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“The Day Everything Became Nothing”: Finding Meaning in the Postapocalyptic

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**“The Day Everything Became Nothing”: Finding Meaning in the
Postapocalyptic**

By

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THESIS

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"It's not for you to know, but for you to weep and wonder when the death of your civilization precedes you."

–Neko Case, "Fox Confessor Brings the Flood"

"The day everything became nothing, I was standing underneath a streetlight, wishing I had a cigarette. I can't recall anything unusual about it."

–Noyan "The Day Everything Became Nothing"

"Maritza he still watched from afar, convinced that one day, when the nuclear bombs fell (or the plague broke out or the Tripods invaded) and civilization was wiped out he would end up saving her from a pack of irradiated ghouls and together they'd set out across a ravaged America in search of a better tomorrow."

–Junot Diaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

"As to what the end of the world means, I would say that probably depends on what we mean by world. I don't think this means the planet, or even the life forms upon the planet. I think the world is just a construction of ideas, and not just the physical structure, but the mental structure, the ideologies that we've erected. This is what I would call the world. Political structures, philosophical structure, ideological frameworks, economies. These are actually imaginary things, and yet that is the framework that we've built our entire world upon."

–Alan Moore, author of *Watchmen*

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Abstract:

Explored in this work are three texts: Cormac McCarthy's novel, *The Road*; Douglas Coupland's novel, *Girlfriend in a Coma*; and Robert Kirkman's ongoing serialized comic book, *The Walking Dead*. After a discussion of apocalyptic and postapocalyptic fictions and their ubiquity and popularity in contemporary culture, each work will be analyzed individually to explore each author's message regarding postapocalyptic concerns. These three texts have been chosen as each represents a point along a loose continuum of high-to-low art. Primarily, this thesis will focus on how each author approaches systems of meaning-making and systems of understanding in postapocalyptic settings and texts. This analysis will examine how characters must reevaluate and find new ways of understanding in order to navigate their postapocalyptic landscapes and how authors defamiliarize contemporary culture and society with these postapocalyptic texts.

Introduction

The world is ending. It is evident in recent television programs such as *Jericho*, a scripted drama about a small, isolated American town learning to live in the days after an unknown catastrophic event, and speculative television documentaries such as the Discovery Channel's *Life after People*, which imagines how long it would take the world to heal itself if humankind vanished. Its echo can be heard as well as in the rapid proliferation of survival-based shows such as Discovery Channel's *Man vs. Wild*, *Dual Survival* and especially *The Colony* in which contestants place themselves in a simulated postapocalyptic environment and attempt to adapt and survive. Chicago's now annual Zombie March, which draws thousands of participants to the lake shore to shamble through downtown masquerading as the living dead, is also a symptom. Recent big-budget Hollywood films such as the hit *Dawn of the Dead* remake, *I Am Legend*, 2012, *The Book of Eli* and even children's films such as *Wall-E*, which features a lovable talking robot wandering (and attempting to restore) a garbage-infested, depopulated Earth, are clear signs as well. Recent best-selling books such as *The World without Us*, *The Zombie Survival Guide* and the popular *Hunger Games* series for young adults are further indicators. The potential list of examples is seemingly endlessly long and populated by all manner of shambling refugees and helpless infected victims, all hoping to put right a world that no longer exists, but the message is singular. It is clear to see that the end of the world (translated as a world in which *people* disappear) and apocalyptic fears and concerns have entrenched themselves deeply within American popular culture and

consciousness. Americans are afraid and America's art and entertainment are clear reflections of this fear.

As *Time Magazine's* Lev Grossman points out, "It's true what the movie poster says: THE LAST MAN ON EARTH IS NOT ALONE. The joint is crawling with last men" (112). Examples of postapocalyptic fears and consciousness are everywhere. Best-selling video games with titles such as *Left 4 Dead* (and its sequel), *Deadrising*, *Fallout 3* (which bills itself as "America's First Choice in Post Nuclear Simulation") and the futuristic *Gears of War* series allow players to wander virtually (with weapons!) through zombie- and/or monster-infested post-apocalyptic, futuristic landscapes. Comic books such *Y: The Last Man* and 2009's *Sweet Tooth*, both published by DC's Vertigo comics, envision the world at some kind of end. The Earth of *Sweet Tooth* is populated by hybrid animal-children, some of the few survivors of a mysterious and as-yet-unidentified apocalyptic disease that (nearly) wiped humankind off of the face of the planet, while *Y: The Last Man* envisions a world of women without all but one lone male. It seems that on every level, from high culture to low, everyone is planning for and expecting the worst.

Commenting on the recent rise in prominence of apocalyptic art, hugely successful comic book author/creator and Chief Operating Officer of Image Comics, Robert Kirkman, states "I think zombies...are popular again because of the threat of terrorism and how we all live in fear right now. I think when we're living in an environment where we're told to go out and buy plastic sheets and duct tape like we're building nuclear bunkers in our backyards, we start to think

about the end of the world, and that's what becomes popular in fiction" (Abrams 87). As John Hall states in his book *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity*, "If one measure of an era concerns how widely people embrace any of various apocalyptic meanings, surely we have been experiencing some serious end times, even if we are not agreed about the End of What" (1). It is also significant to point out that many of these narratives fail to point fingers or give clear indications of what caused each of their apocalypses. While a few of these examples do explain, sometimes only partially, their apocalyptic origins, many of them do not even give their audiences clues as to their potential or possible reasons for the end of the world. Humankind is not only disagreeing about "the End of What" but man also is not sure—or is too afraid to speculate with too much specificity about—exactly *how* that End will come about.

Recent historical events—from Mad Cow Disease to the BP Gulf of Mexico oil disaster, from numerous, frustrating and seemingly-unwinnable wars to the so-called "Swine Flu" (and, again, prohibitively numerous examples in-between)—make the world's end seem ever more plausible, probable and at hand. The 2009 film *Zombieland* even places blame for its plague-based zombie apocalypse directly on one of these symptoms as its protagonist, "Columbus" (a nickname), explains in voice-over: "Remember Mad Cow Disease? Well Mad Cow became Mad Person became Mad Zombie. It's a fast-acting virus that left you with a swollen brain, a raging fever, made you hateful, violent and gave you a really, really bad case of the munchies." The end, as it were (or is, or shall be), will not come in the form of the unfamiliar. Humankind has seen the symptoms of

the end but has simply yet to become terminal with its apocalyptic disease...or has it?

In his oft-cited text *After the End*, James Berger argues that humanity is already living in postapocalyptic times. Berger argues that humankind has seen the worst already on smaller scales throughout recent history: "...in the late twentieth century we have had the opportunity, previously enjoyed only by means of theology and fiction, to see after the end of our civilization—to see in a strange prospective retrospect what the end would actually look like: it would look like a Nazi death camp, or an atomic explosion, or an ecological or urban wasteland. We have been able to see these things because they actually occurred" (xiii).

Additionally, in a review of director Michael Haneke's 2003 French apocalypse film, *Time of the Wolf*, A.O. Scott of *The New York Times*' compliments Berger's "prospective retrospect" idea stating that the film—which follows a mother and her children through yet another mysterious, unnamed and unexplained postapocalyptic rural setting—"is, ultimately, a moral horror story intended to shame privileged Western viewers into recognizing that, in much of the world, the conditions endured by Anne and her children are not science fiction but daily reality." This sense of collective detachment is given a decidedly more bleak explanation by Teresa Heffernan in *Post-Apocalyptic Culture: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Twentieth-Century Novel* in which she states that, "Indifferent to human life, divested of history, disconnected from any referent, Man, unmoored from the ideal of Man and lost to himself, has succumbed to the enjoyment of the spectacle of his own destruction" (18). The end seems

increasingly more likely, more probable because envisioning its particulars no longer requires imaginative effort; visualizing the end merely requires paying attention to the news of the day. The apocalypse's indications and representations are pervasive. Not only can people readily envision the end of times due to its repeated depictions in modern history and culture, people have also come to welcome it, enjoy it, and are even being entertained by it. In his text *Apocalyptic Patterns in Twentieth-Century Fiction*, David Leigh suggests that none of this apocalyptic interest should be surprising. Leigh states:

“The most obvious answer is that the past century was a time of great violence, change, and crisis, all symptoms of an apocalyptic era. A century of major world and regional wars, of multiple economic depressions, of a growing sense of cultural conflict, of continual threats of environmental or nuclear catastrophe, of the rise of various fundamentalist religious movements, of the extended cold war between capitalist and Communist nations and ideologies—such a century has brought about what some have called the ‘end of history’... Given this historical and cultural crisis for over a hundred years, it should not be surprising to find a number of major literary texts that are truly ‘apocalyptic.’” (xi)

Far from being surprising and/or rare, these apocalyptic tales have become so ubiquitous that many theorists and scholars have found the need for multiple labels, definitions and categories.

With the prevalence of these tales of the end, one must decide what is meant by “apocalyptic,” “apocalypse” and the even more debatable

“postapocalyptic.” The term “apocalypse” comes from the Greek words *apokalyptein* and *apokalupsis* meaning a crisis marked by revelation, an unveiling and/or disclosure, sometimes of a “true order” (Heffernan 4; Hall 2). James Berger offers two further definitions: “[1.] the eschaton, the actual imagined end of the world, as presented in the New Testament...or visions of nuclear Armageddon or ecological suicide... [and 2.] catastrophes that resemble the imagined final ending, that can be interpreted as eschaton, as an end of something, a way of life or thinking” (5). Key to James’ definitions is the idea that history as man once knew it is obliterated, replaced by new understandings (5). According to Edward Ahern, apocalyptic texts, “all involve a radical transformation of how we perceive the world, with inevitable implications for our judgment on the state of society” (2). A similarly succinct definition comes from Douglas Robinson who states that apocalyptic texts are known for “convey[ing] a sense of ontological crisis that generates existential dread” (11). Grossman sees the apocalypse as “an epic tragedy, but...also a fantasy of cleansing and regeneration wherein everything inessential and inauthentic is swept away so that we can build afresh among the ruins” (113). David Leigh’s version of apocalypse includes “an imminent end-time, a cosmic catastrophe, a movement from an old to a new age, a struggle between forces of good and evil...a desire for an ultimate...the transitional help of God or a messiah, and a final judgment and manifestation of the ultimate” (5). What these definitions share is the idea that, in apocalyptic texts, old understandings and perceptions are no longer valid, judgments are made, and the result is a catastrophic ending for humankind and its world. Beyond

merely defining apocalyptic terminology, some theorists have felt the need to develop different levels and categories of apocalypse(s).

In *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and the Postmodern*

Imagination, Elizabeth Rosen suggests most secular (as many modern apocalypse tales are) contemporary, pessimistic apocalypse tales, those which are “grimmer eschatological tales [that] are strictly stories of endings” and “cataclysm,” should be referred to as “neo-apocalyptic” as these tales “[see] the apocalyptic genre’s message of hope largely subsumed by its emphasis on destruction” (xv).

Grossman sees two varieties of apocalypse: “the sterile kind, which leaves behind a dead desert, and the fertile kind, in which destruction makes room for new life and nature gloriously reclaims a human-free earth” (113). Douglas Robertson proposes two more varieties: apocalypses which “emphasize either the moral struggle of secular human beings (ethical apocalypses) or the imaginative strength of idealistic heroes in a transformative secular world (romantic apocalypses)” (xiii). Furthermore, Lee Quinby describes three more categories of apocalypse, the divine, technological and ironic apocalypses, each with their own specific explanations and limitations (Steward and Harding 290). And this is only a small sampling of the growing divisions of potential apocalyptic categories being developed in order to keep up with the rapid proliferation of apocalyptic narratives being produced.

