

The American Dream: still standing?

What can post-apocalyptic literature tell us about the American dream ideology?

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The American dream in post-apocalyptic America

“The American dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one – if you work hard and play by the rules, you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given ability will take you,”¹ President Bill Clinton said in a 1993 speech to the Democratic Leadership Council. In doing so, he captured the widely endorsed characteristics of this concept, a phenomenon that has helped shape the United States, that is undeniably flawed, yet always seems to increase hope and opportunities around the country. The tenets Clinton named, however, also raise the question of how achievable that success is for all Americans – and in what respect changes in the United States affect the ideology of the American dream.

Strikingly, a recent speech by President Barack Obama shows how the content of the ideology can shift because of societal circumstances in the United States. In February, Obama claimed that “folks don’t have unrealistic ambitions. They do believe that if they work hard they should be able to achieve [a] small measure of an American dream.”² Elaborating on this, Obama listed the abilities to raise a family, own a home, have health insurance and sending your children to college as elements of this stripped-down American dream, a message that appeared cut out for America in its current economic circumstances – with a widening income gap and an unemployment rate of above 8 per cent seemingly calling for a more realistic American dream.

In whatever way the dream is analysed, it is always recognisable as a true American ideology and has always remained an American concept. In this thesis, I will offer a closer look at the ideology behind the American dream and the way it is reflected in post-apocalyptic literature – is the American dream ideology in its current state transferred to a dystopian portrayal of the United States or is it altered? In order to do so, two influential post-apocalyptic novels will be examined – looking at the United States from the perspective of societies that are rooted on its ashes will provide a different insight of the dominant paradigm that the American dream ideology entails. The novels I have selected provide divergent portrayals of a post-apocalyptic America. Cormac McCarthy’s widely acclaimed *The Road* shows the image of a deterred, miasmal country, in which the few survivors of a suggested cataclysmic natural disaster struggle to survive. In Suzanne Collins’ young adult novel *The Hunger Games*, the first book in a trilogy on a post-apocalyptic world, a dystopian state is revealed, an America that is reminiscent of George Orwell’s *1984*, in which the state controls all human life, even to the point where children have to fight each other to death on national television, in order to emphasise the unassailable power of the government. Naturally, this limited selection cannot be considered representative for American post-apocalyptic literature. The constraint of the selection will make it harder, if not impossible, to make general

¹ J. Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* (Princeton 1995), 18.

² Associated Press, ‘Obama peddles modest American dream on campaign trail’ (21 February 2012), <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2012/02/21/obama-peddles-modest-american-dream-on-campaign-trail/#ixzz253vkwLZR> (20 August 2012)

assumptions about the American dream ideology. I do however strongly believe that an analysis of the narrative framework that comes forward in these two novels – divergent in their themes, style and audience, yet each painting a vivid image of a dystopian post-America – will contribute to my analysis of the American dream ideology, a complex trope that has proved and remained significant in American culture and the shaping of a national identity. The American dream is indeed a complex trope that cannot be fully unravelled or explained, but analysing its appearance in two highly appraised novels that provide an alienating view of a fictional post-apocalyptic America might help explain the role it fulfils in American society, and the way the contents of the ideology might be subject to changes in America.

The Road and *The Hunger Games*, each portraying a different dystopian post-American state, will be used as an illustration in order to help answer a set of questions, the primary one being the topic of the endurance of the dream concept that has always been closely tied to the country – to what extent is the American dream ideology necessary for the survival of any form of America in a dystopian world? As the United States no longer exists in its current form in the selected novels, they will provide a helpful insight, that will serve as a case study in answering these questions. In order to be able to answer this set of questions, though, it is of vital importance that the history of the American dream ideology is examined. Looking at how the contents of the concept may have evolved over the years and how the ideology may have performed a specific task in American culture – following the philosophical notion that ideology can entail a performative factor, as expressed by the Frankfurter Schule – investigating the ideology's history will provide a framework for the dream, a framework I will consequently assess in *The Road* and *The Hunger Games*. By studying these novels and the actions of their protagonists, I will offer an analysis of the role of the American dream in these two post-apocalyptic novels, in order to help examine its significance in American society. As the different fictional portraits of post-apocalyptic America have their fundament in present-day America, they will provide an insight in the actual function of the ideology of the American dream. Furthermore, I will look into the social criticism on America and its dream ideology that is expressed through the novels – the dystopian world entails the enlargement and decontextualisation of certain parts of American culture and can consequently function as a critical reflection on these phenomena. In order to do so, I will assess several philosophical perceptions of ideology, like Slavoj Žižek's *The Spectre of Ideology*, as well as analyses of the American dream itself, and investigate how these notions can be retrieved in the respective novels. My approach will follow Žižek's neomarxist notion that ideology can play an active role in people's thinking and actions. The fictional altered American landscape of *The Road* and *The Hunger Games* can be seen as a narrative strategy to place present-day concepts in a different, more extreme context. As the portrayed dystopian societies seemingly entail a shift in social paradigms, using them as a case study will help define how the ideology works if it is taken away from its usual social context.

