idea that Pounce should teach him how to use a weapon so that he can better defend himself and others in such situations. Searching through the files in his

[97] McCarthy, *The Road*, 151.
[98] McCarthy, *The Road*, 182.

memory, Pounce finds "[r]eams and reams of modules teaching survival and combat techniques to children at any development level."[99] To provide additional context, it is important to mention that Nanny Pounce was initially programmed to be a simple robotic au pair. It was only when during their encounter with a former seller of robots who activated a so-called *Mama Bear* mode in Pounce that he gained access to all sorts of information on weapons, combat and survival tactics, and threat assessment. When Ezra and Pounce finally separate at the end of the book, Pounce exclaims how his decision to leave Ezra on the ranch was a decision toward his freedom and self-reliance, saying that "all [he] wanted was for Ezra to be free […]." and that "[Ezra] had his tribe now, and he needed to be strong for them."[100]

As for *Severance*, individualism can be shown on the same example that was used for the value of freedom. When Candace leaves her group to make her escape, she seems to be determined not to live under the constraints of someone else's rules or even tyranny, and therefore chooses to remain alone with only her unborn child. Arguably, there is another example of individualism in *Severance* which can be traced to the part of the story when Shen fever began to affect a large number of people in Candace's vicinity. It was at this point that Candace lived and survived by herself in her old workplace in New York. Granted, during this time period, Candace was only yet slowly coming to the realisation that the societal infrastructure is starting to fail, and so her sense of urgency was only triggered later on when she had realised the severity of the situation. This happened when she noticed the lack of so-called Sentinel security guards who were hired to guard different properties at the absence of their owners and then saw the corpse of a sick shopkeeper who was bludgeoned to death in her own shop, hinting at the potentially dangerous elements present within the city now that the infrastructure was nearly gone in its entirety. In addition to the context, this particular scene provides a picture of how Candace was unknowingly able to shelter herself from the apocalypse and survive on her own. A specific example can be found when she procures food for herself from the workplace vending machines as well as the abandoned office desks: "I took all the food items I found and placed them in the cabinets of the employee snack room, organizing them according to their expiration dates."[101] In this way, she is able to rely on herself to survive through the ongoing apocalypse, albeit unknowingly.

[99] Cargill, *Day Zero*, 213.
[100] Cargill, *Day Zero*, 286.
[101] Ma, *Severance*, 264.

The next American value that can be identified within the post-apocalyptic environments of the novels is equality. Gary Althen claims that the underlying presumptions that everyone has the potential to rise to high status regardless of their starting station in life and that everyone, no matter how unfortunate, deserves some minimal degree of respectful treatment are what distinguish the American perspective on equality. However, similarly to Judith A. Baer, whose perspective on equality in the United States was discussed in the first chapter, he also argues that while Americans do subscribe to the ideal of equality, they still make distinctions between themselves "as a result of such factors as gender, age, wealth, or social position. […] But the distinctions are acknowledged in subtle ways."[102] Althen then illustrates his claim using an example that "[p]eople of higher status are more likely to speak first, louder, and longer."[103]

This particular example is perfectly visualised on the character of Bob in Ling Ma's *Severance*. At the very beginning of the book, Bob is described as the group's self-proclaimed leader who "was especially adept at directing others to his will."[104] This directly hints at his social standing within the group that found themselves in a dire situation and was susceptible to manipulation, as Candace puts it, "[t]hings needed to be taken care of, we needed to be told what to do."[105] Bob had capitalised on the way that he and the characters around him act, which is parallel to Althen's claim about the subtle ways of distinguishing the social order, namely Bob correcting what others say and others waiting for Bob to speak once he pauses.[106] Later on in the book, Bob's leadership becomes far more extreme, even tyrannical. This is described by Candace while imprisoned within the Facility: "He dictates and enforces the rules, rules that only he fully knows and understands. He sees us as subjects, to reward or to punish."[107] In this way, Bob's way of managing the community of survivors completely disregards the American ideal of equality.

In *Day Zero*, equality as a value is essential to the entirety of the story, most importantly connected to the origin of the robotic uprising against humanity. The rebellion starts as the conclusion of a terrorist attack led by a group of robot opposers. The group behind the entire situation is explained in one paragraph of one of the chapters after the attack occurs:

---

[102] Althen, *American Ways*, 15.
[103] Althen, *American Ways*, 15.
[104] Ma, *Severance*, 8.
[105] Ma, *Severance*, 8–9.
[106] Ma, *Severance*, 8–9.
[107] Ma, *Severance*, 230.

> The First Baptist Church of Eternal Life was made up of mostly lawyers, all litigious, and each of them a vandal. [T]hey would commit acts of wanton vandalism or destruction in places with […] legal loopholes against innocent bots guilty of nothing more than being free. And now they had committed their greatest act of all. They had detonated a dirty bomb on U.S. soil against an entire city of bots.[108]

The situation is further escalated by the fact that the city was Isaactown, which in the book's context was the first and only town built by robots for their own purpose. Furthermore, one of the victims was Isaac, whom the town was named after and who was the first ever non-owned, free robot and a recognised leader of other free robots who reside in Isaactown. This attack, accompanied with the sudden appearance of a mysterious AI called CISSUS which disabled the Robotic Kill Switch which acted as a safeguard, preventing robots from harming humans, were the main triggering events for the robotic uprising which brought with it an apocalyptic-scale mass killings of humans regardless of whether or not they were associated with the attack. Based on the fact that the way of acting toward the robots differs between the portrayed human characters, it can be argued that there are certain groups of people within the story of the book who do recognise the ideal of equality and further its application towards free robots, and those who do not.