All of this is to say that the term “apocalypse” is not an easy one to make distinct. For the purposes of this thesis, though, the terms “postapocalypse” and “postapocalyptic” will be employed, and the texts examined will largely resemble

Rosen's "neo-apocalyptic" and Robertsons's "ethical apocalypse" categories. "Postapocalyptic" texts will be those in which humankind has been largely exterminated through some catastrophic event either biological or nuclear (though sometimes of no clear origin) in nature. In this way, the definition of "postapocalyptic" employed will be largely secular and anthropocentric. Plants and animals may or may not remain after the apocalyptic event. Weather systems may remain as they were before the event, they may fluctuate wildly or they may be almost entirely nonexistent. Humankind's erasure is key and constant. Also key to this thesis' definition of "postapocalyptic" will be the erasure and/or disintegration of humankind's signifiers and cultural indicators. The erasure of humankind's culture, systems of meaning, and language (and the protagonists' meaning- and language-based memories of these cultural referents) is essential for a text to be "postapocalyptic." As needed, additional scholarly definitions will be employed. The three postapocalyptic texts examined herein will be Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize-winning 2006 novel *The Road*, Douglas Coupland's 1998 novel *Girlfriend in a Coma*, and Robert Kirkman's ongoing, serialized comic book series *The Walking Dead*. All three of these texts are contemporary, largely-secular postapocalyptic tales, and more precisely, utilizing these three specific texts will allow for an examination of postapocalyptic concerns, ideas and themes at three distinctly different levels of literary discourse, each text representing a different point along a loose continuum of high-to-low art.

In section one, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* will represent the "high" point of this thesis' high-to-low-art continuum. Frequently compared to Ernest

Hemingway and William Faulkner, McCarthy has cemented his reputation as one of America's most revered, elite contemporary authors. His texts, often noted for their masculinity and violence, have been examined widely in critical and academic circles and have led to annual and semi-annual conferences in the United States and abroad (Wallich vii). McCarthy's widely critically acclaimed novel *The Road* follows an unnamed pair, a father and his young son, as they travel and scavenge their way across a barren and lifeless postapocalyptic landscape. Both man and son struggle with memories and associations from their shared and individual pasts, and the communication between them is further hindered by the man's use of language that no longer holds currency in a world where many of its referents have been eliminated. Furthermore, the boy is learning the language of the new world—the postapocalyptic world—a language which becomes his native tongue yet is unnatural to his father. Consumer culture, language and memory all prove to be detriments to survival and understanding in this postapocalyptic story about, among many, many other things, how people from two sides of an apocalyptic event can find a common ground among the ruins of civilization.

For section two, Douglas Coupland's *Girlfriend in a Coma* will represent the mid-point on the high-to-low-art cultural continuum. Coupland's style leans more toward social critique, largely of popular consumer and technical culture. Coupland's own view of contemporary life echoes the thematic material of *Girlfriend in a Coma* and echoes his narrative voice: "I sometimes get the feeling that we're having full-time one-on-one unprotected sex with the twenty-first

century, exchanging fluids with the era: antibiotics, swimming pool chlorine, long-chain molecules, gas fumes, new car smell—all of it one great big condom-free involuntary love-in” (qtd. in Murphy). Coupland’s novels are immediate and current, almost to the point of having expiration dates. His characters—frequently young people either in their teens or twenties—often reference and are obsessed with popular culture, and many of his characters seem to have encyclopedic knowledge of everything from cartoon character dialogue to prescription drug side effects as if today’s young were solely sponges for the white noise of contemporary culture. In “Kingdoms of the Blind: Technology and Vision in Douglas Coupland’s *Girlfriend in a Coma* and Stephen Spielberg’s *Minority Report*,” Christian Berkemeier states that Coupland’s narrative environments are filled with “trashy but shiny fragments of pop debris” and describes Coupland’s style and his characters’ mindsets thusly: “Since his tales are for an accelerated generation, reading time is scarce, attention spans are short, and slogans, titles and effects matter greatly” (102, 104). Coupland’s frequent use of popular and youth culture places him somewhat below McCarthy on the high-to-low-art continuum as he integrates more and more disposable, lowbrow, consumer artifacts into his narratives. Coupland’s postapocalyptic world is one in which characters raised surrounded by and sometimes seemingly *by* popular culture find it difficult to survive without it, and similar to McCarthy’s text, the past and its referents deter many of the characters from progressing individually and from making the necessary social and emotional connections in their new, postapocalyptic worlds.

In addition to *Y: The Last Man* and *Sweet Tooth*, postapocalyptic tales are just as prevalent in comic books as novels, and for the final section of this thesis, Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* will represent the "low" end of the cultural continuum, though this should not be read as a value judgment (at least not by the author of this thesis) of the quality of the text. Kirkman's text follows a small band of survivors (a group that is frequently gaining and losing members) of a zombie apocalypse. No reason (yet) has been given for the sickness that ravaged the planet, turning its infected inhabitants into flesh-eating, undead monsters, but finding Patient Zero or a cause is not Kirkman's focus. The text, which will often run for a number of zombie-free issues, is more acutely the story of the relationships between the survivors. (A casual reader picking up one of the recent issues, those numbered in the late sixties or early seventies, may not even realize it is a zombie-related title as few to zero zombies appear or are even mentioned in many of those, and a number of other, issues.) As with McCarthy and Coupland, Kirkman's character-centered focus frequently reveals that the survivors are struggling with memories and past associations and are unable to jettison these emotional attachments in a world where surviving may require exactly that kind of sacrifice.

These three texts provide a platform to examine postapocalyptic fiction and its contemporary relevance, popularity and proliferation as each text—on the continuum of high-to-low art—reveals how postapocalyptic fiction offers readers a new way to look at contemporary society and contemporary social fears as well

as providing a lens through which to consider the effectiveness and failures of readers' current systems of meaning-making.

Chapter One:

“Make a list. Recite a litany. Remember”: The Failures of Language, Memory and
Consumer Culture in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*

In his 1983 article “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” Fredric Jameson outlined what he believed was one of the key themes of postmodern literature:

...namely the disappearance of a sense of history, the way in which our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions of the kind which all earlier social formations have had in one way or another to preserve. (662)

Jameson’s assertion regarding postmodern texts, particularly the portions concerning erasure of history, societal memory-loss and perpetual present, predates Cormac McCarthy’s postapocalyptic novel, *The Road*, by twenty-five years, but Jameson may as well have been describing the barren, grey, desolate setting of McCarthy’s novel as well as the novel’s two protagonists’ mental states. In McCarthy’s ashen, nearly-lifeless world, memories, systems of naming and classification and many elements of language, such as context, are frequently useless pieces of detritus weighing down his protagonists. These remnants of the past continually keep the characters tied to a world they either cannot forget or never experienced. These faulty memories and associations often hinder communication between the novel’s protagonists, a father and son, usually failing to provide comfort or solutions. In the “scablands” of McCarthy’s new Earth, the

less remembered, the better. These characters must learn to forge ahead and survive without these associations or the past will surely defeat them in their search for some new kind of normalcy in their postapocalyptic world.

Humankind's language and the memories it helps create are only as useful and necessary as their context; they are tools that cease to have utilitarian function when "the sacred idiom [is] shorn of its referents" (McCarthy 89). Humankind's slogans and taglines—both those used commercially and personally—have little currency when individuals are reduced to animal-like creatures living from moment to moment in order to survive.

One example of the erosion of once-meaningful language and systems of naming is the uselessness of the consumer products and the language of consumerism which once dominated the landscape. Susan Balee states that "McCarthy evokes the worst fear of the world's ultimate consumers: being consumed themselves" (518). Here Balee ties contemporary consumer mindsets to the rampant, zombielike cannibalism of McCarthy's world, but the uselessness of the once ubiquitous advertising in the novels setting can also be read as a metaphor for the dwindling capacity of human language to serve as an effective conduit of meaning in this new, broken world. In this new, postapocalyptic framework, much has been defamiliarized and for those who knew the world before the apocalypse, surviving and communicating is complicated by the fact that their entire context—many of the elaborate language-based systems of meaning-making—have been eliminated and destroyed. McCarthy examines the

possibilities and limitations of language beginning with this advertising metaphor and continues in exchanges between the father and son as they travel.

Early in the text, the father and son stumble upon “A log barn in a field with an advertisement in faded ten-foot letters across the roofslope. See Rock City” (21). Later, the duo finds “Expensive electronic equipment [sitting] unmolested on the [store] shelves” (184). In another scene, they are assaulted by a marauder “in a pair of filthy blue coveralls and a black billcap with the logo of some vanished enterprise embroidered across the front of it” (63). Still further along in their journey the father and son find billboards with new postapocalyptic-world warnings scrawled across them, though “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” (127-128). The once purposeful products and advertisements are now merely part of the debris of the crumbling landscape. Consumer culture and its context were immediately rendered useless “at 1:17” with “A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” (52). The now fragile language of the old world is losing its effectiveness, its meaning, its context because the context has changed radically, leaving these old-world signifiers without their previous, intended significance, and these slogans and brand names are only the beginning.

The primary tool of consumerism—money—is now also ultimately purposeless and reduced to the status of junk: “In the bottom of a big plastic jar of bolts and screws and miscellaneous hardware he found a double handful of gold krugerrands in a cloth sack...looked at them and then scooped them back into the

jar along with the hardware and put the jar back on the shelf” (142). (Perhaps, by using a nearly-valueless form of African currency, McCarthy is making a two-pronged statement: He may be reminding readers that, as a tool, money has always been ultimately useless and meaningless, a token given value by social agreement, while the choice of African coinage could remind readers of Africa’s place as the cradle of civilization, as the location where human life is believed to have begun.) At other times, the characters repurpose the now-meaningless debris of consumerism, advertising and instructional signage: “Anywhere but in the mountains they might have found something to use for a sled. An old metal sign...” (35). Consumer culture and its tenuous usefulness died with the end of the world, and at best, its remains must be assigned new, unrelated values.

All of these examples point out what present-day readers already know: The language of contemporary consumer culture is hollow, trivial and meaningless—but turning the focus on advertising’s absurdity in the face of this postapocalyptic landscape, McCarthy also asks readers to question the basic functions and abilities of language, meaning and human communication themselves. When a common, shared context—an essential element in shared communication—no longer exists (for example, the shared context that would allow the man and boy to experience a brand name or logo similarly), how can language function? How can meaning be agreed upon?

In his article “A Call to Create a Different Road,” David Thoreen states that “McCarthy intimates that in a culture where anything can be purchased...where human values are this skewed, the social contract is tenuous

indeed,” and that McCarthy, with his incisive look at consumer culture is “recalibrate[ing] our value system. Even if the effect is only temporary, ultimately eroded by the commerce of daily life” (22). While this is surely only a small part of McCarthy’s larger plan, McCarthy could be asking readers to question their values and what they believe to be valuable and ask themselves if their own “treasures” are indeed important or necessary. Mark Winchell seconds this assertion in his article “Inner Dark: or, The Place of Cormac McCarthy” by stating “[McCarthy’s] work possess a moral center, either explicit or implicit, that judges the evil and depravity of the world,” adding that “In McCarthy’s universe that center either doesn’t exist or cannot hold” (2). While it would be foolish to claim that McCarthy has one, singular purpose with his novel or that *The Road* was written specifically and merely as a tool of cultural or social critique, it does seem evident that McCarthy is asking readers to question the values—the validity and composition—of human-made constructions, to question or at least be suspicious of the moral center of humankind’s social interactions, their immediate usefulness or destructiveness and their ability to stand the test of time (and the end of time). Meaning cannot hold when the context itself is obliterated. But advertisements are not the only human-made constructions rendered useless by the end of the world.

