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## **THEY'RE HEADING WEST: (POST) APOCALYPTIC VISIONS ON THE ROAD**

### **Abstract**

'Hitting the road' has always been a significant act in the American culture, since it represents the opportunity for a new life. In most road movies, the road is often depicted either in a positive way or, in contrast, as the escape route for outlaws. Nevertheless, the road can similarly represent a place of violence and destruction, functioning 'either as a utopian fantasy of homogeneity and national coherence, or as a dystopic nightmare' (Cohan and Hark 1997: 3). The aim of this article is to analyze (post) apocalyptic *road movies* as critical dystopian narratives that present a horrific future while simultaneously functioning as a metaphor for the present, by pointing to dreadful, but possible alternative realities that, nonetheless, are not devoid of hope.

**Key words:** Journey, road movies, (post) apocalyptic cinema, Sci-fi.

## 1. (Apocalyptic) visions on the road

“The whole world’s coming to an end, Mal...”

– Mickey Knox in *Natural Born Killers*

“We blew it” – Billy in *Easy Rider*

In the American culture, more than in any other culture, the road plays a symbolic role, especially due to its connection with motion pictures and automobiles, resulting in a particular cinematic genre: road movies. The idea of the road as place of opportunities, adventure and mobility, as popularized by Jack Kerouac’s novel *On the Road* (1957) and immortalized in Hopper’s film *Easy Rider* (1969), stands in a long tradition embedded in popular culture and social history.

As Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark comment, the road “has always been a persistent theme of American culture” (1997: 1), one that “goes back to the nation’s frontier ethos” (1997: 1), projecting some of the features concerning Western mythology. Heading west meant unlimited opportunities for those willing to risk their lives for the journey in search of a new and better life. This was a much-romanticized version of the West, as a place that represented the new Garden of Eden, an idea that became deeply entrenched in the American culture. The West symbolized a place of escape, of freedom and, for some it even represented the return to a simpler way of life, where they could rediscover the importance of the landscape (in closer contact with wilderness) beyond the claustrophobic urban and suburban areas.

The *road movie* focuses on (social) mobility in an industrialized context and concentrates on the driver’s learning experience while on the road, rearticulating his/her identity within a framework of modernity. As a result, hitting the road either allows the character, on the one hand, to be free and to pursue his/her dream of happiness or, on the other hand, to escape the law and society’s rules, *i.e.*, from home life, domesticity, marriage or employment. The genre is even more significant because it provides a space for reading the nation, “exploring the tensions and crisis of the historical moment during which it is produced” (Cohan and Hark 1997: 2). This is particularly true in the case of *Easy Rider*, a well-known counterculture movie that criticized the involvement of the United States in the Vietnam War.

Generally speaking, *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) and *Easy Rider* (Dennis Hopper, 1969) are considered the foundations of the *road movie* genre, both combining the features that most road narratives would soon come to adopt. A very important feature of these movies is the way they critique modernity and its consequences, particularly the automobile and its social disruptive potential. This reading of the road as a place of opportunity but also of impossibility contribute to the way road movies imagine the nation's culture "either as a utopian fantasy of homogeneity and national coherence, or as a dystopic nightmare" (Cohan and Hark 1997: 3).

I am particularly interested in this "dystopic nightmare" since the ending of *Easy Rider* – "We blew it" – points out to not only the failure of Wyatt and Billy's "quest", but also to the chance they have to become really free. Their journey is nothing more than an illusion of their apparent freedom and of the disappointment in not finding the "true America" they seek for throughout the film. They are not the only ones who feel disenchanting while on the road, so does the viewer who gets a glimpse of "America the Ugly", as suggested by Klinger (1997: 193), where the notions of death, disaster and the apocalypse are present. Bearing this in mind, this scene problematizes both the myths of mobility and prosperity on the road.

The final scene, where Billy and Wyatt are blown off their bikes and killed by the "rednecks" who are chasing them in a van, foresees an apocalyptic scenario on the road, one that is marked by the changing iconography of the landscape, no longer picturesque, as Laderman proposes, but bleak and industrial instead:

The last riding montage is quite distinct from all the previous one, setting a dismal tone for this assassination. It is comprised mainly of ugly industrial landscape imagery, suggestive of technology's debris: factories, smoke, telephone wires, harsh glare on water and cross-traffic (Laderman 2002: 77).