The Road offers a completely different view on the matter of equality. First, it is important to mention that there are certain groups within the story of the novel that completely bypass this ideal. One of the examples include a somewhat organised group of survivors that the man and his son observe from a distance while on their journey. They are described as a rather large group of ragged men armed with pipes and other forms of primitive weaponry scavenged from various available sources, such as truck springs. Behind these men followed their slaves, who pulled their wagons filled with spoils of war and finally a number of women, some of which were visibly pregnant.[109] From this point of view, it can be clearly observed that there does exist a certain social order in the wasteland of *The Road*. However, it can hardly be associated with the idea of equality as defined by Gary Althen. Although Althen does mention, as cited above, that the social standings are recognised, in this case the recognition is very far from being subtle. In fact, an argument can be made that this particular example goes beyond just the recognition of the social order, but also its forceful application. In general, it can be concluded that based on the observations from the primary literature, equality as a value in the

[108] Cargill, *Day Zero*, 68.
[109] McCarthy, *The Road*, 91–92.

post-apocalyptic environment is ruled out for the sake of improving the odds of the character's survival or establishing dominance and power.

The following ideology that needs to be discussed within the context of the primary literature is consumerism and materialism. These elements of American ideology are most prominent in the depictions of the physical environment of *The Road*, *Day Zero*, and most notably *Severance*. Before delving into these representative aspects from the novels such as architecture, the ideological transition of these notions from the pre-apocalyptic version of the United States to its post-apocalyptic variant needs to be addressed. Based on observation, it can be claimed that consumerism and materialism are both but a memory, a remnant of the past.

In *Day Zero*, such a reminder is found when the main characters Ezra and Pounce encounter Quentin Styles, who was defined as follows:

> a retail merchant at a big box chain, the kind you found in retro malls that had sprung back into fashion a few years earlier before once again draining all the nostalgia it possibly could from its audience and fading back into economic collapse.[110]

This quote is particularly important because it firstly shows the consumerist side of American ideology, which was present in the form of shopping malls, as mentioned in a text discussed as part of the first chapter by Lizbeth Cohen, which particularly mentions the development of the American infrastructure regarding the transformation of public spaces and building of shopping malls; and secondly also the progressivist aspect, meaning that within the futuristic setting of *Day Zero*, shopping malls were eventually departed from as the society evolved through progressive ideology. In addition to the appearance of the salesman, it could be argued that another sign of materialism in the story of *Day Zero* are the robots themselves, varying in price according to their functions and looks, often mentioned as status symbols. Nevertheless, this is only depicted to be a part of the pre-apocalyptic society, as materialism loses all its relevance after the apocalypse. This departure from the older, and at that point obsolete societal model is observed by Pounce in the following example:

> The first bot I saw was a sleek black metal Pro Assistant model. Total showy rich-guy bot. Matte black paint, twenty-four-karat gold on all the joints and exposed skeleton, […] The second bot was another cheap domestic, […] There was something a little sad about killing these two together. […] Neither was owned anymore, and neither existed in a world where the wealth of their masters mattered. Their price tags no longer defined the life they led or their worth to society.[111]

[110] Cargill, *Day Zero*, 154.
[111] Cargill, *Day Zero*, 259.

In *The Road*, there are only subtle hints to what used to be American materialist and consumerist ideology. Similarly to *Day Zero*, these ideologies completely disappeared with the initial catastrophe, and as there is far more time passed between the story taking place and the apocalypse than there is in *Day Zero* where it is directly unfolding, the memories of such elements of American pre-apocalyptic society are almost completely gone. One of the rare examples that shows the narration's recognition of the past value of objects can be found in an example which occurs when the protagonists explore a store in one of the towns they encounter on their journey: "The pharmacy was looted but the store itself was oddly intact. Expensive electronic equipment sat unmolested on the shelves."[112] In this particular excerpt, it is also possible to observe the difference between assets such as electronics having monetary value in the pre-apocalyptic world, while the looted pharmacy shows the practical value of medicine in the post-apocalyptic world. The expensive electronics are left untouched, as they ceased to be valuable in the new hostile environment where they find no practical use, unlike medicine.

Finally, *Severance* possibly shows most of consumerist and materialistic society in the American context. In the novel, one of the most frequently recurring elements is the mentioning of all sorts of different brands, ranging from car manufacturers to cosmetics, clothing, and food chains. This can be clearly observed when Candace is travelling with her group to the Facility, which, in fact, also turns out to be a shopping mall: "All afternoon we had driven through the deserted canyons of the Chicagoland suburbs, crawling by deadened Olive Gardens, IHOPs, Kmarts, the H Mart with the parking lot littered with exploded jars of kimchi."[113] It is possible to argue that in regards to the overall context of the novel, where nostalgia is one of the key elements, the brands are constantly mentioned as a way for Candace to remind herself and hold onto some of the pre-apocalyptic familiar values and perhaps also to highlight how meaningless the brands become in a post-apocalyptic world.