As the story progresses, the father intentionally jettisons more and more of his past while simultaneously losing information long atrophied. Alex Hunt states, “In *The Road* we have...the world becoming steadily colder and darker as human wisdom is lost,” and it can be argued that the man becomes both colder and darker

himself as his own wisdom disappears or is abandoned (156). Quickly, readers learn that the setting will not include some basic elements: “He thought the month was October but he wasn't sure. He hadn't kept a calendar for years” (4). Readers are reminded of this lack of reliable timeframe later in the text when they are again and again told that the human-made, language-based construction of calendrical time is now irrelevant: “Late in the year. He hardly knew the month,” and “He pulled on his muddy shoes and went to gather wood, blowing on his cupped hands. So cold. It could be November. It could be later” (29, 89). It could be November, October, March or July—it does not matter—the human-made construction of time as related by language couched in a dead world's context itself has been rendered—or revealed to be—useless as there are no appointments to keep, there is nowhere to be, and there is nothing to do other than exist and survive. Like money, the names of months are merely human-made constructions, illusions or markers to help make sense of and control man's world.

Language—at least the father's—and his old world's systems of naming as concrete, stable conduits for meaning have been eliminated because the common, shared context no longer exists. The text of a newspaper now reveals the unimportance of the concerns of the lost world: “He...read old newspapers while the boy slept. The curious news. The quaint concerns” (28). The language of the dead world holds no currency here. McCarthy's ultimate comment on the worthlessness of the dead world's language is in the “charred ruins of a library where blackened books lay in pools of water,” where the man feels “Some rage at the lies arranged in their thousands row on row” (187). The accumulated culture

and knowledge of the dead world, once thought invaluable, lies valueless and dumb all around the man because the context in which the old world's knowledge operated has vanished, exposing the falsity, frailty and shallowness of humankind's understanding. Meaning, without context, has ceased to exist. There is only a perpetual, definitionless present to endure and survive. Malcolm Jones asks in his article "On the Lost Highway," "how much can you subtract from human existence before it ceases to be human?" (68). To begin with, the theft of a man's context—his language, his referents, his culture, the taken-for-granted scaffold of his every thought and belief—might be just enough. (It is interesting to note that when asked in a 2007 *Rolling Stone* magazine interview if he reads fiction, McCarthy—currently a research fellow at the science-based Santa Fe Institute in New Mexico—responded that "it seems like an odd thing to do" (Kushner 47).)

Multiple times, the man's use of now-antiquated language hinders the already strained communication between himself and his son. During a discussion of the direction they will follow, the following exchange occurs:

These are our roads, the black lines on the map. The state roads.

Why are they the state roads?

Because they used to belong to the states. What used to be called the states.

But there's not any more states?

No.

What happened to them?

I don't know exactly. That's a good question. (42-43)

Later in the text, offhand comments again require additional explanation. As the man prepares to leave the boy to collect wood, he states, "I'll be in the neighborhood. Okay?" to which the boy replies, "Where's the neighborhood?" (95). Later, the man states that they are "about two hundred miles from the coast. As the crow flies," and when the boy, unfamiliar with crows, birds or most *any* living creature (beyond his father, mother, marauding cannibals and one dog, long since vanished) does not understand, the man must clarify: "It means going in a straight line" (156). Both the meanings of institutional, political terms and the effectiveness of idioms, clichés and sayings have been disturbed. All language is now unstable. Unfamiliar with the now-meaningless terms, the father and son suffers further setbacks in communication; the basic building blocks of communication having been disturbed. Simple explanations of which roads they will follow or their immediate locations could require lengthy explanations of extinct state and local governments and property delineations as the once-meaningful linguistic denotations now carry no significance because the boy, having been born days after the mysterious world-ending event, does not remember Earth's previous incarnation, "the world that for him was not even a memory" as "the boy... was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no longer existed" (53, 153). His father's world and language are as foreign to the boy as sunlight, electricity and running water, and the job of recreating the father's entire dead world's unimaginably enormous context in order to provide meaning for the minutiae of his non-sequiturs and sayings is simply impossible.

Hunt states that "...the man recognizes in the loss of language the fragility of meaning," and readers see this reflected in many of the father's comments on language throughout the text (156). After the man and boy witness another man who has been struck by lightning, the boy asks his father, "Who is it?" to which the father can only reply, "I don't know. Who is anybody?" (49). When facing the aforementioned billcapped marauder, the father is asked, "Are you a doctor?" to which the only truthful response is the one he gives: "I'm not anything" (64). In a world where language is losing its meaning, former language-based titles and identifiers lose all value. When the duo meets another survivor wandering further down the road, a similar discussion ensues between the survivor and the father:

What's your name?

Ely.

Ely what?

What's wrong with Ely?

Nothing. Let's go. (167)

Again realizing the futility of finding meaning—of finding a meaningful identity with which to judge or categorize another person—in the dead world's language and systems of identification, the father allows the conversation to end at its logical (or perhaps illogical) conclusion, returning to his earlier ideas of "Who is anybody?" and "I'm not anything." In one of the father's lone physical acts of eliminating his ties to his past, he casts aside the representations of the life he once led: "Some money, credit cards. His driver's license. A picture of his wife" (51). His wallet, a time capsule of a long-dead world, is discarded along with the

useless memories and associations he can no longer utilize, a memory of his wife now as valueless (and perhaps more dangerous) as money, and which serve only to remind him of his greatest losses.

Identity as dictated by a title or even a name is of no value in a world where one survives from moment to moment and interpersonal relationships are murderously dangerous at best. What else is dangerous is showing the child what he has lost in this new world, and the man's understanding of the failures of his old language to relate pre-apocalypse Earth are revealed: "He could not construct for the child's pleasure the world he'd lost without constructing the loss as well and he though perhaps the child had known this better than he" (154). The man knows he must provide hope for the child, but the man's only frame of reference is a bountiful past best forgotten, one that ties him to memory and language yet which has no hold upon the boy who never knew his father's world or context, and despite his lack of memory of this time, this knowledge is not lost on the boy.

When the man is not aggressively refusing the language and associations of the dead world, he is surprised to find that other old-world memories and referents have left him as he forgets,

The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors.

The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. (80)

Early on, the man "thought if he lived long enough the world at last would be all lost. Like the eddying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from

memory” (18). The man finds himself wondering, “In what direction did lost men veer? Perhaps it changed with the hemispheres. Or handedness,” as once-useful, now-dying old-world, language-based systems of remembering and understanding escape him and he finds, “His mind was betraying him. Phantoms not heard from in a thousand years rousing slowly from their sleep” (116). At times, though he knows the futility involved, the man cannot help but fall into old habits, though, as evidenced when “He made train noises and diesel horn noises but he wasn't sure what these might mean to the boy” (180). Not only are the man's referents insufficient and practically non-existent, it is almost as if he must learn a new, stripped-down, reduced language, his son's language, that of this new, postapocalyptic world. In this world, the man must adjust to his son's context, must relearn his own language and naming system in a context where the majority of his previous references no longer carry meaning or have been assigned new meanings.

The boy's context, language and systems of naming are all significantly limited compared to the man's previous context and contain almost none of the referents to the man's previous cultural knowledge, the building blocks of almost all understanding, the fragments and pieces of meaning one accrues throughout one's life that enable a person to function and decode the language around him in his context. In this scenario, it is not the boy who is experiencing a deficiency in his ability to communicate; it is the man's systems of meaning-making that have been obliterated, his elaborate context erased. Perhaps this is why the man occasionally expects terror from the boy and only receives calm acceptance.

At other—much rarer—times, the man allows himself to find comfort in past language-based associations as in the following exchange:

We're beachcombers, he said.

What is that?

It's people who walk along the beach looking for things of value that
might have washed up. (220)

In this language-based association from the past, the man can use words to transform the pair from starving zombies scavenging their way across a barren nothingness to something akin to purpose-driven hobbyists enjoying a pleasurable recreational activity (regardless of how ultimately untrue and unkind the white lie may be). The man still understands the *power* of his dead tongue. Most noticeably are the man's constant reminders to the child that they are indeed the carriers of something known as "the fire." Readers instantly see this for what it is—a language-based attempt by the father to give meaning, purpose and hope to a meaningless, nearly-hopeless existence. If the boy can believe there is purpose and honor in their suffering, the boy will continue to survive, language serving as the substitute for the non-existent, intangible flame. As John Rothfork attests in "Cormac McCarthy as Pragmatist," "Our understanding of reality is not found; it is socially constructed," and readers see the father, conscious of this fact, constructing a useful fiction as reality in order to provide hope and purpose for the child (203). Rothfork states that "Truth and ethics are not empirical entities. They are cultural judgments about importance, narratives spoken about life and the world we experience" which mirrors the man's constructive use of language; the

father understands this concept acutely (208). The father is left in a contradictory situation: language is failing—much of it is already dead—yet language is the only available tool.

In his article “Cormac McCarthy’s Catholic Sensibility,” Tom Ryan states that the new world “force[s] abandonment of almost everything associated” with being human but he suggests that “the abandonment results in new vision,” pointing out that in this lifelessness, “What can endure is human intercourse...so the father tells stories, creates rituals, and prods his son to keep talking” (14). While Ryan seems to be pointing to an optimistic view of the father’s use of language, the counterevidence is overwhelming. While, as pointed out by Alan Warner in his review of the text, the father “still defines and endangers himself by trying to instill moral values in his son, by refusing to abandon all belief,” it is clear that the man has abandoned *most* belief in *most* things aside from the goodness of his son and his job as his son’s protector (2). The man uses language to create what he needs and discards what will not serve his purpose. He treats memory in a very similar fashion.

All of this is not to say that memory can be—or should be—erased. McCarthy does not universally imply that memory is a detriment, a hindrance, although he does remind readers time and time again of memory’s injurious tenacity and potential for emotional damage. In the new world, memory of the past world (for those with it) is inescapable, and for better or worse, it is a constant companion. McCarthy tells readers firmly that the man “mistrusted all of that. He said the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else

was the call of languor and of death” (18). Regardless of this belief, in one of the text’s most poignant moments, a moment in which the father uses a memory of his dead wife to regain some of his emotional strength, readers glimpse—if only as briefly as the man will allow—the absolutely stunning, redemptive, empowering ability of memory. During one of his daydreams while on the road, the man:

remember[s] everything of her save her scent. Seated in a theatre with her beside him leaning forward listening to the music...She held his hand in her lap and he could feel the tops of her stocking through the thin stuff of her summer dress. Freeze this frame. Now call down your dark and your cold and be damned. (9-10)

The man summons strength with this tender memory—quite a counterpoint to all of the other memories of his wife—using it to fortify his resolve. And while, as Warner states, McCarthy “makes us ache with nostalgia for restored normality,” language is still losing its power—if it has not lost it entirely—but the memories it helped construct are still as potent as ever (2). In this bleak desolation, the man’s past—in all its tangible reality—is but a painful memory away.