The landscape enhances the apocalyptic dimension of the final act, with Wyatt's motorcycle exploding into flames. This scene predicts a society doomed to violence, one where the surrounding environment is contaminated by the dangers of technology. The last montage, therefore, can be seen as a comment upon pollution and the careless use of resources. As Klinger (*ibid.*) further argues, this final scene proclaims a nation lost in

a progress that has grown out of control. This issue was likewise explored in the 1960s in Pop Art, where the romanticism established between the car and the road was criticized. Artists took into consideration the dark side of driving, speed, mobility and all the other icons associated with the road:

Such art arose in reaction to the 1950s growth of motel and fast-food chains, prefabricated housing, suburbanization, and the incursion of small industry, businesses, and billboards on the highway. But Pop Art also reacted to a myriad of incidents in the 1960s, from the escalating war in Vietnam, domestic civil strife, and the dramatic decline of the city to statistics about highway casualties and the media exploitation of traffic accidents (1996: 195)

Well-known examples include *Motorcycle Accident* (1969), *White Burning Car III* (1963), *Orange Car Crash 14 Times* (1963), *Ambulance Disaster* (1963) or *Foot and Tire* (1963-64). In depicting the violence of accidents and car wrecks, Pop Art was in tone with most of the films from the 1960s, exploring a catastrophic and apocalyptic culture such as the one depicted at the end of *Easy Rider*: the road as a place ruled by violence and chaos, essentially a negative apocalyptic vision of the world, as may be seen in *Mad Max's* trilogy (George Miller, 1979, 1981, 1985).

Automotive destruction and apocalyptic scenarios may also be observed in *Duel* (Steven Spielberg, 1971). Although it is not viewed as being apocalyptic or, for that matter, a Science Fiction film, it still describes a sort of wasteland/barren road, where a mysterious truck threatens the life of David Mann (Dennis Weaver) who is driving across South-east California. As an existentialist film, *Duel* expresses the emotional malaise of driving and also the perils of the automobile. An example of that is the faceless driver of the truck who tries to kill Mann, so that he is eventually forced to fight back. Considering these events, it is evident that the road is as a very dangerous and hostile place. The claustrophobic atmosphere existent in *Duel* contributes to create a violent world in decay where rules no longer subsist. In this sense, the ending of Spielberg's film is not that different from the one in *Easy Rider*, which announces the beginning of the apocalypse on the road. *Duel* similarly ends with a death and the explosion of both vehicles; however, Mann manages to survive. The truck is destroyed as well as its driver, but he will return, in a certain way, in *Mad Max's* apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic world, probably the first (post) apocalyptic road movie.

## 2. Mad Max – From apocalypse to Post-apocalypse without the road

I believe that not only does the driver from *Duel* return in *Mad Max*, but the “rednecks” from *Easy Rider* as well, this time in the skin of the bikers who kill Max’s (Mel Gibson) family. Though the film is Australian, it was very important in the United States and was enthusiastically received by the critics. Also, even though the film poses important questions about Australian themes and national identity, the scenario described in this narrative may take place anywhere. Nevertheless, it is clear that George Miller is influenced by the history of the road movie.

The first installment is set almost in the aftermath of *Easy Rider*’s and *Duel*’s endings, since the world is not completely devoid of law nor rules. However, the landscape has completely disappeared to be replaced by the lethal road, now no longer a place of possibility, freedom and hope. Instead, it is the place for battling the war between good and evil, between order and disorder, and harmony and the apocalypse. Sadly, justice no longer fulfills its role. The *Main Force Patrol* (MFP) represents what is left of a civilization fighting against the savages who promote anarchy.

As a result, this world forces Max to become a (road) warrior, a self-fulfilling warrior, who will wander the roads in a solitary quest for the meaning of life. Justice may exist, but people do not believe in it anymore, not even Max, who no longer represents the police. He is now a loner, who strives for survival in a land that has become sterile, yellow and gray colored. It is a land where destruction is not only possible but also plausible, and where chaos now rules. The other characters also seem contaminated by the road, which is portrayed as a fatal landscape. The subsequent *Mad Max* films further present a society reduced to barbarism, living on their primeval instinct: their own survival. Taking into account these films then, while in the past the road represented something familiar, now it is a frightening, foreign, unpredictable and volatile place.