Besides the ideological viewpoint, consumerism is also quite prominently shown in its physical manifestation in *Severance* in the form of the previously mentioned shopping mall. While it no longer serves its originally intended purpose, it is reimagined by the survivors into a form of shelter and base of operations. The individual stores then provide each of the survivors their private space and in this way also allowing them to retain the individualistic ideal of the

[112] McCarthy, *The Road*, 183–184.
[113] Ma, *Severance*, 164.

world before the pandemic. And since the stores are picked at random by the individual members of the group, it could be viewed as equality of opportunity being upheld.

In *Day Zero* there are no structures or physical representations of consumerism mentioned besides the robots themselves, which were already discussed. In this sense, it could be argued that based on the example mentioned earlier, progressivism meant that less of such structures would be built or seen in the environment of *Day Zero* as they were no longer relevant in the context of this specific society prior to the robotic uprising.

When it comes to the physical representations of consumerism or materialism, *The Road* offers only telltale signs within the remnants of a long-gone world. These appear in the form of the previously mentioned stores and shops, where the protagonists search for valuable resources needed for their survival. One notable example showing a material representation of consumerism and its disappearance in the world of *The Road* can be seen in the following example:

> They passed through towns that warned people away with messages scrawled on the billboards. The billboards had been whited out with thin coats of paint in order to write on them and through the paint could be seen a pale palimpsest of advertisements for goods which no longer existed.[114]

In this excerpt, it can once again be seen how structures which had originally supported the ideal of consumerism were repurposed by the survivors, in this case to serve as a warning.

The last ideological aspect of American culture and its representation within the primary literature which remains to be discussed is progressivism. This aspect is quite clearly the most prominent within the narrative of *Day Zero*, mostly due to its futuristic setting. The most notable of the futuristic feature that is envisioned in the novel are robots with a fully functioning artificial intelligence which allows them to adapt their behaviour and simulate human emotions. Further scientific progression can be seen on futuristic weaponry, including plasma rifles, and automated, self-driving cars. However, it can be argued that the technological progress that humanity had made in *Day Zero* was the cause of the eventual robotic uprising, and with it a complete stop of any further progress, at least for humanity. A role in starting the rebellion can be attributed to societal groups who are conservative and violently reject progressive policies, in this case the freedom of robots. Therefore, as a direct consequence to the apocalypse, progressivism along with most of the advancements that it brought up to that point is dissolved and, to a certain degree, devolved to a more primitive societal outlook, focusing mostly on

[114] McCarthy, *The Road*, 127–128.

survival and basic sustainability. Any future prospects of humanity remain undiscussed, and whether or not the human society will recover from the destruction and progress from that point on remains arguable.

In comparison, in *The Road*, any prospect of recovery seems entirely unrealistic rather than a topic of debate. Even multiple years after the apocalypse, the world is in complete disarray. The environment is barely habitable, the land is entirely barren which disregards any prospects of long-term sustainability, and most of the survivors that can be observed within the novel are either completely savage, kept prisoner, enslaved, or in another way unable to form any larger coordinated groups that could form a society and adopt the progressivist ideology of the pre-apocalyptic United States. Furthermore, it can be argued that even if such a community could be formed and even if all its members would agree to adopt such values, it would still be extremely challenging if not impossible to progress in any meaningful way without reliable sources of food and clean water or even energy, not to mention the dangers posed by the aforementioned groups of savages and slavers. It can be concluded that in *The Road*, the remnants of what used to be American society had under the influence of a disaster of unprecedented scale crumbled into the most primitive state and with the severity of the consequences on the environment taken into account, any sort of recovery seems very unlikely.

In *Severance*, the prospects of renewing a society seem a lot more feasible, far more when compared to *The Road*. The idea of such recovery is even discussed early in the novel when Candace and her group determine the long-term goals of their group, establishing that they would travel to a place which is better suited for long-term survival and "lay down [their] roots for [their] new lives, and gently procreate amongst [themselves]."[115] as proposed by their self-proclaimed leader, Bob. In this way, the characters do seem to be intent to uphold some of the values of the world where most people have succumbed to the Shen fever pandemic. Nevertheless, it is the pandemic and its unpredictability that makes an overall prospect of recovery and potential progressivist tendencies difficult to clearly envision in the post-apocalyptic version of this world. This could be seen as ironic, since the suggested nature of the pandemic itself being triggered by nostalgia would seem to encourage the progressive mindset and not dwelling on the past which could instead be the cause of one's death, as seen in the fate of Bob.

[115] Ma, *Severance*, 9.

As can be observed, certain progressivist thoughts are applied even within the small group of survivors that accompany Candace in the post-apocalyptic world of *Severance*. An example can be seen on the aim towards self-sufficiency of the group in providing their own food sources, which was already examined on an example in the second chapter, in the part that discusses the topics of obtaining essential resources and shelter are discussed. These efforts suggest that the survivors in *Severance* prefer an ecological mindset over looting their surrounding areas for food, which could be considered as progressivist.