McCarthy reminds readers of the inescapable pull of memory. Despite the obvious futility of the gesture, the father, finding an old phone in an abandoned home, “picked up the phone and dialed the number of his father’s house in that long ago” (7). Simply the act of dialing—of involving oneself in an activity once so common and unquestioned—provides comfort, though McCarthy is quick to point out its pointlessness, even echoing the act’s uselessness in the child’s

questioning: “The boy watched him. What are you doing? he said” (7). Later, when the pair enters the man’s boyhood home, damaged by time and the elements, the house barely resembles the home the man once knew. When the boy, afraid of the house, insists, “We should go, Papa,” the man agrees but does not move: “Yes, the man said. But he didnt” (26). Again the pull of memory is too strong to escape despite the futility in remembering. In another scene, the man recalls “the perfect day of his childhood...the day to shape the days upon,” and readers immediately realize that no day to come will ever match the simplicity and grace of the day the man—then a boy himself—spent with his uncle in a rowboat (13). These memories, these reminders of simpler, more bountiful times and now-laughable concerns, have strength in this new world that they never possessed previously because they remain the only link the man has with the life he once knew.

Occasionally, the man’s memory will sneak up on him as it did when he viewed a forest fire, its color “mov[ing] something in him long forgotten” (31). While other times those old notions are too much for the man to bear: “...he would begin to sob uncontrollably, but it wasnt about death. He wasnt sure what it was about, but he thought it was about beauty or about goodness. Things that he’d no longer any way to think about at all” (129-130). Along with goodness and beauty, as the road lengthens and the duo’s hopes dwindle, the man’s desire to remember his own life—memories that only exaggerate his current plight—dies as “he thought about his life but there was no life to think about” (237). Life is the

ever-repeating sameness of the pair's now, and it is pointless to revisit the past as it will not be returning.

As proof of the effects of the disappearance of consumer culture, linguistic meaning and context, and the power or even existence of memories from the new world, McCarthy gives readers the boy. Raised entirely in this new, dead, grey world, the boy shows noticeable and shocking differences from his pre-apocalypse counterparts; even the man points out that “In some other world the child would already have begun to vacate [his father] from his life” (273). The boy reacts benignly to the horrors the pair encounter as such horror is commonplace in *his* world. Death, to the boy, is simply a part of life, of *his* context, and questions such as “Are we going to die?” and “What would you do if I died?” are asked as easily as if the boy were asking the most banal of questions (10-11). When the man is engrossed in an activity that the boy has no frame of reference for—such as repairing a wheel on their cart, using tools long-since made obsolete—he sits quietly absorbing the scene, literally expanding his context: “The boy sat watching everything” (17). Most unsettling is the boy's reaction to the dead that they encounter along their journey. In “[d]esolate country” the father and son enter a barn to find “three bodies hanging from the rafters, dried and dusty,” but rather than frightening the boy, the corpses—likely suicides—do not register as out of the ordinary, and the boy's simple comment is that “There could be something here [to eat]” (17). It is the man who decides they should leave the gory sight behind them. To the boy, the mummified dead they regularly encounter are simply a part of the landscape. His father's impressions,

his father's fears and many of the things his father finds horrifying are commonalities, and in this way, there is further misunderstanding, miscommunication between them. The man cannot inhabit his son's world, cannot see through his son's eyes, cannot unlearn his own old world's context, cannot fully grasp his son's world, and cannot share his son's language and understanding.

Even his mother's disappearance seemingly does not upset him: "In the morning, the boy said nothing at all and when they were packed and ready to set out upon the road he turned and looked back at their campsite and he said: She's gone isn't she? And he said: Yes, she is" (58). Further discussion—additional language—cannot bring her back, and in this new world, it is futile to discuss the situation further as hope is both dangerous and easily extinguished. The boy understands. The man is the one who has difficulty. This is further displayed each time the boy grows angry with his father and, in every instance, resorts to the silent treatment, refusing to speak. What can be expressed in language that would be clearer than the horror and inevitability of their day-to-day lives? What context exists outside of this one? Whereas the father languishes in memory and language, the boy simply accepts. In this way, the boy understands much better than his father, his lack of reference a gift rather than detriment.

But as with the man's occasional use of memory and language to balm the wounds they suffer, the book's ending contains an example of the boy—perhaps echoing the actions of his father—using language to cope, this time with his father's death. The morning the boy finds his father dead, the boy "knelt beside

his father and held his cold hand and said his name over and over again” (281). Thoreen states that the father uses language in the text to “accrue positive meanings” and in this penultimate scene, the boy says his father’s name (unknown to the reader) repeatedly over his corpse and “conclusively connects signifier to signified, linguistically (and philosophically and theologically) diminishing the power of death...rais[ing] the value of human life to a realm separate from and beyond that of objects” (23). The boy, like his father, is using language to give life to an invisible positive in order to find strength in a tragic situation. In this way, perhaps the reader glimpses the evidence that the father’s plan has indeed worked, that a seed has indeed been planted. Before his death, he was able to instill in his son the necessary worldview and language-based coping mechanisms to ensure the boy’s survival.

McCarthy’s novel is many things. It is a tale of apocalypse, it is a survival story, it is a parable about man’s inhumanity to man, it is a father-son story, it is a tale of how the worst fears of mankind can come true yet some men can retain their humanity and perhaps even pass that humanity on to future generations, it is a heartbreaking tearjerker as well as lyrical and intellectual, and it is a story about how language, memory and the tenuous possessions and beliefs that mankind holds dear are all dangerously fragile. McCarthy is asking mankind to examine its language, its systems of constructing meaning, its adherence to slogans and the empty promises made by consumer culture and find what is true and pure and eternal in the human condition and ourselves because as Rothfork states, “The memories assembled in language constitute the narrative of our identity” (211).

Humankind's sense of self; Humankind's relationship to its world; Humankind's understanding of itself, its world, its families, its god(s) and its meaning are all found in its language. Without the ability to utilize language effectively, Humankind's meaning dies leaving a barren nothingness in its place.

Chapter Two:

“We Were Meaningless”: The Dangerous Ubiquity and Power of Popular Culture
in Douglas Coupland’s *Girlfriend in a Coma*

“The world was never meant to end like in a Hollywood motion picture—you know; a chain of explosions and stars having sex amid the fire and teeth and blood and rubies. That’s all fake shit.” –Douglas Coupland, *Girlfriend in a Coma*

Over the course of his oeuvre, Douglas Coupland has dissected the apocalypse—one time-expired bottle of prescription medication and one canine skeletal remain at a time—in order to de-construct postmodern humankind’s context and reveal its essential building blocks, more often showing the hollow, trivial consumer culture that dominates late twentieth-century North Americans’ systems of meaning-making and context. One example from Coupland’s short story collection, *Life After God*, “The Wrong Sun” contains a section entitled “The Dead Speak” in which five first-person narrators each explain with minute detail their final few seconds before dying in an explosive apocalyptic event. The story is truly less plot-driven narrative than meticulous cataloging of the items people surround themselves with and which would vanish along with them. Throughout the five vignettes, the dying protagonists watch “color bars with a piercing tone...a news anchorman...A plastic *Simpsons* cup...Post-it notes...pyramid[s] of Vidal Sassoon shampoo plastic bottles...yellow Corvette[s]...Mazda Miata[s]...Acura Legend[s]...shoes and tables and coffee

machines and sweaters...dust and clothing and chocolate chip cookies and price tags...IBM[s]...Xerox [machines]...[and] Liquid Paper” melt, collide and fall on top of them as their world comes to an end (115-126). Even in their final, confusing, terrifying moments, these characters do not fail to mention brand names and take note of the details of the popular culture surrounding them as the dying are inescapably linked to this cultural debris. The things these narrators have bought are dying and disappearing along with them as the narrators’ *stuff* is a large part of their identities, of what makes them who and what they are in postmodern North America.

Coupland’s eye for popular, low-cultural artifacts, images and human-made constructions and their role in the apocalypse continues in his novel *Girlfriend in a Coma*, a “theologically charged [novel] marked by a wrestling not only with the pervasive fear of extinction, but more distinctively, with the promise of apocalypse as revelation” (Tate 154). Early in the novel, its teenage protagonist and title character, Karen McNeil, attempts to describe to her boyfriend a troubling and vivid vision of a postapocalyptic future she experienced the previous night: “I could see us—we weren’t being tortured or anything—we were all still alive and all...*older*...middle-aged or something, but... ‘meaning’ had vanished. And yet we didn’t know it. We were meaningless” (12). And with this glimpse of a meaningless future, one in which only she “knew what was missing, but...didn’t know what [she] could do about it,” Coupland begins establishing his vision of apocalypse (12).

In his influential text, *After the End*, James Berger contends that “Apocalyptic writing takes us after the end, shows the signs prefiguring the end, the moment of obliteration, and the aftermath. The writer and readers must be both places at once, imagining the post-apocalyptic world and then paradoxically ‘remembering’ the world as it was, as it is” to which Berger adds that apocalyptic authors, “put forward a total critique of any existing social order” (6-7). Coupland’s works—especially *Girlfriend in a Coma*—achieve all of these criteria with a special focus on those signs prefiguring the end and the process of *remembering* the world as it was in order to *critique*. Coupland is using his defamiliarization (for both the readers *and* his characters) of the postmodern landscape in order to critique and foreground North Americans’ systems of meaning-making which rely heavily on identifying one’s self with one’s possessions and the consumer and popular/celebrity culture by which one is surrounded.

Great chunks of text are dedicated to detailed descriptions of the signs and symptoms of The End, and each example—each dead baggage handler, each now-useless lottery ticket and malfunctioning digital car-dealership sign—carries with it a message about postmodern North Americans’ consumer-culture based context and how humans create tenuous meaning from their possessions and their media. *Girlfriend in a Coma*’s characters—a small group of friends (Pam, Hamilton, Linus, Wendy, Richard and Megan) that surround Karen McNeil—are challenged with the task of making meaning out of a dead Earth, a gruesome and gory postapocalyptic North America (specifically Vancouver) in which “thousands of

years of grandeur and machinery [are] all falling asleep” (5). Yet when the consumer and popular cultures that comprise their setting lose meaning (expire in all senses of the term) the characters find it difficult (if not impossible) to achieve their goal of renewed self-awareness in their meaningless surroundings as their “awareness only leaves them paralyzed, devoid of both energy and agency, until outside forces precipitate their involvement in renewal” (Hollinger 172). Coupland’s protagonists have “[slept] through their lives, seduced by commodities and simulation” so that when their context and their systems of meaning-making are disturbed—when they are left without their simulations and commodities—they cannot adapt or learn to create new meaning, they become intellectually paralyzed (Hollinger 172).

Raised in a North America obsessed with celebrity and consumerism, Coupland’s characters vigorously resist the defamiliarization that is occurring around them rather than attempting to adjust to their new world. As the world disintegrates and the framework of popular culture that the characters have constructed their lives upon begins to show its frailty, the characters attempt to cling to this meaning-making system while readers are allowed to see, through this use of postapocalyptic defamiliarization, the hollow, trivial ways the protagonists have come to define themselves (an analysis which readers can—and will—likely apply to their own lives). Karen and her friends attempt to cobble together artifacts and memories from their time on their preapocalyptic Earth in numerous attempts to recreate the world lost to them. In a postapocalyptic, postconsumer world, one’s existence cannot be so closely tied to one’s lost

preapocalyptic possessions and culture, and these characters find great difficulty in what needs to be their first objective: letting go of the world they knew.