*Mad Max: The Road Warrior* (1981), for instance, is already set in a post-apocalyptic wasteland, in the aftermath of the war over oil, exposing an atmosphere engulfed in anxiety, ambivalence and an unpredictable future. Max is now a wanderer, who finds a “community” – living in a refinery – in need of his help to drive a truck full of oil that will allow them to embark on their journey to “the Gold Coast” (symbol of the mythic west). However, a group of bikers dressed in post punk outfits scavenges the land in search of

oil, also wanting the truck for their own use. As Laderman notes (2002: 137), this second movie follows the trend of Science Fiction/action films from the late 1970s and early 1980s, such as *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), *Star Trek* (Robert Wise, 1979) or the *Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984), the latter also exploring the notions of technology and Artificial Intelligence.

This may be the reason why *Mad Max II* emphasizes a dystopian future where humanity no longer has access to an unending amount of resources. In *Mad Max's* world, gasoline and cars are, in fact, precious, symbolizing the pre-apocalyptic world where people had the chance to avoid destruction. As a consequence of this, civilization is decaying due to the lack of natural resources they have consumed and are now on the brink of extinction, continuously destroying themselves over the last few remaining resources on earth. The “gas people”, for instance, only remain civilized as long as they have gas, the ultimate resource that will allow them to escape to their utopia, where they may rebuild a new society unthreatened by anarchy.

This vision of no social or institutional control is even clearer in the third installment of *Mad Max*. In *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* (1985), a civilization that is more reminiscent of a post nuclear war is now portrayed, where some survive due to pure luck. They have created a community called Bartertown where, as the name indicates, everything is exchangeable. The essential logic of Bartertown is one of survival.

In fact, this is a new community that is also very primitive, immoral and dirty, as they keep destroying themselves. Bartertown is a city constructed after its rulers, who represent an alternative, chaotic society no longer bound by conservatism. In this sense, Bartertown is therefore a threat for contemporary society, since the city is ruled by a Black Woman named Aunty (Tina Turner), who represents “the fear that multiculturalism might undo the current power structure” (Winn 1997: 6). As a result, she must consequently be eliminated.

In contrast, the children represent those who have tried to run away from the apocalypse and who wait for their white hero, the one who will destroy the implemented government. This is of course a social-political interpretation. Max is definitely the hero who saves the “chosen ones” from annihilation and tyranny, making the path towards renewal and rebirth possible. The children are therefore the metaphor for a new world and the possibility of regeneration, where technology can be used for the good of humanity.

As Christopher Sharrett explains (1985: 82), Miller uses these movies “to suggest the immanence of an apocalyptic spirit” that has pervaded over

humanity throughout time. This is even more noticeable in the last *Mad Max* where the road has completely disappeared “into a trackless landscape of desert dunes, fertile gorges, and post-nuclear dust” (Falconer 1997: 249). Kirsten Moana Thompson in her book *Apocalyptic Dread: American Cinema at the Turn of the Millenium* (2007: 13) emphasizes this idea of an apocalypse. She argues that most films in the late nineties were fusing science fiction with apocalyptic themes and disasters regarding theological and technological cycles, focusing on the prediction of the end of the world to serve as a warning for humanity’s constant mistakes.

In most of these films, the notion of family, representing unity and the good of the community, is threatened by the possibility of disaster. Indeed, this menace to the family is intensified after the 9/11 attacks when fear and anxiety took over society. The apocalyptic imagination, as Mick Broderick suggests in “Surviving Armageddon: Beyond the Imagination of Disaster” (1993), requires an imagination of disaster where the forces of good and evil are destined to fight each other: “By necessity and definition, the apocalyptic imagination requires an imagination of disaster. Armageddon becomes an apocalyptic *raison d’être*: the forces of good and evil are destined to battle each other (Broderick 1993: 379).”

We are unable to predict how the world is going to end, but cinema has presented us with several possibilities, including a foreign explanation with aliens, that could come not only from outer space, but also from within society, as verified through diseases, mutations, wars, invasions and, of course, zombies.