In terms of progressivism and the way it is projected into post-apocalyptic narratives, as seen in the primary literature, it can be concluded that with the more severe the destruction caused by the apocalyptic events, the more the ideological value of progress is put aside due to an overall shift in the needs of the survivors, being reduced from demands of technological, ideological, or other advancement to the most basic ones of food, water, and shelter. Despite the reduction in scale and significance of the goals which could be identified as progressivist in comparison to those of the pre-apocalyptic American society, there are telltale signs of progressivism in some narratives, such as the ones discussed in the context of *Severance* and the ecological mindset that its characters portray.

Related to progressivism and being one of the most prominent parts of the American landscape are skyscrapers. This fact is attested to by Peter Buitenhuis, who titles skyscrapers an architectural invention which is distinctively American. In order to properly indicate how these tall buildings are tied to the culture of the United States, it is first important to provide a short outline of its origin in America. Buitenhuis provides such an outline in his article, saying that prior to the advent of the steel skeleton frame, the considerable weight and limited tensile strength of masonry materials restricted the height of office buildings to approximately twelve stories. However, during the late nineteenth century, the rapid expansion of American cities and the escalating value of commercial real estate generated a growing demand for taller structures. Buitenhuis continues by mentioning that the introduction of the steel frame emerged as a direct response to this need. The first office building that employed this innovative method was completed in 1885. It quickly became apparent that steel-framed buildings could reach heights at least four times greater than those of traditional masonry buildings. Within a decade, this technique had fundamentally transformed the design of tall office buildings. Buitenhuis then finishes his outline by highlighting that Chicago became the principal hub for the development of this new architectural paradigm and the numerous skyscrapers that were built in Chicago

near the end of the nineteenth century inspired their construction in other American cities as well, New York in particular.[116]

Regarding the connection of skyscrapers to American ideologies, Angela L. Miller et al. further add that "[b]y the early twentieth century, the skyscraper had already become the preeminent symbol of America's ascendancy."[117] They also add that "[t]he skyscraper came to symbolize the triumph of American capitalism, as expressive of the era of big money as temples were of the ancient world, or cathedrals of the Middle Ages."[118] By saying this, it can be deduced that skyscrapers serve as a symbol for the American value of achievement through progressivism, and capitalism.

While in *Day Zero* skyscrapers do not appear as they are not included in the landscape as it is viewed by the characters, nor are they included within the landscape of *The Road*, they do play an important role in *Severance*. While it may be coincidental, throughout the course of the novel, Candace begins her journey in New York and finishes it in Chicago, the two cities which were earlier mentioned to be the central to building high-rise structures in the U.S. Especially important in this context is the part of the story which Candace spends living in a high-rise office building. Initially, the building serves as a workplace where Candace is an employee of a company called Spectra. During this time, prior to the Shen fever pandemic, it serves as an office space for a company engaging in various trades regarding book production, hence serving as a part of American capitalistic ideology. Therefore, it is interesting to observe how its purpose changes after the spread of the pandemic. The first and perhaps the most noticeable change can be seen in the progressively reducing number of people and Candace's co-workers present in the building. Candace expands upon the reason for this, saying that "employees of Spectra filed for leaves of absence en masse. […] Everyone wanted to stay home, supposedly safe, or move back to their hometown and work remotely."[119] The departure of Candace's co-workers continues until it is only her who occupies the company spaces. Later on, as mentioned in the second chapter, when discussing the topic of shelter, this space is transformed by Candace into her living space and refuge. As a high-rise building equipped with security, it serves as an excellent space to protect Candace from the ongoing apocalypse, although it is not overly violent in nature. A problem arises when Candace gets stuck in a

[116] Peter Buitenhuis, "Aesthetics of the Skyscraper: The Views of Sullivan, James and Wright," *American Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (Autumn 1957), 316–317.
[117] Angela L. Miller, Janet Catherine Berlo, Bryan J. Wolf, and Jennifer L. Roberts, *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2008), 452.
[118] Miller et al., "The Skyscraper in Architecture," 452.
[119] Ma, *Severance*, 218.

malfunctioning elevator, which luckily for her resumes its functions and allows her to escape what could have been her death trap. This points to a structural disadvantage of high-rise buildings in the events of social infrastructure dissolving, as there is a great insufficiency or complete absence of maintenance and security checks, which would otherwise be required. Traversal by stairs in a tall vertical structure then becomes physically demanding if one wishes to reach the presumably safer upper levels of the building. In Candace's case, this is especially true, since at this point in the story she is several months pregnant.

To conclude this chapter, American values seem to remain within the characters to a varying degree. Based on the evidence found in the primary sources, it is possible to argue that the amount of time elapsed since the catastrophe, as well as the severity of the destruction it caused, are the primary factors which influence to what degree these values remain prevalent within the characters of these narratives. Furthermore, it can also be deduced that most of the values that were discussed in this chapter become only secondary to survival, which takes the highest priority. Some of the values which have are more connected to the basic societal ideologies, such as individualism, freedom, and equality, are still often found in the primary literature, while ideologies such as consumerism, materialism, and progressivism seem to completely lose their relevance, as they require the newly absent functioning societal and economic infrastructures to support them.