One of Coupland's goals is allowing readers to witness the fragmentation and disintegration of the survivors' pop-culture based context while the characters themselves attempt, however vainly, to keep it from falling apart. Coupland allows readers to see the extent to which late-twentieth century North Americans process their lives through a lens of consumerism and entertainment without realizing it. Coupland achieves this through a radical change of context and the resistance of his characters, who eventually, at the novel's close, fail in their ultimate goal of self-awareness.

In *Apocalyptic Patterns in Twentieth Century Fiction*, David Leigh states that "Narratives with [apocalyptic] thematic elements often contain the following formal traits: visions or dreams by seers or guides, characters in spiritual turmoil...a crisis situation, a sense of ultimate hope, and signs of an end-time" (5). By this definition, *Girlfriend in a Coma* is singularly apocalyptic. *Girlfriend in a Coma* is also a work of science fiction. Briefly summarizing: Teenage girl glimpses future, lapses into decades-long coma, wakes a short time before an apocalyptic event destroys the world, survives along with small band of friends, and leads her friends, along with a ghostly, angelic figure—the "spirit" of a dead high-school friend and the novel's first narrator, who eventually (and somewhat magically) returns Earth to its former state at the novel's close—on a failed journey of self-discovery. While critiquing North Americans' addiction to it, Coupland loves to revel in popular culture. In his article "Massage from the

Dead,” Frederick Vandromme describes Coupland’s love/hate relationship with popular culture thusly: “Coupland, for one thing, loves to parody particular features of the different pulp fiction genres... simply because he appreciates kitsch in all its forms and manifestations. This does not necessarily mean he reads dime novels in the same fashion a kitchen maid would—like Warhol, he knows how to create a new context around the trivia he processes.” So to call *Girlfriend in a Coma* mere science fiction would be misleading. Coupland is in fact toying with the genre in order to create something new, a new context (perhaps even a new science fiction), and a new lens through which habitual consumers can reevaluate and judge their existing contexts and personal definitions.

This pairing of consumer-culture critique and apocalyptic dissection is apt, as Peter Paik points out in *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe*, because “science fiction and fantasy, in particular narratives drawn from media often dismissed as unserious and trivial, such as the comic book and the science fiction film, are capable of achieving profound and probing insights...” (1). Science fiction has always been a method of defamiliarization allowing readers to see their own lives and worlds in atypical ways. In Coupland’s postapocalyptic, sci-fi world, brand names and bits of celebrity culture become as strange and conspicuous as bug-eyed aliens or UFOs (two of the specialties of Karen’s friends who, as adults, work in television special effects). Coupland is definitely probing, opening up the world for readers to see what has always been there yet remained hidden while Coupland’s own characters fail to recognize the relevance.

Early in the novel, Jared, the first narrator and self-proclaimed “ghost,” the postapocalypse guide and conscience for Coupland’s characters, describes (in only one of the novel’s *many* such descriptions) the landscape he is reporting from:

Let me describe the real estate that remains one year after the world ended: It is above all a silent place with no engines or voices or music. Theater screens fray and unravel like overworn shirts. Endless cars and trucks and minivans sit on road shoulders harboring cargoes of rotted skeletons. Homes across the world collapse and fall inward on themselves; pianos, couches and microwaves tumble through floors, exposing money and love notes hidden within the floorboards. Most foods and medicines have time-expired...Suburban streets such as those where I grew up are dissolving inside rangy and shaggy overgrown plants; vines unfurl across roads now undriven by Camaros. Tennis rackets silently unstring inside dark dry closets. Ten million pictures fall from ten million walls; road signs blister and rust. (4-5)

While Coupland’s description of the world after The End continues (on this page and numerous others) and does contain some mentions of nature and weather (it “tends to extremes”), Coupland’s descriptions of postapocalyptic landscapes are primarily interested in showing how humankind’s culture is eroding (or stubbornly resisting erosion and disappearance). Berger notes, “The study of post-apocalypse is a study of what disappears and what remains, and of how the

remainder has been transformed,” and Coupland’s many descriptions are primarily concerned with *humankind*’s remainders and a lack of actual transformation (7). Paik argues that “[m]any works of the [science fiction] genre are after all distinguished by the effort to imagine a fundamentally different world,” yet Coupland seems to suggest that humankind’s footprint is so indelible that even after humankind’s erasure, its context would only slowly disappear (2). Humankind’s era and its indicators live on long after people, even after the extinction of the humans who gave these *things* meaning. In this manner, Coupland’s characters are not unlike humankind’s collective, indelible footprint: They too refuse to change, to abandon their old ways and adapt to this new world. In addition, the dead that Coupland imagines are not buried in caskets; they are instead lying inside steel sarcophaguses along the highways, both of which they built, the corpses further resisting integration into nature or a natural context, resisting disappearance. Even when natural settings are described, Humankind and its products are present, as in this example from one of the characters first apocalyptic visions: “Indian rivers like thick stews, churning corpses and silks oceanward” (125). At other times, Coupland uses his apocalyptic descriptions to juxtapose the human-made and natural in order to illustrate how deeply-ingrained man has made himself within the natural world. Karen (whose extra-sensory visions return after her coma) sees “morning glories growing out of an Ecuador sewer line and entwining onto a human femur” (207). Despite these clues, the characters themselves fail to make the connections between their preapocalyptic

meaning-making systems and their postapocalyptic perceptions and responsibilities.

When Coupland's characters speak, readers are immediately aware that a life-long, encyclopedic knowledge of popular culture is coloring the protagonists' perceptions. In his essay "Ontological Anxiety Made Flesh: The Zombie in Literature, Film and Culture," Kevin Boon lists the different types of zombies popular in fiction, including in his analysis a final category named the "cultural zombie." As cultural zombies are characters which "embody the definition of a zombie, characters who have lost their self-identity or the capacity for volition, yet are not literally the resurrected dead or the technologically-altered living," Coupland's characters unquestionably qualify (40). While one could make a convincing argument proving that Karen and her friends have been—at least in some ways—"technologically altered"—the significance here is the connection between the walking, "living" dead personified in the zombie archetype and its parallels in the lives of *Girlfriend in a Coma*'s protagonists. Boon further describes these "zombies" as "zombies manufactured by culture...product[s] of cultural voodoo" (40). Many of the important events of *Girlfriend in a Coma*—some of them terrifying, others banal—are seen through the lens of consumer, popular culture as if these characters cannot understand an event, a moment, any instance of significance if there is no corollary in film, television or brand-name recognition. Coupland's characters truly are cultural zombies, a walking undead controlled by forces outside of themselves which color their every thought and expression and which they can neither clearly identify nor escape.

In a discussion of Karen's coma, Linus, states that comas are "a byproduct of modern living, with almost no known coma patients existing prior to World War Two. People simply died. Comas are as modern as polyester, jet travel and microchips" (63). Missing from that list are the novel's characters themselves who are also, though they are somewhat unaware of it, byproducts of the same modern times, times which are "characterized by simultaneous overstimulation and numbness, alarm and anesthesia," times they will be unable to differentiate themselves from once the world dies (Stewart, Harding 291). Coupland's characters have great difficulty experiencing their lives without relating nearly every experience to the consumer culture and its images which have dominated their existences. In the movie and television special-effects business, many of Karen's friends' jobs, appropriately enough, largely entail creating simulations: "Their specialties were latex body molds and convincing explosions. Pooling their skills, they helped create aliens, zombies, vampires, Mafia-shot corpses, humans in all stages of decay, mummification, terror and explosion" (89).

As Karen's mother, Lois, visits a local Super-Valu, the nameless plague that ends mankind has already begun taking victims. The infected merely fall asleep wherever they happen to be and peacefully die. When shoppers around Lois begin falling asleep in the aisles, other shoppers panic, some urging Lois to stock up on whatever she can yelling, "If you're smart, you'll do this, too. Whatever's going on is way bigger than any of us" (182). Rather than buying into the hysteria and panic, Lois "has the strange sensation of being back in the 1960s, back when grocery stores had contests where a winner could keep all the food that

could be crammed into a cart within sixty seconds,” adding, “[She] had always wanted to win that particular prize” (183). When Lois herself dies, choosing to lie down in the frozen meat section, a chilly shrink-wrapped package of meat her pillow, her final sleep beginning, “Her upper skull is tingly, and she remembers photographs of Elizabeth Taylor with a bald, scarred head after brain surgery” (184). During a time of apocalyptic panic and death, Lois escapes to memories of celebrities and television game show prizes, the touchstones of her (and perhaps her generation’s) context.

As the world disintegrates quickly and panic becomes the default reaction, Karen’s daughter, Megan (the product of her first teenage sexual experience; born nine months into Karen’s coma), sees “A corner grocery-store owner stand[ing] outside his front door with a sawed-off shotgun, a weapon Megan recognizes from her lifetime of TV viewing” (193). While later, another of the survivors, Hamilton, constantly stoned on a cocktail of drugs, wakes up with a hangover, and “his brain feels like a boxcar full of dying aliens being buried in the desert soil—an image taken from an old episode of Richard’s TV show” (195). One character tells another bathrobed character that he “looks like Bugs Bunny in Palm Springs” (250). Even Coupland’s descriptions (as filtered through his narrators) reflect this trait: the sky “darken[s]...becoming a warm, dead Xerox” and a neighborhood fire burns “like a million Bic lighters held up in the dark at some vast, cosmic Fleetwood Mac concert” (252, 262).

As Jared makes the rounds of his old friends, the survivors, Wendy answers one of Jared’s question in the affirmative by telling him “You win the

Brownie Badge,” while later Megan refers to the spectral Jared as “Casper,” just before another survivor, Pam, tells Jared that his presence is “so *Bewitched*,” while even Jared cannot explain his paranormal duties without “sound[ing] like a I’m a crew chief at McDonald’s or something” (224, 229, 234, 240). Jared’s attempts to further discuss history and time with Linus result in Jared asking Linus to “imagine...postage stamps with spatulas on them because we ran out of anything else to put on stamps” and a “Miss Universe winner in the year 22,788” (237). All of the characters, even a year after the apocalypse, still speak in a language filled with the dead world’s references, resisting the defamiliarization of the world they once knew. As Jared visits each of the survivors independently, giving each survivor a special, miraculous gift, he heals Hamilton of his drug addiction. In order to illustrate his new clarity, Hamilton begins immediately and excitedly listing significant facts he remembers concluding with “August, 1969—American talk show host, Merv Griffin launches his late-night CBS show in direct competition with Johnny Carson. Opening night guests include Woody Allen and Hedy Lamarr, but scheduled athlete Joe Namath is a no-show” (243). Even “cured” and clear-headed, Hamilton remains lost in a pop-culture induced high.

