

MONIKA KAUP. *New Ecological Realisms: Post-Apocalyptic Fiction and Contemporary Theory*. Edinburgh UP, 2021, 332 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4744-8310-0.

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Kaup opens her book with a question about the fate of literary criticism after post-structuralism. Dissatisfied with postmodernism's generalisations that consider every object of inquiry a text hiding an ideological bias (2), Kaup advocates for the recovery of the real. Searching for a proper methodology, she turns her attention to new ontologies (an umbrella term for such approaches as speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, new materialism, feminist materialism, or ontology of knowledge), for she believes that the ontological turn after poststructuralism offers a solution to Cartesian dualism, capable of bridging the gap between hard sciences and the humanities and reassembling the fragmented vision of reality they provide. Kaup argues that the four approaches she has chosen as the theoretical background for her literary analyses—Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's autopoiesis, Markus Gabriel's ontology of fields of sense, Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenology of givenness and Alphonso Lingis's phenomenology of passionate identification, and Bruno Latour's actor-network theory—provide a comprehensive lens for investigating the real as they “posit that reality is not found by decomposing things into elementary parts, but by describing patterns, or mapping the way things are organised into ordered ensembles, constellations and configurations” (5). Kaup concludes the introduction by explaining that the novels she has chosen for close reading—all being post-apocalyptic fictions—mirror the ontological shift in theory by reinvestigating the real as a complex system composed of both matter and spirit; she claims that “apocalyptic narrative is a literary variety of a ‘systems’ vision of the real that demonstrates the irreducibility of integrated wholes” (6). The novels both respond—in a manner all significant post-apocalyptic works do—to very contemporary fears and create alternative visions of the world that call for ontological examination.

The first chapter, “New Ecological Realisms and Post-Apocalyptic Fiction,” situates the notion of the real advocated by Kaup in the context of the debate among “new realists.” Attempting to find an alternative to old materialism's dismissal of non-material phenomena and postmodern constructivism's radical anti-realism, they advocate for realism that accounts for both material objects and mind-dependent constructs without giving primacy to any of them. Although offering slightly different solutions to the matter-spirit dilemma, thinkers discussed by Kaup share the belief that the human subject is

always embedded in the world and a new vision of realism must take into account this embeddedness. Kaup believes that the current relevance of that belief stems from at least two phenomena: climate change, bringing to the foreground very tangible, global consequences of human actions, and new developments in the neurosciences, undermining the validity of Cartesian dualism (21–22). Therefore, the notion of realism advocated by Kaup “is committed to a pluralistic concept of the real that recognises the manifold existents outside of the domain of the natural sciences” (28). Another reason for her embrace of the ontological turn is the fact that it offers a notion of realism that accounts for non-material phenomena studied by the humanities (34). Kaup argues that “humanistic study need to be unapologetic about the reality of non-material entities that make up its principal concern” (36); consequently, “the humanities need to redouble their effort to re-establish the singular ontology of their field as distinct from that of the natural sciences” (42). She believes that the four new realist ontologies she discusses in her book may help in achieving that goal as they “all endorse a holistic, contextual, systems-oriented, ecological and embedded realism” (44). As post-individual, they reject the anthropocentric view of the isolated, independent subject (45), allowing for the reconnection of “the human cultural world with the natural environment” (47). Kaup concludes the chapter by elucidating the affinity between post-apocalyptic narratives and new ecological realisms: “in their respective media,... [they both] envision new, sustainable concepts of the real and of world that depart from existing paradigms that have exhausted their explanatory power” (53).

The second chapter, “The New Realism of the Factish and the Political Ecology of Humans and Non Humans,” analyzes Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy through the prism of Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory. Kaup begins with an overview of Latour’s project of abolishing the division, originated at the advent of modern science, between natural sciences and the social sciences/humanities. Latour believes the Anthropocene to be affected by human actions to such an extent that the concept of “pure” nature has lost its relevance (85); hence, he argues for a theory that perceives the world of nature and the world of human constructs as interconnected, a theory that does not relegate the study of objective facts and subjective values to separate academic disciplines (91). The “flat ontology” he proposes “places phenomena of all types (cultural, scientific, economic, religious, political and so on) on one single, connected plane” (94). As a result, the ability to affect reality (being an actant, to use Latour’s phrase) is granted to non-humans. In Latour’s view, agency is never autonomous (96) but is distributed across the network of interconnected actors (actants) who affect each other (97). What is more, agency is not necessarily an inherent quality, hence Latour’s notion of hybrids, namely “beings that shift their mode of existence: from dependent or passive to independent” (96). This insight is connected with the second notion Kaup believes to be of particular relevance to her study: Latour’s idea of the factish. Coined as a hybrid of two terms, fact and fetish, it abolishes the division between scientific facts and non-scientific beliefs. Latour argues that both facts and fetishes are “artefacts that are felt to be real, that is to say, to be autonomous forces in the ‘real’ world—world-making act-