### **3. The road is full of zombies**

*Zombieland* (2009), directed by Ruben Fleischer, is a good example of a road movie that focus on the family issues posed above and also on a post-apocalyptic world. Although the film functions as a parody to zombie films, it also addresses the important theme of the loss of humanity, as only a few have survived that post-holocaust world. And those who are still alive lost their families, as commented in the film: “we were all orphans in Zombieland”. As Bishop argues, in zombie films, family becomes the primary target, and *Zombieland* is no exception:

The now canonical zombie invasion narrative, particularly those films produced by or made in imitation of Romero, traditionally offers audiences a rather bleak view of the apocalypse, one in which society's vital infrastructures are quickly destroyed by the unstoppable armies of the walking dead. Furthermore, as evidenced by Romero's early zombie movies, the primary target of such supernatural devastation is nothing less than the American nuclear family (2010: 2).

The first image that is shown is an American flag on a destroyed presidential limo while the Capitol is burning, a clear sign of a world without any political, military and social rules or laws, a particular feature in zombie movies. Zombies mostly appear after all the infrastructures have been destroyed, an indication that society has collapsed and those living are on survival mode. Columbus (Jesse Einseberg) is now living in the "United States of Zombieland", a world where zombies now rule and where he tries to survive.

In *Zombieland*, Columbus, who is trying to survive the apocalypse, meets Tallahassee (Woody Harrelson), Wichita (Emma Stone) and Little Rock (Abigail Breslin), all, curiously enough, names of American cities. Together, they form a group of misfits, who end up building a familial bond while trying to survive in this world. They are all basically seeking for a supportive structure within this doomed society. At the end of their journey, however, everyone will find their own place: Columbus will overtake his fear of society and clowns, and will turn out to be a hero who manages to find a girlfriend, Wichita; Tallahassee finally grieves his son's death at the hands of zombies and becomes the father-figure of the family; and both sisters learn to trust people. Together they form a family and ensure the continuity of mankind, sending out the message that attention should be given to the little things in life, such as to connect or re-connect with family and community, as opposed to the emotional emptiness here represented by the zombies.

However, *Zombieland* is much more than just a road movie concerned with family. It also addresses the questions of paranoia and insecurity, as well as society's most pressing fears, especially regarding the contemporary social tensions and violence:

During the latter half of the twentieth century, for example, zombie movies repeatedly reacted to social and political unrest,



graphically representing the inescapable realities of an untimely death (via infection, infestation, or violence) while presenting a grim view of the modern apocalypse in which society's supportive infrastructure irrevocably breaks down. The twenty-first-zombie movies are not much different from their historical antecedents, but society itself has changed markedly since the World Trade Center towers were destroyed, making cinematic zombies and their accompanying narratives all the more timely and effective (Bishop 2010: 11).

After 9/11, the possibility of a scenario in which ashes and dust cover the world became more than plausible. Chaos ruled in New York City following the days of the attacks, and the country was on full alert expecting a massive invasion of "invisible forces". Such is the case of *Zombieland*, a film that follows most of the typical features of zombie films by showing a chaotic world with deserted streets and dead corpses all over, an imaginary world void of human presence and full of dangers; a world where the living dead feed on each other, resulting in the total annihilation of the population.

In this film, zombies function as way of criticizing the government and other institutions (such as public health organizations), demonstrating as well how certain forms of power and control affect the general population. Zombies function as powerful metaphors (Lansdale 2011: x), illustrating almost every possible apocalyptic scenario. In *Zombieland*, like in other zombie films where the survival of humanity is put into question, all the characters have developed a means of survival: the sisters by trusting no one and Tallahassee by force, violence and anger. There is also Columbus, who survives by following his own rules to avoid being eaten. However, mankind is never prepared for the end of the world, and even less to survive a cataclysm, as Maberry explains:

Here's the logic for why odds aren't in our favor in a global disaster: We have become fatally soft, weakened by the technology that has allowed us to conquer the rest of the planet. [...] If the system fails, we are no longer conditioned to react quickly and appropriately; [...] Our weakness is exacerbated by our trust that the system will always reset itself. Once the system fails and we become convinced of its failure, that's when we stopped being who we are (2011: 18-19).