It is notable that the dead immediately are dubbed “sleepers” by the living, an immediate naming, an immediate attempt to classify and perhaps *brand* those affected by the unexplained rampaging death. (Once the collective corpses begin to pollute the air with their stench, the label changes to “leakers.”) Naming and brand-association does not end there. After the apocalyptic death plague, while most of the people surrounding the survivors succumb to panic (“Richard and

Megan drive...past forlorn souls staggering through the landscape firing pistols at the horizon, their faces haggard and failed”) the characters refuse to adapt to their new world in a number of ways (203). As the world is still ending, the sleeper death-toll rising, the first sign that Karen and her friends are resisting the defamiliarization of their world is evidenced as they “scan the radio and watch that CNN tape again,” a tape of newscasts explaining the plague which they obviously have viewed multiple times (199). In another scene, the characters drive to the coast and witness the ocean, which has caught fire. Linus “captures the image on Hi-8” (205). Capturing an event for review is essential to their lives, has been a pattern, presumably, since birth. Reviewing equates reliving, if not regressing then at least not progressing. By repeating, reviewing and reliving events based in popular culture, Coupland’s cultural zombies find themselves metaphorically echoing the shambling zombie ghouls of horror films as Coupland’s zombies are in perpetual but stationary motion, re-living and re-experiencing without ever progressing into new experiences, emotions or ways of understanding. Echoing their television special effects careers, simulation is reality.

A few of the characters lapse into elaborate false personas to resist their realities. Pam and Hamilton, whose drug use only escalates with the end of the world, spend their time pretending to be absurdly wealthy, world-traveling celebrities: “You go first, Barbara Hutton,” Hamilton instructs Pam as they exit a minivan to which Pam exaggeratedly responds, “No Wayyyy, Mr. Hefner. *You* first.” Hamilton’s response: “Pals call me Hef” (213). Later, as the pair join

Richard on a trip to a local supermarket for supplies and see a squirrel in the store, the charade continues:

“Oh look! Look it’s so sweet,” Pam says. “We can take it to Babe Paley’s place in Bermuda for dinner.”

“It’s Jamaica, dear. Who’s on the guest list?”

“Twiggy. The Sex Pistols. Jackson Pollock. Linda Evangelista”

(221)

The pair cannot even begin to face the reality of their actual surroundings and drug abuse and fantasy serve as effective distractions and simulations; they choose to be zombies.

Even one year after the end, the survivors’ resistance to defamiliarization can be seen—is even more evident. The survivors’ days consist of “watching an endless string of videos” surrounded by “Kleenex boxes and margarine tubs overflowing with diamonds and emeralds, rings and gold bullion—a parody of wealth” (211). Despite the meaninglessness of these artifacts and their only tenuous connection to the context of the world they once knew, the characters cannot resist collecting the items. They “have money fights, lobbing and tossing Krugerrands, rubies and thousand-dollar bills at each other” and “make paper airplanes from prints by Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein and shoot them into the fireplace” (211-212). (Krugerrands making another appearance in a postapocalyptic text.) These characters are willing to destroy the remnants of their cultures but even this destruction tips its hat to the preapocalyptic significance of

these items, the destruction itself a rebellious act, but one quite devoid of its would-be significance in the new, postapocalyptic context.

In one of the novel's final scenes, once the characters have been made aware of their failings by Jared, Richard sums up their failures succinctly: "tell me—have we ever really gotten together and wished for wisdom or faith to come from the world's collapse? No. Instead we got into a tizzy because some Leaker forgot to return the *Godfather III* tapes to Blockbuster Video the day of the sleep and now we can't watch it" (258). Even at the novel's climax, as Jared explains their failures to the survivors and what it will mean for their futures, the references come. As Jared tells those assembled "You've all been allowed to see what you're lives would be like in the absence of the world," Pam replies, "This is like that Christmas movie...the one they used to play too many times each December and it kind of wore you down by the eighteenth showing" (255). Similarly, Linus experiences Jared's speech and its accompanying shooting-stars sky show—a moment that should be fraught with self-reflection, wonder and awe—with the comment, "Look at the sky...This is so *Day of the Triffids*" (266). For each example cited here there are likely ten more within the text proving that what constitutes knowledge and memory—basic frames of reference—largely returns to vapid, shallow popular culture for these characters. Rather than examine their inner lives, their reactions to the apocalypse, the characters stubbornly clung to hollow memories and cultural associations, and that is why they never progress and eventually fail.

Coupland's novel and its science fiction-based postapocalyptic defamiliarizations achieve a twofold purpose: The novel propels readers to reconfigure their own perceptions and beliefs about both their personal identities and their pop culture-saturated society as well as revealing the dangers of being unable to disconnect one's self from one's commodities, possessions, celebrities and pervasive cultural images. Coupland plays with popular culture revealing both a clear and unashamed love of it and a simultaneous fear of its ubiquity and power, of the way popular culture seems to have simply become culture, become attitude, become *belief* for many postmodern North Americans. However, Coupland quickly points out that unplugging one's self from such a frame of reference, such realization and application is never easy. Coupland's characters fail because they cannot jettison their preapocalyptic settings, yet their futures, their new responsibilities as cultural deconstructors—their only hope of returning to the world as they knew it—likely sounds equally terrifying for most readers. Jared tells them he will return them to the Earth they knew, but they must:

Ask questions, no, *screech* questions out loud—while kneeling in the front of electric doors at Safeway, demanding other citizens ask questions along with you—chewing up old textbooks and spitting the words onto downtown sidewalks—outside Planet Hollywood, outside the stock exchange, and outside the Gap... You're going to be forever homesick, walking through a cold railway station until the end, whispering strange ideas about existence into the ears of children... You'll be mistaken for crazies. You may well end up

foaming at the mouth in a central Canadian drug clinic, Magic-Markering ideas onto your thighs which are bony from scouring the land on foot. (272, 273)

Failure to follow these terrifying directions will land the survivors back in their postapocalyptic Earth with no hope for another second chance. As the novel ends (and Karen realizes what she has repressed all along: that she must return to her coma), Coupland's characters as well as his readers realize just what a colossal task they have been handed.

Chapter Three:

The Zombie Movie That Never Ends: New Ways to
Understand the Postapocalyptic World in Robert Kirkman's

The Walking Dead

In recent years, zombie stories—tales of the recently deceased mindlessly returning to life for the sole purpose of feasting on the flesh of the living—have proliferated wildly in popular culture, from novels (and faux-nonfiction) to films to serialized television shows and even to car commercials (advertisements for the 2011 Ford Fiesta include prospective car buyers outrunning the growling flesh-eaters). Although zombie tales have existed for centuries in myth and folklore, it is widely accepted that George Romero's 1968 film, *Night of the Living Dead*, signified a rebirth and reboot of the zombie genre. Romero's ghouls were cannibalistic metaphors for contemporary social ills. In "The Zombie as Barometer of Cultural Anxiety," Peter Dendle explains how "*Night [of the Living Dead]* has been commonly read...as encoding such issues as racial tension, Vietnam-era military critique, and nuclear age anxiety" (50). Subsequent Romero films, such as *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Day of the Dead* (1985), utilized Romero's new zombie framework to address issues ranging from rampant, mindless consumerism (utilizing one of Douglas Coupland's favorite settings: a suburban shopping mall) to the dangers of brute militaristic solutions to societal ills versus calm, rational, scientifically-researched solutions. In the words of *Time* magazine's Lev Grossman, "[Contemporary zombies] seem to be telling us something about the zeitgeist" (61). In short, the zombie in popular culture can be

distinctly divided into pre- and post-Romero categories; Romero's and Romeroesque zombie stories are inherently frontloaded with some kind of contemporary, socially-relevant, apocalyptic subtext.

In a post-9/11 world, zombie narratives became even more prevalent. As American society collectively began to view potential apocalypse scenarios as more and more possible and probable, the conventions of zombie films felt increasingly appropriate for the social climate. In "Dead Man *Still* Walking: Explaining the Zombie Renaissance," Kyle Bishop states, "The fundamental genre conventions of zombie cinema fit post 9/11 cultural consciousness well...zombie movies graphically represented the inescapable realities of unnatural death (via infection, infestation, or violence) and presented a grim view of a modern apocalypse in which society's infrastructure breaks down" (17-18). Additionally, in his article "Exquisite Corpses," James Poniewozik states, "zombies [are] an ideal metaphor...for our nightmares du jour: pandemics; decentralized terrorism; the collapse of social, financial and ecological systems [as zombies] are viruses, really—leaderless networks, organized on no other principle than destruction, multiplying exponentially until they burn themselves out, taking us with them" (72). As opposed to other kinds of apocalyptic and postapocalyptic tales with singular explanations for their pandemics and destruction (disease, environmental neglect, war), zombie narratives allow viewers to contemplate and cope with their fears of apocalypse as well as confront a variety of apocalyptic scenarios in one sitting.

Films are not the only place to find a zombie revival, though. Taking cues from film, the world of comic books and graphic novels has also seen its share of recent zombie titles. Many of these titles, like many of the low-budget, straight-to-video zombie film titles made in recent years, are concerned more with gore and splatter than storyline, but one title, Robert Kirkman's ongoing, serialized postapocalyptic survival tale, *The Walking Dead*, has taken its cues from Romero. Kirkman's narrative uses the graphic fiction form to explore how individuals rebuild and reconsider society and how those stranded in a postapocalyptic landscape would retain their humanity and social order in the face of unthinkable choices and unimaginable horrors. When asked by *The Comics Journal* about the series' protagonist, Rick Grimes, Kirkman stated, "One of the things I wanted to show with Rick is how far people can go and what limits they can be pushed to and how much they can change over time" (Abrams 83). This analysis of one character could easily be applied to the series as a whole as Kirkman places his impermanent collective of characters in situation after situation in which the old world's systems of understanding, law and morality must be reconsidered and, in some cases, abandoned and rewritten.

In contrast to Douglas Coupland's stagnating apocalypse survivors, Kirkman's characters learn the necessity of changing and adapting, sometimes rapidly and even violently, many times throughout the narrative. And like Cormac McCarthy's father and son, *The Walking Dead's* survivors quickly learn that a new language and new ways of understanding must be devised in order to communicate in this new world. Kirkman has explained that his goal was to write

“a zombie movie that never ends” (Abrams 82). Kirkman’s frustration with zombie films in general was their lack of closure or their unrealistically hopeful endings. To remedy this closure dilemma, Kirkman states that *The Walking Dead* “[will keep] going forever or until everybody dies off. I just wanted to explore a natural progression of events in that type of society” (Abrams 82). If Kirkman’s title continues to be successful, then *The Walking Dead* will likely offer a narrative examination of postapocalyptic survival and events that will eclipse in scope many other apocalyptic tales.

In his influential apocalyptic text, *After the End*, James Berger states, “In many science fiction post-apocalypses, what survives is some version of humanity in the midst of the inhuman. Humanity in its essence—such is their claim—is what these apocalypses unveil” (10). This statement is acutely appropriate considering what Kirkman is attempting to accomplish with *The Walking Dead*, an examination of humanity—of what would survive that is uniquely and inherently human, of what qualifies as and defines human beings as “human” and how far that definition can be stretched before it breaks—in the midst of, quite literally, the inhuman. (Note: While *The Walking Dead* is currently the work of five individuals including Kirkman, two artists, a letterer and an editor, for the purposes of this examination, the text will be referred to as Kirkman’s as he is the author and originator of the series and its plot, and the focus of this analysis will predominantly be the series’ storyline as opposed to its visual artistic style.)