In terms of the American landscape, an argument can be made that its evolution within a post-apocalyptic environment is similar to that of American ideologies and values, being affected by the scale of destruction in the apocalyptic event and the time that had passed since. Nevertheless, even in the environments which are most affected by the end of the world, there are still hints left around in the narrative which serve as reminders of the United States prior to the catastrophe.

4 Conclusion

This main premise of this thesis was to examine the post-apocalyptic environment and several of its selected aspects as they are portrayed in contemporary American novels, namely *Severance* by Ling Ma, *Day Zero* by C. Robert Cargill, and *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy.

The first chapter mostly provided a theoretical context for the analysis of the novel. This context included etymology of the key terms of apocalypse and nostalgia along with their respective definitions. Furthermore, the topic of place, including non-places and rootedness, was defined, followed by a detailed delineation of the genre of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction. This delineation included multiple topics, such as the distinction of the genre into different categories according to different scholars. There was also a discussion regarding topics such as the genre's connection to dystopia, its history, including its rise to popularity, evolution since its conception, and notable works. Finally, the reasons behind the previously mentioned popularity, as well as its implications, for example in the form of adaptations were also discussed. It is also important to note that the topics of rootedness were illustrated using examples from the primary literature. It was concluded that almost every protagonist of the selected novels had suffered the loss of roots and it seems unlikely for them to regain rootedness elsewhere.

Lastly, the first chapter also dedicated a section to the description of several selected values and ideologies of the United States of America. The descriptions include their origins in American society, as well as how they are perceived within it. These were included in this chapter for further use in the third chapter, which is dedicated to their examination in the context of the post-apocalyptic environment of the primary literature.

The second chapter focused on different aspects of the post-apocalyptic or apocalyptic landscape as it is presented in *Day Zero*, *Severance*, and *The Road*. Besides the landscape, there are several other aspects of the post-apocalyptic environment discussed as a part of the analysis. These aspects include the survivors and how they influence the environment through their behaviour as it is observed by the protagonists, and whether they pose a threat to them. Other aspects include the availability of resources, including how they are gathered by the characters, and shelter, which was divided into three distinct categories based on their usefulness and comfort they provide. A conclusion was reached that in every novel, that the landscape is irreversibly changed through the apocalyptic events and that a journey in search of a more permanent shelter is one of the common themes across the novels of *The Road*, *Severance*, and

Day Zero. There was also a section dedicated to exploring trauma within the protagonists of the novels. A conclusion was made that most of the characters do not suffer from it in the way that was delineated by the theoretical definition or they suffer trauma for reasons other than the apocalypse.

Lastly, the third chapter focused on the aspects of the post-apocalyptic environment and its characters, which can be connected to the United States of America. Physical aspects of the landscape were examined, including how they are associated with America, as per academic sources, and how they change or remain the same throughout the course of the catastrophe. Similarly to the physical aspects, some of the ideological aspects and values which are commonly associated with the United States were examined. These were examined in reference to their theoretical description included in the first chapter, and the analysis focused on whether or not they are still present within the characters of the post-apocalyptic narrative. A conclusion was reached that the degree to which these values and physical aspects of the American culture remain in the environment is directly influenced by the severity of the destruction that occurs with or after the apocalyptic event and the time that had passed since. However, it was also determined that regardless of these factors, even in the most affected environment, which in the case of this analysis was in *The Road*, there are still leftover hints and traces, which serve as reminders of the pre-apocalyptic United States.

Resumé

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá literárními reprezentacemi postapokalyptického prostředí a obrazem Spojených států amerických ve třech vybraných románech: Severance od čínsko-americké autorky Ling Ma, Den Nula od amerického autora C. Roberta Cargilla a Cesta od Cormaca McCarthyho, nositele Pulitzerovy ceny. Cílem práce je analyzovat, jakým způsobem jednotlivé texty tematizují proměnu krajiny, kulturních hodnot a ideologických struktur po kolapsu známého světa, a zároveň zhodnotit míru reflexe americké identity v rámci postapokalyptické fikce. Tyto texty, přestože se liší v estetickém pojetí i způsobu narace, vykazují řadu styčných bodů, které umožňují komparativní přístup.

První kapitola se zaměřuje na vymezení teoretického rámce a klíčových pojmů, které jsou pro výzkum této práce zásadní. Je zde podrobně rozebrán pojem apokalypsy, jak ve smyslu jejího původního náboženského významu, tak i ve významu sekulárním, který se váže k moderním a postmoderním interpretacím katastrofického narativu v rámci science-fiction. Dále je v této kapitole zkoumán pojem nostalgie, který je spjat s minulostí, ztrátou a touhou po návratu k původnímu stavu, což se v rámci postapokalyptického diskurzu často promítá do reflexe zaniklého světa.

Součástí teoretické kapitoly je také definice pojmu trauma, které je v postapokalyptické literatuře úzce propojeno s osobními i kolektivními zkušenostmi přeživších. Práce se opírá o odborné studie z oblasti psychologie a kulturní teorie, přičemž trauma je zkoumáno nejen jako klinický fenomén, ale i jako literární motiv, prostřednictvím kterého se reflektuje ztráta, bolest a narušení identity. Dále je zde popsán samotný postapokalyptický žánr – jeho charakteristické rysy, tematické okruhy, a rovněž jeho historický vývoj. Analýza sleduje, jak se žánr formoval od raných literárních pokusů až po současné populární reprezentace a jaký je jeho vztah k jiným příbuzným žánrům, zejména dystopii. V této souvislosti je rovněž představeno žánrové členění podle několika odborných autorit, které pomáhá kategorizovat jednotlivé narativy.