ants—for parallel reasons: they have successfully undergone a previous phase of human construction, according to the particular—and very different—protocols of modern science on the one hand, and various religious and secular beliefs on the other” (101). Becoming a factish, Kaup concludes the theoretical part of the chapter, “involves a metamorphosis from dependency and fabrication (on and by a creator, the scientist in particular and human society more generally) to an autonomous mode of existence as an actor-network” (104).

Kaup reads Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy as a dramatic enactment of the ontological transformation theorized by Latour (110). The post-apocalyptic world depicted in the novels, brought about by a bioterrorist attack that kills almost all humans and leaves the Earth inhabited by bioengineered beings, proves a fruitful playground for applying Latour’s ideas. Firstly, Kaup argues that the *MaddAddam* trilogy reflects Latour’s insight about the interdependence of facts and values. The two main male protagonists of *Oryx and Crake* personify “the dichotomy of reason vs. feeling and facts vs. values that, as Latour maintains, is the root of the modern dilemma” (117). The clash between two competing sets of values is investigated from a different point of view in *The Year of the Flood*. In the second volume of the trilogy, the focalisation shifts to two female members of an eco-religious sect, thus allowing for the juxtaposition of science and religion. The sect’s distrust of modern technology and their environmentally sustainable practices allow them to survive Crake’s apocalypse, whereas thanks to their holistic ecological worldview they are capable of forming an ecological collective of humans and non-humans, a process depicted in the third volume of the trilogy. Secondly, Kaup claims that the Crakers, designed to be a perfect replacement for the humans flawed by their non-quantifiable and unpredictable feelings, demonstrate the “pharmacological instability of scientific factishes” (120). Having left the laboratory to inhabit the post-apocalyptic world, they “escape the determination of their creation and their scientist-creator” (110) and “acquire an autonomous mode of existence as actants” (120). Consequently, they are capable of entering the social world of humans and participating in creating a new posthuman future.

In the third chapter, “The Ontology of Knowledge as the Enaction of Mind and World,” Kaup juxtaposes Maturana and Varela’s autopoietic theory with José Saramago’s *Blindness*. First of all, similarly to Latour, the Santiago school rejects Cartesian dualism in favor of the notion of cognition as embodied action (147). In Maturana and Varela’s view, knowledge is not a pre-given condition but emerges out of the subject’s interaction with the world. More importantly, they argue that knowledge is action—“cognition is a mode in which organisms bring forth a world” (152). This notion of world-making through cognition finds a perfect reflection in Saramago’s novel. Kaup reads the novel’s post-apocalyptic defamiliarization, caused by the epidemic of white-blindness, as a comment on the Western culture’s preoccupation with knowledge as insight. “Newly sightless, [humans] must find a new type of cognitive organisation that allows them to know their world, a process in which neither blind minds nor worlds are pre-given, but ... are brought forth in the process of living” (185). Secondly, the theory of autopoiesis

“denotes the immanent arising of novel phenomena within a network, which result spontaneously from interaction between assembled components” (Kaup 148). Rejecting liberal humanism’s notion of an independent subject, Maturana and Varela propose a post-individual theory where “the autonomy of autopoietic systems is dynamic and conditional: first, they originate by way of a reciprocal co-constitution with their environments. Secondly, the survival of autopoietic unities depends on maintaining reciprocal interactions with what is outside their boundaries” (157). In Kaup’s reading, the protagonists of *Blindness* form a collective according to the rules elucidated by Maturana and Varela. The process of “cooperative blind self-organisation” (190), depicted in the novel, brings to the foreground the main feature of social autopoiesis: language. As Kaup notices, “[i]t is through language that the blind bring forth a new world of reciprocal cooperation and solidarity” (191).