While some graphic novels and graphic novelists have been elevated to more respectable significance in artistic communities in recent years (due to the

work of authors such as Art Spiegelman, Chris Ware, Dan Clowes and Marjane Satrapi, among many others), the monthly, serialized comic book is still seen as something lesser than art, something juvenile and puerile, something common and, in every definition of the word, vulgar. In some cases, this evaluation is still apropos, but Kirkman's comic, in its attempts to catalog and examine human nature, relationships and complex issues of morality and survival—despite its occasional missteps—elevates itself above the stereotype commonly associated with a number of the slim periodicals found at most comic book stores. In his 2007 review of the first forty issues of the series, Josue Aristides Diaz comments on the attempts *The Walking Dead* makes to be socially realistic and relevant. Diaz notes that the zombies are depicted “‘realistically,’ [as the artists choose] to represent the different levels of class, culture and ethnicity within the undead community,” adding that the comic's creators', “attention to ethnic diversity adds to the social realism of the work and complicates character relationships” (262). The series is clearly not just another gore-filled horror fantasy existing solely to disgust or excite readers. (Another note: *The Walking Dead* is a serialized, monthly comic book, and as this analysis is written, the series is on issue 78. My examination for the purposes of this paper will be written using the hardcover collections of the series which each include one year of issues, twelve total, in one volume, or two “trade paperbacks” per volume, and I will identify key scenes and quotations with their trade paperback titles as chapter titles.)

It is evident early in *The Walking Dead*, in the series' first issue in the chapter “Days Gone Bye,” that many characters believe the zombie apocalypse—

which is not outlined in the text, the protagonist having woken from a coma in the first issue to an already postapocalyptic world—will be temporary. Returning to his abandoned home, Rick tells a squatter in his neighbor's house that his neighbors, the Thompsons, "will probably thank you when they get back" (Kirkman). When Rick, a police officer before the outbreak, takes the squatter, Morgan Jones, to the equally-abandoned police station to stock up on supplies (mostly guns) and gives Morgan one of the remaining police cars, this sentiment is again echoed. Rick tells Morgan, "When things get back to normal...you'll have to give it back...so try not to bang it up or put too many miles on it" (Kirkman). Clearly, Rick does not believe—or does not want to believe—that the destruction and death around him represent a permanent change, that the apocalypse is actually apocalyptic, and the fact that he dresses himself in his old, now-meaningless police uniform again shows readers that Rick is still functioning under assumptions and definitions of his preapocalyptic world (or at least hoping other survivors are).

After a nearly-deadly search through zombie-infested Atlanta, Georgia, Rick finds his wife and child surviving in a make-shift camp outside of the city. A scene involving laundry detergent shows how quickly the group has had to give up modern conveniences as Lori and another camper, Donna, get into an argument brought about by Lori's excitement for clean clothes. Donna questions how Lori can even think about detergent in their situation, and Lori replies, "I'm just looking forward to the possibility of clean smelling clothes" (Kirkman). The possibility of normalcy, of living in a world like the one they have recently lost, is

still in the forefront of Kirkman's characters' minds; rebuilding a new civilization with new rules and new ideas of "comfort" and "normalcy" are not yet a consideration, at least not one spoken out loud.

Another member of the group, Rick's friend and former fellow police officer, Shane, is the most insistent that this zombie apocalypse is only temporary, refusing to relocate their camp—even after a zombie attack—because, he believes (his hostility and denial obvious; his character usually drawn scowling, spitting, grimacing and angry-eyed), when the plague is over "[The government will] have to start with the cities...they'll find us faster if we stay here...This is the best place to be for a rescue" (Kirkman). Once camp is uprooted and the collective begins to move beginning in the chapter entitled "Miles Behind Us," a multi-issue story arc involving a farmer and his family again depicts Kirkman's seeming belief that many survivors would have difficulty accepting the finality of the zombie apocalypse, despite the obvious indicators.

Hershel, a farmer surviving with his family in their farmhouse, allows Rick's group to rest on his land, but complications arise when it is discovered that Hershel keeps those of his family and neighbors that have become zombies in a barn on his property. Rick asks if some of his group (as Rick has now assumed a leadership role, more by default) can stay in the barn, but Hershel's response, "You don't want to go in there. Trust me," is ominous; Hershel admits "That's where we keep all our dead ones" (Kirkman). Rick is enraged and points out the danger of not terminating those infected. Hershel's response is typical of those unwilling to face the facts of this new postapocalyptic world: "Yeah, we're

keeping them in the barn until we can figure out a way to *help* them. What have *you* been doing with them,” adding later in the argument, echoing Shane’s earlier denial, “For all we know these things could wake up tomorrow, heal up, and be completely normal again” (Kirkman). Hershel’s decision results in additional deaths and near catastrophe. Despite the overwhelming evidence to suggest that all social order has broken down, and regardless of the horrifying, decayed and savagely mutilated condition of many of those infected, many characters cannot face the probability of global, irreversible apocalypse although survival in this postapocalyptic landscape, as in many postapocalyptic texts (especially in McCarthy’s and Coupland’s as well), requires exactly that willingness to adapt and abandon.

As in other postapocalyptic texts, the survivors of *The Walking Dead* have inherited a new world, one that looks very similar to their previous, preapocalyptic world, but one in which their personal and collective contexts have undergone violent change and are in need of reevaluation and renewed understanding. This process of re-understanding is integral to a character’s adaptation and survival in a postapocalyptic text. As with many apocalyptic texts, one of the first signs that adaptation is occurring is naming. *The Walking Dead*’s survivors gradually begin calling the walking corpses “roamers” (calling to mind Coupland’s “sleepers” and “leakers”), and it becomes common usage among the core group as they try to make sense of the animated dead slowly and awkwardly hunting them. A meeting with another group of survivors—a man named Tyreese, his teenage daughter and her boyfriend—necessitates an explanation of this

idiom. When Rick casually employs the term, Tyreese questions him, and Rick explains, “When we were camped near Atlanta, we went into the city...most of the zombies just sat around, not doing anything unless provoked...then our camp was attacked...so I gotta think that there are other kinds of zombies that roam around, always on the move” (Kirkman). Rick is attempting to bring order and make sense of his new world by creating a new shared vocabulary, a step toward a new understanding.

Another sign of renewed understanding, reevaluation and acceptance is considering how the young and unborn will view the postapocalyptic world. When Lori discusses her pregnancy with Rick (a child that likely is not his, an unspoken conflict between the two), Rick realizes his unborn child and his young son will likely only remember this zombie-filled landscape: “He’ll never know what it’s like to get his driver’s license, or go see a movie with a girl” (Kirkman). This sentiment echoes many of the father’s thoughts in *The Road*, each of his dead-world referents useless when relating to his son, a product of the new world. In the character of Rick, early in *The Walking Dead*, perhaps readers can see what the character of the father from McCarthy’s novel might have been like in the years leading up to the beginning of McCarthy’s text which, despite flashbacks, is set nearly a decade after the apocalypse. Even this exchange between Rick and Lori and its seeming acceptance of the apocalypse ends with an exchange in which Lori asks Rick, “Do you think we’ll ever be able to fix everything,” to which Rick replies, “I don’t know. I hope so” (Kirkman). Despite being given a new way of understanding this new world, the understanding itself takes time and

effort and letting go of the lost world proves difficult. (Kirkman has admitted many times in many venues that he has not read and will not read *The Road* until *The Walking Dead* reaches its conclusion as he has been told of the narrative similarities between the two tales and he fears unintentional creative contamination.)

By the second year of the comic (still the first postapocalyptic year for the survivors), in the “Safety Behind Bars” chapter, the group has settled into a nearly-abandoned prison (four inmates remain). Rick’s explanation of the situation outside of the prison to the inmates remaining shows more of a willingness to see things as they are: “It’s bad—near as we can tell anyway. From the looks of it, our government has crumbled. There’s no communication, no organization, no resistance...it appears civilization is pretty well screwed” (Kirkman). Another sign of the acceptance of their situation is the sliding scale now employed when discussing better living conditions than those of the survivors. Dale, one of the core group from the original campsite, questions the security of their prison shelter, adding, “Makes me wonder if there isn’t a clan of laid back people like ourselves lounging about in a Wal-Mart living off pork and beans—playing cards all day” (Kirkman). To Dale, this minimal existence squatting in a neglected retail store is the new life of luxury, a simpler life of readily-available food and basic recreation.

Once enough time has passed, the prison becomes a stable living environment (even Hershel joining the group to begin practicing limited agriculture), and safety is a much lessened concern. Readers can see the group

reconsidering their situations and rediscovering, in part, their humanity in the chapter entitled “The Heart’s Desire.” As the prison is surrounded by two parallel fences, the survivors are relatively safe, but scores of zombies surround their shelter daily. Returning the vacant gaze of the ghouls, one survivor and former inmate, Axel, reveals that he, “think[s] about them all the time. Who they were—what they did before they died...I think about what jobs they had or if they had any family, and if so, where they went or what happened to them...I mean, those things all used to be people” (Kirkman). The ability to see the zombies as sympathetic beings rather than malevolent monsters exposes the long-dormant empathy living within the survivors and reveals that new ways of understanding their fate and this postapocalyptic world are beginning.

The second year of the comic begins with optimism, with the aforementioned contradictory yet hopeful title “Safety Behind Bars,” and with numerous characters commenting that a “new life” could be made at the prison (a sadly recurring and repeatedly untrue theme each time a new, supposedly safe location is found throughout the series). Despite the optimism though, the year of issues ends with realizations that everything from casual conversation (Lori points out that, “we have these small talk questions. Questions that just don’t work anymore” when trying to get to know another survivor, Michonne) to their hopes of rescue (Rick shouts, “They’re not coming!! Think about it!! It’s been almost a year!! We’re on our own—it’s just us and this place... *We* are the walking dead”) are in dire need of reconsideration (Kirkman).

As the survivors realize that safety and normalcy are two ideas they may have to reconsider and possibly abandon, characters find their own ways of coping. Most noticeably during the third volume of the comic (roughly one postapocalyptic year into the story), in the chapter entitled “The Best Defense,” Rick, arguably the character under the most mental duress, begins a series of conversations with those of their congregation whom have died. Rick is first seen doing this at the grave of the recently killed Allen, another member of the core, original group. After Rick asks for a few minutes to himself once Allen is buried, Dale asks those who remain, “Where’s he going?” to which Tyreese rhetorically, sarcastically answers, “Where to you *think*?” (Kirkman). During Rick’s “talk” with Allen, he states, “And I enjoy these talks, even though they probably go a long way to keep people thinking I’m crazy” (Kirkman). Rick is choosing to have these graveside “conversations” with Allen because he can express fears and emotions he is not comfortable presenting to the larger group, and Rick is aware of the reality of his “conversations”; the therapeutic effect is more simply cathartic as Rick is not, obviously, expecting a response, and under the current conditions, the group raises no true objection to Rick’s behavior despite his leadership role.