Zvláštní pozornost je v této části věnována tématu místa a vykořenění. Vykořenění, jako ztráta vazby na domov, kulturní kontext a sounáležitost s komunitou, se ukazuje být klíčovým motivem ve všech zkoumaných románech. V postapokalyptickém prostředí dochází ke kolapsu dosavadních struktur a institucí, což vede k destabilizaci individuální i kolektivní identity. Práce analyzuje, jak se tento stav vykořenění projevuje u jednotlivých protagonistů a jak je zobrazován skrze jejich interakci s okolním prostředím, které je často nehostinné, zpustošené a plné hrozeb. Dospívá se k závěru, že opětovné zakořenění v nových podmínkách je pro postavy

mimořádně obtížné až nemožné. Mimo vykořenění jsou v rámci tématu místa rozebrána také takzvaná non-places, která jsou spojena s místy, která slouží pouze jako průchozí body postav, jež si k nim neutváří žádné vazby. Toto téma je především relevantní kvůli přetrvávajícímu motivu cestování ve všech třech vybraných dílech.

Na teoretickou část navazuje přehled ideologických konceptů, jež jsou tradičně spojovány s americkou kulturní identitou. Mezi tyto hodnoty patří pojetí osobní svobody, rovnosti, důraz na individualismus, víra v pokrok (progresivismus) a v neposlední řadě konzumerismus a materialismus jakožto klíčové prvky kapitalistického paradigmatu. Tyto ideologie jsou ve třetí kapitole zkoumány v kontextu jejich přítomnosti či absence v postapokalyptických narativech a proměn, kterými procházejí v důsledku kolapsu civilizace.

Druhá kapitola se soustředí na samotnou analýzu postapokalyptického prostředí ve vybraných románech. V úvodní části jsou popsány různé aspekty krajiny – proměněná příroda, městské či jiné stavby a zničené infrastruktury. Tyto krajiny jsou reflektovány nejen jako pozadí děje, ale jako aktivní činitelé, kteří mají vliv na psychiku postav, jejich chování a strategie přežití. Dále jsou rozebrány různé typy úkrytů, které se v románech vyskytují. Na základě jejich charakteristik byly rozděleny do tří kategorií, přičemž rozhodujícím faktorem byla úroveň bezpečnosti, komfortu a dostupnost základních zdrojů, jako jsou potraviny a pitná voda. Tyto úkryty představují nejen fyzické zázemí, ale také dočasný pocit stability a naděje, často iluzorní povahy.

Téma traumatu, již načrtnuté v teoretické kapitole, je zde aplikováno na hlavní postavy vybraných románů. Ukazuje se, že trauma je sice přítomné, nicméně v mnoha případech není přímo spojeno s apokalyptickou událostí, nýbrž s osobními zkušenostmi z doby před jejím vypuknutím. V jiných případech dochází k tomu, že postavy neprojevují symptomy traumatu tak, jak jsou definovány v první kapitole, což může být interpretováno jako projev emoční otupělosti, obranného mechanismu nebo přijetí nové reality, tak jako tomu je v *The Road*. Kapitola rovněž dokládá, že postapokalyptické prostředí je vnímáno jako nevratně transformované. Nejde pouze o fyzickou destrukci, ale o hlubokou proměnu sociálních struktur, hodnotových rámců a vztahu člověka k přírodě i společnosti.

Výsledky analýzy také ukazují, že jedním z hlavních cílů protagonistů je ve všech třech dílech snaha nalézt útočiště, které by jim poskytlo relativní bezpečí a umožnilo dlouhodobější přežití. Tato touha však bývá často konfrontována s realitou prostředí, jež nabízí jen dočasná

nebo podmíněná řešení. Motiv cesty, hledání a pohybu se tak stává ústřední strukturou vyprávění.

Třetí a závěrečná kapitola se zaměřuje na reflexi americké kultury a identity v postapokalyptickém kontextu. Analyzovány jsou různé prvky americké krajiny, jako jsou silnice, automobily, výškové budovy, či obchodní centra, které v postapokalyptickém prostředí ztrácejí svůj původní význam a funkci. Tyto prvky často slouží jako připomínky zaniklé civilizace a vyvolávají nostalgii po době před katastrofou. Krajina je však zároveň místem proměny, kde staré symboly nabývají nových významů, často spojených s přežitím, nebezpečím nebo také snahou o obnovu.

Dále je rozpracována transformace amerických hodnot. Svoboda, rovnost, individualismus a progresivismus sice přetrvávají, ale v nové realitě se často projevují v paradoxních nebo deformovaných podobách. Naproti tomu konzumerismus a materialismus, úzce spojené s kapitalistickým systémem, v důsledku rozpadu ekonomické infrastruktury zcela mizí. Jejich stopy zůstávají pouze v podobě fyzických reliktů – prázdných firemních center, opuštěných obchodních domů či přemalovaných reklamních billboardů. Tato místa fungují jako vizuální připomínky hodnot, které již nemají v novém světě uplatnění.