As Kim Paffenroth (2006: 13) argues, zombies are very unique in the sense that they are the ultimate apocalyptic monsters – they “reveal’ terrible truths about human nature, existence, and sin”. Nevertheless, in *Zombieland*, as in other zombie films, there are some humans who remain with a functioning brain (an important part), denoting the possibility of mankind rebuilding a new path. That is, the road still represents the opportunity for those characters who search for their “mythical west”. But how about survival in a post-apocalyptic world where everything we know is completely gone? What are the chances of survival and what do we become when there is nothing left? What happens when we consume everything? Do we stop being who we are?

#### **4. *The Road* – Post Apocalyptic eco-disaster**

The film *The Road*, based upon the homonymous novel by Cormac McCarthy, tells the story of a boy (Koddi Smit-McPhee) and his father (Viggo Mortesen) on the road, in a post-apocalyptic world where everything is burning, where ashes cover the countryside and the road is basically void of life. Those who have survived have become cannibals and those who do not want to live in this world choose to put term to their own lives. Survival is the key word.

This is a world in an advanced state of decay: the sky is completely darkened with ashes, blocking out the sun’s rays. The viewer stands before a nuclear winter, where smoke and fire represent the ultimate consumption (Becker 2010: 33) and the chance of survival is minimal. What is left to eat, when it is possible to find anything, are the remains of an obsolete world, such as the canned goods in a bunker (a symbol of the former industrial life that was consumed, but that cannot be renewed). Cities and towns are decaying, drowning in the litter that remains as a remembrance of all the resources that were consumed and exhausted. Nevertheless, Father and Son must keep heading South – here depicted as the mythical re-inscribed frontier – where it is warmer. Their journey is a a-modern one (by foot), where the speed of the automobile is replaced by a shopping cart (a symbol of abundance and of the capitalist past), which more or less functions as their life support system, as Randal Wilhelm comments:

The shopping cart, one of their most treasured material helpers, is also both a physical and symbolic container. Its core function in the once prosperous society from which it was created was to carry surplus groceries by the abundance, foodstuffs, of such abundance one literally had to cart them away. Now, it remains as a stark reminder of plenty, but like so many objects it is an unstable sign, for fitted with a sidebar motorcycle mirror, the cart also functions as post-apocalyptic roadster, its “trunk” loaded with the precious items necessary to their desperate existence, and serves as a testament to human creativity and determination in the face of catastrophe (2008: 132).

Lacking technology and basic commodities, they must move on or else they will be killed and consumed, as humans have become reduced to mere matter. Even though this is not a zombie movie, the film deals with the question of cannibalism, a step behind the mutation that was seen in *Zombieland*. Here, the real fear comes from those who are alive, those who capture other humans in order to eat them, as seen in one of the houses visited. In this particular film, the American national landscape becomes “the site of lawless terror” (Ellis 2008: 32).

As for the road, it is a place of violence and death, absent of social stability, where those who still maintain their humanity are condemned to being eaten by those who have completely lost it. As Brian Jarvis suggests (1998: 258), the cannibalistic gangs who roam the landscape in search of humans to eat are proof of the return to an increasingly primordial civilization. These are no longer civilized groups, but barbaric men, who represent the egotistical consumerism that seems to have annihilated them in the first place, an issue that is explored in both McCarthy’s novel and in Hillcoat’s film:

One of the recurrent themes throughout McCarthy’s work is of our impermanence and irrelevance as individuals and species. His fiction repeatedly reveals the fragility of our attempts to control or order the world, and it frequently problematizes the supposed progress of our culture. [...] his novels *lack* culture, and they often lack a certain level of materiality in terms of technology, and material goods, of the things that supposedly make our lives easier but which in fact contribute to the end of things. This is especially the case in *The Road*, and McCarthy’s portrayal of the

response to the event suggests how close we are as a species to a primordial existence, how fragile our claims to superiority over the world truly are, and it is another none too flattering portrayal of homo sapiens (Walsh 2009: 261-262).

