Youth and the Post-Apocalyptic in Film, Television and Video Game

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In his 1993 article "Surviving Armageddon", Mick Broderick identifies a major historical shift within apocalyptic cinema. Whereas Susan Sontag wrote in 1965 that such films were preoccupied with the spectacle of catastrophe in the immediate post-war years, Broderick observes that *post-*apocalyptic narratives of survivalism and social recovery have become a more dominant trend from the late 1970s onwards. The fantasy of a fresh start for humanity entertained in these texts has long been potently evoked by images of youth, yet scholars like Broderick discuss contemporary post-apocalyptic narratives primarily in relation to myths surrounding the adult male "hero-saviour". In these analyses, younger characters are commonly understood as "magical helpers" (Broderick 378) or catalysts for adult protagonists' redemption (Shapiro 110), rather than as autonomous individuals. However, as children, adolescents, and young adults have come to assume increasingly prominent and varied roles in post-apocalyptic texts across a range of media, there is now a clear need for further academic research into the complex generic and socio-political functions performed by these characters.

The diverse formal and narrative characteristics of different screen media have accommodated a host of creative approaches to the representation and perspectives of youth, which is demonstrated by examples of the recent boom in stories of social upheaval, decay and transformation focused on youth. As witnessed in the cycle of popular films that followed in the wake of the critical and commercial success of *The Hunger Games* books (Suzanne Collins 2008, 2009, 2010) and 2012-2015 film adaptations (e.g. *How I Live Now* [2013], *The Maze Runner* films [2014, 2015], the *Divergent* trilogy [2014, 2015, 2016], *The 5th Wave* [2016]), younger characters have risen to prominence in these post-apocalyptic worlds and

fought back against the adult authorities that attempt to govern their future. Also, television dramas, like *The 100* (2014-) and *Between* (2015-), have used their serialised format to imagine how societies almost exclusively comprising young people might function over time, after adult populations have been decimated or young survivors have been expelled from the remaining adult society. At the same time, children and young adults have also taken up central roles as player-protagonists in post-apocalyptic video games like *Fallout 3* (2008) and *The Last of Us: Left Behind* (2014), where different modes of interaction offer fresh ways of exploring the complicated agency of the young within a devastated and changed world.

This themed issue brings together 6 new articles investigating how the post-apocalyptic is used in different audio-visual media in the portrayal of youth and how associated social issues relating not only to age, but also the connected issues of gender, race, class, sexuality and family, have been addressed. With their frequent characterisation as posthuman creatures or warriors menaced by manipulative adult authorities, it is our contention that uses of the post-apocalyptic, as a science fiction sub-genre or as a kind of borrowed trope that extends across various genres, present a major arena for exploring cultural conceptualisations of the young as Other and of youthful discontent or negotiation with adult authority, which are integral to wider discussions concerning the portrayal of young people in popular culture. Moreover, the concern with catastrophe and social turmoil commonly presented in these post-apocalyptic worlds allows for an examination of how enduring, intensely personal themes of youth rebellion and self-definition are culturally reshaped by wider historical crises, most recently surrounding millennial anxiety, advances in genetic engineering, terrorist attacks against the West and the subsequent "war on terror", and the intergenerational tensions connected with the Great Recession.

In our first article, "*Sucker Punch*: Post-Apocalyptic Trauma in the Postmodern Age",

Valerie Wee presents us with a reappraisal of an American-produced film by viewing it from

the perspective of its young female protagonist, "Babydoll" (Emily Browning). As much as

the depiction of the highly sexualised leading character in *Sucker Punch* (2011) can be

regarded as set up for the viewing pleasure of the hetero-male spectator (see Mulvey), Wee

complicates this perspective by placing analytical emphasis on the film's use of post-

apocalyptic fantasy sequences as expressive of this girl's psychological trauma, inner turmoil

and fighting spirit within a punishing patriarchal environment. Then, beyond the more

personalised and psychological fantasy discussed in Wee's article, Christine Cornea's next

article, "'For Queen, For Country, For Kicks'", looks at how a post-apocalyptic setting is

employed in the British television series *Spooks: Code 9* (BBC Three, 2008) in an attempt to

engage with the wider socio-political concerns of British millennials, specifically as

understood within the context of the aftermath of the 2005 "7/7" London bombings, the

financial crisis of 2007-2008, economic recession and youth unemployment. Like Wee,

Cornea also focuses on how issues of age intersect with gender, although she detects a far

more reactionary use of the post-apocalyptic in comparison to other examples in media aimed

at the young adult market. In the following third article, "My Triple Teen Apocalypse",

Kylo-Patrick R. Hart considers both the personalised and wider socio-cultural implications

surrounding the representation of the central character in Gregg Araki's films, *Totally F***ed

Up* (1993), *The Doom Generation* (1995), and *Nowhere* (1997). Noting that the actor, James

Duvall, picks up the central role in each of these films, Hart re-frames this trilogy as a series

of apocalypses and post-apocalypses that ultimately examine the liberating and utopian

potentiality of life for queer teens in an imagined post-apocalyptic Los Angeles.

Moving away from film and television, in "Coming of Age in the Capital Wasteland" Souvik Mukherjee explores the influence of the literary bildungsroman genre as underpinning the 2008 videogame *Fallout 3*. In this fourth article, Mukherjee reads the post-apocalyptic wasteland of the game as offering up a space of possibility and traces how the player's main quest can be read alongside growing-up stories in older media. In contrast, our fifth article, "Apocalypse and the Biopolitics of Childhood", by Aris Mousoutzanis, reads the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic as a narrative conceit that works to disrupt developmental discourses, particularly those concerned with the growth from childhood to adulthood. In his analysis and comparison of two recent television series–the American produced *The 100* (2014-) and the British produced *Utopia* (2013-2015) –Mousoutzanis draws upon biopolitical theory to trace the ways in which each can be understood as offering a response to contemporary issues of over-population and resource management. In some respects, Rhys Owain Thomas's final article, "The Secret Life of the Posthuman Teenager", also looks at the disruption of developmental discourses, only here the female teenage protagonist in the American television series *Caprica* (2010-2011) is understood as existing in a liminal 'unliving' state, between life and death. Following her death in a terrorist bombing incident, the central character in this series finds herself in the virtual world of cyberspace, where she embraces her new-found status as a posthuman. Thomas's article thereby returns us to the highly personalised perspective of the teenage girl in her post-apocalyptic fantasy world, offering up an interesting comparison to Wee's analysis of *Sucker Punch* in this issue's opening article.

Collectively, the articles in this themed issue examine a variety of "case study" screen texts aimed at teenagers, young adults, or adults, along with examples with cross-generational appeal, so as to consider the interests and anxieties that their portrayals of youth address.

While each of these articles examine specific case studies or trends within a single screen medium, this issue is also showcasing work that considers how the contemporary post-apocalyptic can work to blur the boundaries between mediums and genres in ways that significantly affect their portrayals of the young. As is made evident in this themed issue, the particular prevalence of processes of adaptation, convergence and intertextuality within post-apocalyptic narratives about young people indicates the importance of research that situates the analysis of individual case studies within the context of interconnected developments throughout media. This themed issue therefore seeks to provide a forum for generating dialogue between scholars focusing on different audio-visual media, and thus seeks to advance critical debates surrounding the multiplying roles that young characters perform within the contemporary post-apocalyptic.

Works Cited

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