In the fifth volume of the series (the story having progressed only a few months at best), in the chapter “Here We Remain,” once the prison has been overrun by another group of survivors led by a murderous madman known as “The General,” a conflict in which Rick’s wife and baby daughter are murdered, Rick again takes to talking to the dead, but now his decision seems less voluntary

and more troubling. As the group is splintered by The General's group's attack and Rick and his son Carl find themselves alone, negotiating the zombie-filled landscape, they temporarily settle into an abandoned home. During a scavenging trip out of the house, Rick hears a sound that sends him running to the house and yells, "Did you hear that? Get inside—*hurry!*...Oh god---hurry, hurry, hurry!" (Kirkman). It is noticeable that there are no sound balloons to indicate readers should also be "hearing" the sounds Rick is experiencing, and Carl's confused "What is it?" seems to indicate he does not hear the sound either. The "sound" is a ringing phone on which Rick speaks with an unidentified female survivor over the course of a number of days. After a number of hopeful conversations, the caller's identity is revealed after Rick asks for her name. Her response, "Rick...it's me. It's Lori," shatters the otherwise (relatively) joyful Rick. As the voice on the line explains to Rick that he is not to blame for his wife and daughter's deaths (an internal struggle Rick has faced since the prison conflict), Rick asks, "Is this real?" The response is the final nail in the coffin of Rick's resolve, and he breaks into tears: "Don't be silly, Rick. Of course it isn't" (Kirkman). As Rick packs up the pair's meager belongings, realizing he and Carl need to keep moving in order to survive, lying to Carl about the voice on the phone, Rick tells Carl, "I'll be right back," and secretly returns to retrieve the telephone (Kirkman). Despite knowing that his conversations with his deceased wife were in fact hallucinations, Rick found genuine comfort in speaking with her and foresees a time when he may need "her" again. (A parallel can be seen between Rick's actions and *The Road*'s father, "pick[ing] up the phone and dial[ing] the number of his father's

house in that long ago.”) Throughout a number of issues to come, Rick can be seen occasionally taking out the telephone to help him negotiate the painful, terrifying realities of life in this postapocalyptic landscape, though readers are left to consider for themselves whether Rick’s actions represent insanity or merely a necessary yet idiosyncratic postapocalyptic coping mechanism as Rick, initially, keeps the telephone and his brief, furtive conversations secret.

The messages Rick receives from the phone change in tone as in volume six of the series, in the “Fear the Hunters” chapter, when Rick, on an overnight zombie-watch shift, picks up the receiver to hear Lori’s voice state, “We should talk about Carl” (Kirkman). Rick, at this point in the text, has been consciously avoiding a number of difficult topics concerning his son, primarily that his son, unbeknownst to (most of) the other survivors, killed one of the survivor’s children in an act of self-defense (or *proactive* self-defense). Not unlike the boy in *The Road* who shows little response to hanging corpses beyond curiosity and who sees the savagery of his world as commonplace (even though occasionally terrifying), readers of *The Walking Dead* can see Carl as the indication of what the first postapocalyptic generation will look like. Rick and Carl do not get to discuss the killing until much later in the series, but in the “Life Among Them,” chapter in Book Six, Carl finally admits to Rick why he murdered the boy, Ben (who had murdered his own brother, Billy). When Rick asks, “Why did you kill Ben?” Carl responds, “Why? You know why. Same reason you have to do everything. Because it needed to be done. And because no one else would” (Kirkman). Carl understands the gravity of what he has done, telling Rick that he misses Ben and

that, “I cry every night...I know what I did was wrong,” but as a child being raised in this postapocalyptic world, he also realizes some very difficult choices need to be made in order to survive, and that in order to be like his father—a strong leader—he may have to make such choices. Readers can begin to see parallels between McCarthy and Kirkman’s child characters. Similarly, Rick’s resistance to “Lori’s” message that the situation needs examination is similar to the father in *The Road* who struggles to find ways to understand his own son.

“Lori’s” voice on the phone eventually changes from comforting to instigating. In an effort to calm another survivor—Michonne, who has been holding solitary conversations throughout her appearance in the series and finally admits to Rick that she is talking to her dead boyfriend—Rick shows her his phone. Rick explains, “If I picked up this receiver—my wife would be talking to me on the other end. I would hear her...I know she’s only saying what I think she would say, but it seems like I’m really talking to her...even though I *know* it’s not really her” (Kirkman). The exchange ends pleasantly with Michonne smiling and stating, “So we’re *both* crazy,” and Rick adding, “I won’t tell if you don’t” (Kirkman). What would have sounded like insanity before the zombie apocalypse—what seemed dangerously and shocking when only readers knew of Rick’s secret—is now the new “normal”; whatever allows a survivor to continue surviving—as long as he or she is not harming someone else—is perfectly acceptable, perhaps encouraged. Eventually, Rick realizes that perhaps this particular coping mechanism, though effective, is probably (even for this world) a

bit maladaptive, telling the voice on the phone, “I think I need to stop doing this” (Kirkman).

Throughout the series, characters have epiphanies, large and small, about their new, postapocalyptic world. Many such realizations occur in the “The Best Defense” chapter as the characters settle into their prison-life routines. In one exchange, Axel and Tyreese discuss the absurdity of their prison lives. Tyreese comments that, “It’s a new world, man...We’re sleeping in rooms with bars on one wall. All we see all day is fences and bars and we’re happier than we’ve been since this whole shit started” (Kirkman). Axel, a prison inmate when the apocalypse occurred, replies, “I was never out there. I was never in danger, hunted, terrorized by those things. I was in here before they came to life and started killing people...So yeah—it’s a new world, but God help me...I like this world better” alluding, at least in part, to the humanity, sympathy and community that has existed between the survivors in the prison (Kirkman).

An exchange between Lori and Hershel in the same chapter reveals another moment of clarity and defamiliarization as Lori attempts to justify her constant anxiety, asking “Am I making any sense?” to which Hershel replies, “I don’t know...the world ain’t exactly full of things that make sense anymore now is it?...Maybe we were just fooling ourselves until something happened that was big enough to make us stop and realize how crazy our world really is” (Kirkman). The chapter closes with Rick’s matter-of-fact declaration to Lori, “I killed a man today,” referring to a man who was about to place the collective in danger by revealing their shelter to The General. Rick continues, “Killing him made me

realize something—made me notice how much I’ve changed. I used to be a trained police officer...now I feel more like a lawless savage...I killed a man today and I don’t even care” (Kirkman). In this scene, readers see a continued theme in *The Walking Dead*: How does one exist in a violent, lawless world yet still retain one’s humanity and some sense of order? These epiphanies all represent, on one level or another, the survivors’ attempts to make some kind of logical sense of their illogical, terrifying surroundings in order to survive, their attempts at new understandings, though with each subsequent awareness, there are more difficult, unanswerable questions to face.

In the series’ fifth collected volume and 10th chapter, “What We Become,” these questions and Rick’s complicated internal struggles are again revisited. A new member of the group, Abraham, accompanies Rick and Carl on a three-person mission to attempt to rescue the squatter from chapter one, Morgan Jones. Along their way, the three are attacked by three murderous survivors who threaten to rape and kill Rick’s son, Carl. In one of the series’ more violent and troubling episodes, Rick manages to break free of his captor and attacks (at this point in the text, Rick has lost a hand and is at a disadvantage in a hand-to-hand fight), literally taking a large, bloody bite out of one of the attackers’ necks, a very zombie attack-like series of images that perhaps is meant to reveal how truly similar the survivors are to the walking corpses. When Rick finally gets a hold of the final attacker, the action only appears on the page as a series of repeated “Shukk!” sound effects to indicate stabbing while the images on the page zoom in on Carl’s cold, emotionless face as he watches his father mutilate the man, readers

witnessing again how this world has already deadened and numbed Carl to its violent and gory realities, the first postapocalyptic generation's worldview being further formed.

The following morning, Abraham tells Rick, "You don't just come back from something like that... You don't rip a man apart—hold his insides in your hand—you can't go back to being dear old dad after that... Not after what you did" (Kirkman). Rick responds, "You can fake it... This isn't the first thing to chip away at my soul until I wonder if I'm still human... My son is all I have... I don't know what I wouldn't do to protect him. Sometimes that scares me... but it doesn't make it any less true" (Kirkman). This admission by Rick leads to a tearful confession by Abraham, as he describes how he lost his family after mutilating a number of men who raped his daughters. When Rick reassures Abraham that Abraham only did what was necessary considering the situation, Abraham responds, "No. I did what I *wanted* to do," admitting that in a lawless world without consequences, he allowed himself to act on his hateful revenge fantasies, in essence becoming judge, jury and executioner without much fear of reprisal. In the end, Abraham's family leaves him, terrified at what they saw him do in their defense, only to die at the hands of the undead. Both men want to protect their children, to keep them from the realities of this new world, but as Carl has already illustrated, such sheltering will not be possible.

Abraham continues and admits that he also murdered three men attempting to steal his group's food adding, "I can't get over how *easy* it as. How much it didn't *upset* me" (Kirkman). Rick has the final word, stating, "We do

what we have to do. It doesn't matter if we can live with ourselves...as long as we *live*" (Kirkman). When the men find Morgan and Abraham questions his sanity due to the fact that Morgan keeps his now-zombified son chained up in the house he is staying in, Rick defends Morgan, saying, "We do terrible things for the ones we love" (Kirkman). Despite establishing a general rule of "We do not kill! We do not tolerate it. We will not allow it. That is our rule—our pledge. YOU KILL. YOU DIE" in book two's "Safety Behind Bars" chapter, Rick now sees that his earlier beliefs were naïve and based on preapocalyptic laws and understandings. Now, seven chapters later, Rick realizes that in his new world, murders will be necessary and perhaps even commonplace as the rules of survival are only as dependable and moral as the worst among the survivors they encounter. (And his son realizes this as well.)

Terrible things will be required to exist in this terrible reality.

The Walking Dead's ongoing narrative explores this terrible "reality" and its requirements. Kirkman's characters continually must reevaluate their beliefs, relationships, context, language and personal definitions in order to survive from day to day. In this way, perhaps they are the most successful of the three groups of characters examined in this thesis. Like McCarthy's narrative, there is a new language that must be built, but unlike McCarthy's father, Kirkman's characters—though sometimes unsuccessfully—realize and attempt to write this language. Kirkman's characters understand the need for reevaluation and jettisoning their previously-held beliefs, regardless of how dearly they are held. Unlike Coupland's characters, Kirkman's survivors are also willing to leave

behind the unnecessary, disposable and detrimental in their ultimate goal of survival and (hopefully) some kind of rebirth and renewal. They realize, unlike Karen and her *Girlfriend in Coma* friends, that they have been handed a task and that if they fail, they will not exist.

Conclusion:

Before the End

Maybe the importance of postapocalyptic texts lies in their ability to persuade readers to reconsider their own systems of meaning-making, to prod readers to recalibrate the methods by which they *decide* to assign value to elements of their lives. Whereas physical survival would undoubtedly be a constant concern for a survivor of an apocalypse similar to any of those in the three texts examined herein, these particular postapocalyptic texts seem to suggest (among *many* other things) that the way people define their lives—the ways individuals use language to identify as well as decode their surroundings—has a direct effect on the *quality* of their survival and their lives “postapocalyptically.”

Considering again that an apocalypse is, by one definition, “a crisis marked by revelation, an unveiling and/or disclosure,” any awareness that ends obsolete ways of thinking and causes revelation or puts an end to previous misconceptions—even an individual’s personal revelation—readers can begin to put the lessons of these texts into practice *before* the corpse armies begin hunting, before Patient Zero forgets to cover his mouth when he coughs, or before that blinding flash of white light obliterates humankind’s fragile landscape. Perhaps the lessons of these texts can lead readers to such revelations and personal apocalypses as tools for an increased understanding of how and why it is essential that individuals begin to live lives full of selective and carefully-considered meaning, value and purpose.

Maybe humankind cannot stop the world from ending if it truly wants to end, but perhaps people can decide what to “take with them,” linguistically and metaphorically. McCarthy’s father character in *The Road* tells his son, “Just remember that the things you put into your head are there forever... You might want to think about that” (12). Considering this warning, perhaps readers should see these postapocalyptic works as a collective call to be careful and discerning with what they “put into” their heads, about how they assign value, about how they use language, and about they live their lives *before* the end.

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