Father and Son refuse to eat human flesh, surviving only on what they can find, resisting both symbolically and literally to their primitive calling. Should they not be able to find food and starve, they prefer to kill themselves instead of eating human flesh. The Father's mission is to pass on to his Son good moral and ethical values that establish a bridge between the old world and the new world. In addition, he tries to protect his son from the atrocities of this post-apocalyptic world by teaching him that he is one of the "good guys", the one who carries the fire not of destruction, but of renewal. In fact, the boy seems to be the embodiment of spiritual purity, one that must not be corrupted by the decay and bleakness in this landscape of loss.

Nonetheless, this spiritual journey with biblical proportions is one that presents the road not only as a physical object, but also as a path both Father and Son must cover in order for mankind to move on. It seems like a mission that carries the flag of hope. For instance, at the end of the film, when they reach the warmer South, the Father dies (the symbolic fall of the old world), only to be replaced by a traditional long lost family, who "is expecting" the boy and who embraces him. There is a woman, who replaces his lost mother, a new father, siblings, and even a pet dog. Therefore, the fire the son has carried throughout his journey is a symbol of hope that has finally been found with this family. Nevertheless, the end of the film does not provide the viewer with any concrete answer about what will happen to these characters, as the family has to face once more the perils of the road, symbolizing the uncertainty of their future.

This road also carries its own utopian and dystopian prophets, contributing to an ambiguous ending. For example, the Old Man, who calls himself Eli, is a prophet of the present world, as he saw the end of the world coming, "People were always getting ready for tomorrow. Tomorrow was getting ready for them" (*The Road*, 2011). He does not believe in the good of humanity or in the prospect of rebirth. Nevertheless, the possibility or renewal of hope comes from the memories passed down from Father to Son, in which the latter only absorbs what is worth carrying with him. That is probably the fire that burns within him. The Father taught him how to use it appropriately, because in this world, new values and new rules may

be created, which provide mankind with the necessary instruments for the world's rebirth. The fire is a metaphor for hope.

## **5. *The Book of Eli* – Words are very powerful**

*The Book of Eli* (2011), directed by Albert and Allen Hughes, is also an interesting example of a post-apocalyptic film, since it recovers the post-nuclear, post-apocalyptic world of *The Road*, but with a hero who firmly believes in his blessed mission. Eli (Denzel Washington) is a warrior, who is prepared to survive in this bleak world. He is on a quest to deliver an important book to a place where all the books that were recovered before/after the apocalypse are kept. That book is none other than the Bible, which he reads every day, and it symbolizes the power and knowledge of the pre-apocalypse, at least for those who remember it. In this post-apocalyptic realm, only a few remember the old world, and those who do remember it, are sightless, a sign of the symbolic blindness mankind had for what would come. Though Eli is also blind, he seems to be a man whose redemption allowed him to see the real truth. He can be understood as the representation of an angel on earth.

In this movie, the viewer is not presented with a nuclear winter, but instead, with a “nuclear summer”, one where all traces of life have also died and where the road continues to be a dangerous and violent place. Nothing grows in this world, as all vegetation has died. The canned goods (once again symbols of industrial life) have all been consumed and people can only resort to eating human flesh, meaning no one is safe. Similarly to *The Road*, people choose/are forced to cannibalism, as all has been destroyed in this nuclear holocaust, symbolizing the regression of mankind. Eli tries to survive in this complete and desolate world, in order to go West to Alcatraz, a symbolic place where he can safely deliver the book. His character is reminiscent of Max, since he too is prepared to deal with the dangers this lawless world brings:

Eli is a quick hand with knives, pistols, rifles, shotguns and karate. He needs to be. After a catastrophe has wiped out most of the Earth's population and left ruin and desolation behind, the remaining humans are victimized by roaming motorcycle gangs of hijackers and thieves (Ebert 2010).

However, he is not completely safe, since Carnegie (Gary Oldman), a man who rules a small community, also remembers the importance of this book and wants it for himself, regardless of the circumstances. He knows it is a book that can comfort the poor, but it can also be a powerful tool to control people's minds, therefore, an essential instrument for him to play the much-wanted role of God.

Solara (Mila Kunis), who was born after the "holocaust", also wants to understand the power of words, but in a different way. She learns to pray with Eli and finally helps him reach his final destination. Carnegie (Gary Oldman), however, eventually gets hold of the Bible, but in an ironic twist of fate, he is unable to read it, because it is written in Braille – a symbolic way of alluding to his 'blindness' in thinking that he is superior to others.