The fourth chapter, “Apocalypse as Field of Sense,” analyzes Olivia Butler’s *Parable* series via the theoretical lens of Markus Gabriel’s ontology of fields of sense. Similarly to other theoretical approaches discussed by Kaup, Gabriel argues for ontological pluralism where the basic building blocks of reality are wholes irreducible to their parts. His ontology “proposes a revisionary concept of existence as appearance in a context, or more precisely, as appearance in a field of sense. Fields are worlds, contexts of meaning (of which an infinite plurality exist, including physics, cooking, art and so on)” (Kaup 199). Instead of old realism’s belief in the mind-independent world, subject-object dualism, and metaphysics, Gabriel advocates for existence that is context-dependent. As elucidated by Kaup, “[o]bjects do not pre-exist the contexts in which they appear, they only exist insofar as they appear in contexts” (208). As a result, the post-apocalyptic world creates a novel context that requires a new ontology. In Kaup’s reading, Butler’s novels address that need by reconceptualizing the notion of God. Earthseed, a religion created by Lauren, the protagonist of *The Parable of the Sower*, replaces the absolute, unchanging God of Christianity with the idea of God-as-Change. A response to the context of the post-apocalypse, “God-is-Change is a metaphysic of the society of extreme risk” (Kaup 231).

The final chapter, “New Phenomenologies after Poststructuralism,” uses Jean-Luc Marion’s phenomenology of givenness and Alphonso Lingis’s phenomenology of passionate identification to analyze Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*. Unfortunately, it is the weakest part of Kaup’s book. The theories discussed by the author provide a fresh coat of theoretical paint for describing the process of identity formation in post-apocalyptic fiction, but they do not seem to offer much in terms of close reading. As if in response to this hermeneutical impasse, Kaup readjusts her theoretical lens and analyzes *The Road* as an example of the neo-baroque. Although she is correct in reading the novel’s landscape as a contemporary example of baroque ruin, her argument about the novel’s style is problematic. She recognizes the fact that most critics acknowledge the minimalism of *The Road*’s language, yet insists that the stylistic form of the book is the neo-baroque (286), an argument that is difficult to defend on the basis of the few erudite words she quotes to substantiate her claim. In other words, it is difficult to agree with Kaup’s claim that the excess of content is reflected in the novel’s language.

The greatest strength of Kaup's book is its theoretical clarity. The author skillfully navigates the reader through the ontological turn, creating a sharp tool for dissecting fiction. However, in spite of her firm belief that the humanities need to be unapologetic about its field of study, Kaup's defense of the ontological status of literary worlds against postmodern constructivism seems like an attempt to find a non-literary justification for the analysis of literature. This paradox is best reflected in Kaup's reading of *Earthseed*. Having abandoned the notion of absolute God of Christianity, Lauren defends her post-apocalyptic metaphysics against charges of constructivism by claiming that she has not invented her religion but discovered it by observing scientific evidence. Kaup seems to accept this argument as it supports the idea of breaching the gap between scientific knowledge and non-scientific values, thus providing a new ontological ground for religion (Kaup 246). The argument, however, does not prove Lauren's God's existence (hence is incapable of convincing her brother Marcus that *Earthseed* is not a sect), but merely reaffirms *Earthseed*'s position in the field of religion as a viable option for people who consider religion an appealing narrative capable of explaining the world but are dissatisfied with its traditional forms. Interestingly, the field of sense responsible for the creation of *Earthseed* bears striking resemblance to Althusser's notion of ideology, criticized by Kaup for its determinism (275). Even though Lauren does not reproduce the meaning and values of her father's religion, she seems incapable of thinking the post-apocalyptic world in secular terms, for her religious upbringing continues to determine the way she perceives reality. Therefore, *Earthseed* may be better perceived as a factish—although invented, it acquires a (semi)autonomous mode of existence through Lauren's followers' practices. It is not grounded in the notion of transcendental deity, but emerges out of the experience of the world. Such a view seems like a natural consequence of Kaup's holistic realism, yet it is unnecessarily obscured by Kaup's urge to follow Lauren's lead in defending *Earthseed*'s ontological status.

In spite of the aforementioned reservations, *New Ecological Realisms: Post-Apocalyptic Fiction and Contemporary Theory* is a remarkable scholarly work that combines a firm grasp of theory with literary analysis. Also, it hints at one of the greatest strengths of post-apocalyptic literature: it fends off the void of nihilism not by defending universal truths, but by depicting characters who find/invent (choose the option you are more likely to identify with) reasons to persevere. Surrounded by constant reminders of humanity's fall, they never cease believing in the transformative power of narrative.

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