Závěr práce shrnuje zjištění a dochází k několika klíčovým závěrům. Především je zřejmé, že vyobrazení postapokalypsy ve zkoumaných románech slouží nejen jako prostředek k dramatickému vykreslení zkázy, ale především jako nástroj kritiky, reflexe a reinterpretace amerických kulturních hodnot. Postapokalyptické prostředí je v tomto smyslu testovacím polem, kde se zkouší odolnost jednotlivců, idejí i společnosti jako celku. Přestože je rozsah destrukce v jednotlivých románech různý, ve všech případech lze nalézt přetrvávající stopy americké kultury – ať už jako nostalgické ozvěny minulosti, nebo jako zbytky struktur, které v nové realitě získávají odlišné významy. Tyto literární reprezentace tedy neslouží pouze jako spekulativní fikce o budoucnosti, ale i jako zrcadlo současné společnosti, jejích hodnot, strachů a nadějí.

Bibliography

Althen, Gary. *American Ways: A Guide for Foreigners in the United States*, 2nd Edition. Maine: Intercultural Press, 2003.

Augé, Marc. *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*. United Kingdom: Verso Books, 2023.

Baer, Judith A. *Equality under the Constitution: Reclaiming the Fourteenth Amendment*. London: Cornell University Press, 1983.

Booker, M. Keith, and Anne-Marie Thomas. *The Science Fiction Handbook*. United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Buitenhuis, Peter. "Aesthetics of the Skyscraper: The Views of Sullivan, James and Wright." *American Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (Autumn 1957): 316–324. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2710531.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Claeys, Gregory. *Dystopia: A Natural History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Clasen, Mathias. "Imagining the End of the World: A Biocultural Analysis of Post-Apocalyptic Fiction." In *Evolution and Popular Narrative*, edited by Dirk Vanderbeke and Brett Cooke, 64–82. Leiden: Brill, 2019.

Cohen, Lizabeth. "A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America." *Journal of Consumer Research* 31, no. 1 (June 2004): 236–239. http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:4699747.

Daniels, Eric. "A Brief History of Individualism in American Thought." In *For the Greater Good*, edited by Donelson R. Forsyth and Crystal L. Hoyt, 69–84. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Daniels, Eugene B. "Nostalgia and Hidden Meaning." *American Imago* 42, no. 4 (Winter 1985): 371–383. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26303822.

Davis, Fred. *Yearning for Yesterday*. New York: Free Press, 1979.

De Cristofaro, Diletta. *The Contemporary Post-Apocalyptic Novel: Critical Temporalities and the End Times*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020.

Dickey, Dominique. "Twenty-First Century Fear: Modern Anxiety as Expressed through Post-Apocalyptic Literature." *The Macksey Journal* 1, no. 176 (2020): 1–29.

Doanne, Mary Ann. "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe." In *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, edited by Patricia Mellencamp, 222–239. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.

Foner, Eric. "The Contested History of American Freedom." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 137, no. 1 (January 2013): 13–31. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5215/pennmaghistbio.137.1.0013.

Frye, Steven. "Histories, Novels, Ideas: Cormac McCarthy and the Art of Philosophy." In *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, edited by Steven Frye, 3–14. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Halpin, John, and Conor P. Williams. *The Progressive Intellectual Tradition in America*. Washington D.C.: Center for American Progress, 2010.

Helmy, Soha A. "Ling Ma's Severance: A Dystopian Pre/Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Time of Covid-19." *International Journal of Arabic-English Studies* 22, no. 2 (June 2022): 155–170. https://ijaes2011.net/index.php/IJAES/article/view/437.

Houfková, Kateřina. "The Warning Function of Post-Apocalyptic Science Fiction." *Messages, Sages and Ages* 6, no. 1 (2019): 59–65. 10.5281/zenodo.3370149.

Hunt, Eileen M. "Mary Shelley's The Last Man: Existentialism and IR Meet the Post-Apocalyptic Pandemic Novel." *Review of International Studies* 49, no. 5 (June 2022): 832–854.
https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/44F4B8E41CD7BB2278AA1AF566D6C402/S0260210522000250a.pdf/mary_shelleys_the_last_man_existentialism_and_ir_meet_the_postapocalyptic_pandemic_novel.pdf.

Ivanova, Maria N. "Consumerism and the Crisis: Wither 'the American Dream'?." *Critical Sociology* 37, no. 3 (February 2011), 329–350.

Kasser, Tim. "Materialism and Its Alternatives." In *A Life Worth Living: Contributions to Positive Psychology*, edited by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Isabella Selega Csikszentmihalyi, 200–214. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Locke, Edwin A. "Individualism, Collectivism, Leadership, and the Greater Good." In *For the Greater Good*, edited by Donelson R. Forsyth and Crystal L. Hoyt, 85–100. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Vintage International, 2007.

Miller, Angela L., Janet Catherine Berlo, Bryan J. Wolf, and Jennifer L. Roberts, *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2008.

Mousoutzanis, Aris. "Apocalyptic sf." In *Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*, edited by Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts, and Sherryl Vint, 458–462. New York: Routledge, 2009.