Eli eventually reaches his destination: the prison of Alcatraz, which is ironically turned into a giant library that holds mankind's knowledge and reproduces it in order to re-create a new civilization. Although he does not have the book, he knows it by heart and dictates it to someone who can reproduce it. Unfortunately, upon reaching the end of the book, he dies; nevertheless, he has fulfilled his mission to shed light onto the world, by proving that even when all systems fail, there is still faith. By the end of the movie, Solara is viewed as the new messenger of God by replacing Eli in his functions, an image that reveals the opportunity for those who never had the chance to learn how to believe to do so, in order to regenerate a society bound by good values, ethics and moral. Here, a new sense of community may arise, one that is not shared by the necessities of a primal, savage humanity, despite the road being a dangerous place.

## **6. A new dawn or do we have no future?**

It may be questioned whether the road is a prophetic place of terror or of hope. From *Easy Rider* to *The Book Eli*, we have been on a journey that has given us different perspectives about post-apocalyptic visions on the road. These visions function as a warning for mankind's abuse in areas like consumerism, violence, wars, destruction, nuclear warfare, natural disasters and alien invasions. As Lawrence Rubin argues (2009: 1), the end of the world has been portrayed in many ways, "Man-made and natural, foretold and unforeseeable, partial and total, the end of the world has been delivered to us by fire, ice, nuclear aftermath, cosmic mishap, and

alien invasion". At a superficial level, the apocalypse plays with mankind's deepest fears of death, loss of sense of humanity and of becoming primitive, but at a deeper level, it also demonstrates how Man must change and, if in fact the time comes, it must continue to live on as possible.

These movies present the road as a place where all kinds of terror may take place, but also as a location of ambiguity. It symbolizes the flow of life, similarly to Man's own journey, which is never completely closed or barred – the "good ones" continue to travel on the road in search of a place to settle down and create a new community, a place to bring the fire they carry. I believe the road essentially holds the power of transformation, opportunity and hope, which is also the lure of the American Dream.

Some might believe it leads to a New Eden (be it the West or not) reborn after the apocalypse on Earth has ended, allowing for a new beginning, as Ira Chernus claims in *Dr. Strangegood: On the Symbolic Meaning of Nuclear Weapons* (1986), "We accept the lure of annihilation, only to discover that it is a temporary condition, a gateway to renewal and rebirth" (1986: 85). Ultimately, salvation and rebirth come from some kind of faith in believing that the "future reserves something better, as long as this future departs from the failed practices of the past, rather than reliving them" (Becker 2010: 51). This is what Mick Roderick defends (1993: 362) when he argues that post-apocalyptic movies are not about the end of times, but rather about survival.

As we drive or walk on the road, we leave behind us the past and head towards the future, a future where our mistakes may be corrected. The rearview mirror reminds us of what we have done and if we continue doing it what may happen. However, the horizon holds new opportunities and new options. After all, as James Berger claims, "the end is never the end" (1999: 5). It is just a renewed beginning.

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#### КА ЗАПАДУ: ПОСТАПОКАЛИПТИЧНЕ ВИЗИЈЕ „СА ПУТОВАЊА“

##### Сажетак

„Путовање“ одавно заузима значајно место у америчкој култури, јер представља прилику за почетак новог живота. У већини филмова о путовању, пут је у највећем броју случајева описан или у позитивном контексту, или сасвим супротно, као један од начина да се избегне правда. Ипак, пут такође може означити и простор насиља и разарања и на тај начин бити у функцији „утопијске фантазије о хомогенизацији и националној кохеренцији или, дистопијског кошмара“ (Cohan and Hark 1997: 3). Циљ овог текста је да анализира (пост) апокалиптичне *филмове са путовања* као критичке-дистопијске наратије који представљају зашашујућу будућност и које истовремено претстављају метафоре везане за садашњост, указујући на суморне слике алтернативних стварности које, упркос свему, нису лишене наде.

**Кључне речи:** путовање, филмови с пута, (пост) апокалиптична кинематографија, научна фантастика