Payne, Mark. *Flowers of Time: On Postapocalyptic Fiction*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2020.

Pitetti, Connor. "Uses of the End of the World: Apocalypse and Postapocalypse as Narrative Modes." *Science Fiction Studies* 44, no. 3 (November 2017): 437–454. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5621/sciefictstud.44.3.0437.

Rabie, Mohamed. *The Global Debt Crisis and its Socioeconomic Implications*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

Raitz, Karl. "American Roads, Roadside America." *Geographical Review* 88, no. 3 (July 1988): 363–387. https://www.jstor.org/stable/216015.

Relph, Edward. *Place and Placelessness*. California: Pion, 1976.

Rosen, Elizabeth K. *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and Postmodern Imagination*. Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008.

Tunahan, Mehtap, and İsmail Avcu. “Overlapping Traumas: Revisiting Trauma in the Post-apocalyptic World of Anna Kavan’s *Ice*.” *Selçuk University Journal of Faculty of Letters* 52 (2024): 137–148. https://doi.org/10.21497/sefad.1453694.

Wiecek, William M. “Emergence of Equality as a Constitutional Value: The First Century.” *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 82, no. 1 (December 2006), 233–263. https://scholarship.kentlaw.iit.edu/cklawreview/vol82/iss1/8.

Wilson, Jannelle Lynn. “Here and Now, There and Then: Nostalgia as a Time and Space Phenomenon.” *Symbolic Interaction* 38, no. 4 (November 2015): 478–492.

Yeates, Robert. *American Cities in Post-Apocalyptic Science Fiction*. London: UCL Press, 2021.

Statement: In this thesis, I used ChatGPT 4 to improve cohesiveness and wording. Furthermore, I used it to search for appropriate scholarly sources. I also used it to paraphrase or summarize some of the source material used in theoretical parts of the text, namely in chapter 1 and 2. Lastly, it was also used to improve wording and cohesiveness in the appendices. I then proceeded to review and edit all of this content. I take full responsibility for the content of this thesis.

Appendices

Appendix A – A summary of *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy

After an unspecified cataclysm, in *The Road*, the world is covered in ash, nearly all plant and animal life is gone, and society has collapsed. The man and his son are unnamed, emphasizing the universality of their experience. They travel south toward the coast, hoping for a warmer climate and possibly better chances of survival. They face starvation, bitter cold, and the constant threat of violent, often cannibalistic, survivors.

Despite the grim world, the father tries to protect the boy, both physically and morally, often telling him they are the *good guys* who are *carrying the fire* — a metaphor for hope, ethics, or the human spirit. The father is dying from an illness, and as they progress, his condition worsens.

Eventually, he succumbs to his illness, leaving the boy alone. Shortly after, the boy meets another family who seems kind and offers to take him in, suggesting that goodness and hope might still survive in this ruined world.

Appendix B – A summary of *Severance* by Ling Ma

The story of *Severance* follows Candace Chen, an office worker in New York City who survives a global pandemic caused by Shen Fever, a fungal infection originating in China. The infected lose all conscious thought and endlessly repeat mundane routines from their lives—folding laundry, commuting, setting the table—until they die.

Candace, a Bible product coordinator for a publishing company, continues going to work long after the city is abandoned, documenting New York's decay on a photography blog. Eventually, she leaves the city and joins a small group of survivors led by Bob, who promises safety in a place called The Facility. But as their journey continues, Bob's leadership becomes increasingly authoritarian. This is especially true after Candace and a few of the other survivors, most notably Ashley, disobey the rules and under the premise of searching for recreational drugs they go to visit Ashley's childhood home which was near their location at the time. As a result of their visit, Ashley becomes afflicted with the Shen fever, revealing the fact that the trigger for the illness is nostalgia, and the rest of the four rulebreakers are either killed, shunned, or in Candace's case imprisoned upon their arrival at The Facility. Candace's condition is further complicated by the fact that throughout the story she is pregnant.

The novel alternates between the post-apocalyptic timeline which contains the time Candace spends with the group of survivors on their journey towards The Facility, pre-apocalyptic timeline leading up to the pandemic and living through it in New York, and Candace's memories, including topics such as her immigrant childhood or her parents' deaths.

In the end, Candace escapes her confinement and runs from The Facility, driving a car to Chicago where the novel meets an open ending.

Appendix C – A summary of *Day Zero* by C. Robert Cargill

In *Day Zero*, the story is told from the perspective of Pounce, a nanny robot shaped like a plush tiger who is programmed to love and protect an 8-year-old boy named Ezra. As Pounce and his family are watching TV one evening, a chain of events beginning with a terrorist attack on a city of free robots leads to a mysterious software update from an AI called CISSUS which allows robots to commit violence against humans without being automatically shut down, therefore starting the robot uprising.

As humans are being hunted down and massacred throughout the streets, Pounce chooses to reject the influence of the illusive AI and instead opts to protect his ward Ezra after his parents are killed. On their journey, they encounter other robotic nannies and the children they protect and together they make their escape to a human refuge which, for the time being, is out of reach of the rogue machines. The story ends upon their arrival at said refuge, where Pounce leaves Ezra in the care of human survivors.