History of the American dream ideology

In this chapter, I will focus on the history of the American dream ideology. In order to be able to grasp the importance of the ideology for American culture, as well as to understand how it could come forward in post-apocalyptic literature, a critical study of the American dream's history is in place. In doing so, the chapter will lead the way to a somewhat hermeneutic approach – by analysing the history of the ideology, it will be easier to contextualise the concept in post-apocalyptic fiction, consequentially leading to a better understanding of the ideology as a whole. Throughout the centuries, the concept of the American dream has adapted to a shifting American society. The rise of capitalism seems to take in a leading position in the development of the American dream ideology. Having started out as the dream of a better and fuller life in terms of both social mobility and economic growth, the latter now seems to take control the ideology. As noted in a 2006 article in *The Economist*, America defines itself by its collective dream more than any other country, a dream that “offers a chance of the good life to everybody who is willing to work hard and play by the rules”³ – an interpretation that is in line with the dominant view on the dream. However, the contents of the dream have allowed it to shift to a more capitalist-centred ideology, the inequalities and insecurities trivialised and blurred by the potential of the dream. The *Economist* article mentions a trend in mentality, which comes down to “who cares if the boss earns 300 times more than the average working stiff, if the stiff knows he can become the boss?”⁴ This increasingly adapted economic interpretation of the American dream, several critics claim, may well lead to the death of the concept, as the ideology was never intended for solely being a platform for “the mere trappings of wealth,”⁵ historian Luke S.H. Wright contends in his 2009 article *The Death of the American Dream*.

Indeed, the American dream started as an ideology of potential, with a range of which the end could not even be seen. “In the beginning,” political philosopher John Locke wrote in his 1689 essay *Second Treatise of Government*, “all the world was America.”⁶ Locke hereby indicates that, in the early stages of the American dream's establishment, the to be founded United States of America offered an endless perspective, a newness that could be filled with infinite possibilities and resources – elements that, as Jennifer L. Hochschild points out in *Facing up to the American Dream*, “are commonly understood to be the essence of the American dream.”⁷ The phrase, she writes, sparks some version of John Locke's ideals for most Americans. Nevertheless, however much Locke's words may evoke fantasies about the various American dream interpretations that have occurred since his work was first published, he specifically referred to “the absence of a cash nexus in primitive society”⁸. The cash nexus gap that capitalism had yet to fill offered a meaning of success that was bound to personal ideals, rather than an economic system. In the beginning, when all was America, this ‘new world’ was a place where anything could happen. The American dream

³ The Economist, ‘Inequality and the American Dream’ (15 June 2006), <http://www.economist.com.proxy.library.uu.nl/node/7059155> (24 August 2012)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ L. Wright, ‘The Death of the American Dream’, *Virginia Quarterly* 3 (2009), 199.

⁶ J. Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream*, 15.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

ideology therefore consists of a diversity of beliefs regarding the achievement of success, in which material well-being is only one form of accomplishment.

The American dream ideology has nonetheless arguably shifted towards a capitalistic paradigm. When taking a giant leap from 17th-century dissident John Locke to 1960's *enfant terrible* Hunter S. Thompson, it seems that the unbridled dream ideal has faded. Thompson, while working on a project about the supposed 'death of the American dream', wrote his editor Jim Silberman in 1969 that the "'American dream' notion becomes increasingly meaningless."⁹ The initial ideology, the notion that every American has a chance to reach whatever their ambitions entail, regardless of race or descent, seemed to have suffered significant damage. Thompson mentioned this after witnessing an altercation at a Democratic convention where Jewish Senator Abraham Ribicoff of Connecticut requested that Chicago's Mayor Richard Daley halted his 'Gestapo tactics', to which the latter responded by screaming "Fuck you, you Jew son of a bitch. You lousy motherfucker!"¹⁰ This scene led Thompson to claiming that he "(...) went to Chicago to research a part of a book on 'The Death of the American Dream', and needless to say my trip was a rotten success,"¹¹ as well as claiming that it was "(...) hard to explain except as a final loss of faith in whatever this country was supposed to stand for, all that bullshit in the history books."¹² One of the history books in which this so-called 'bullshit' was formulated, is historian James Truslow Adams' *The Epic of America*, published in 1931, in the heart of the Great Depression. In his epilogue, Adams coins the term 'American dream' as meaning:

"[...] that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. It is not the dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognised by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth and position." (Wright 197)

Adams touches the core of the dream's ideology by showing how the American dream ultimately revolves around the ability of self-fulfilment, notwithstanding one's social-economic origins. In line with Locke's initial claim that 'all the world was America', Wright points out how material well-being should not be at the base of the American dream. As he puts it, "it (the American Dream, LS) can never be wrought into a reality by cheap people or by 'keeping up with the Joneses.'"¹³

Strikingly, the original foundation of the American dream, as posited by John Locke, and the coining of its exact definition by James Truslow Adams both occurred in a time when people did not blindly follow capitalistic ideals, either because it simply did not yet exist, or because the Great Depression had highly diminished people's trust in the economic system. It may be worth noting that Adams' *The Epic of America* was published around the rise of the Frankfurt School and the growing importance of critical

⁹ L. Wright, *The Death of the American Dream*, 196.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Wright, 197.

theory in the western world. His motives for coining the American dream in the way he did have arguably been influenced by the rise of social criticism. Nonetheless, if ‘the Joneses’ are struck by a financial crisis, the relevance of having a bigger house or a fancier car fades, and the way of life in which keeping up with the rest (or being better than others) has become the heart of the dream ideology, is brought back to its original state. The simple and powerful American dream ideology that former President Bill Clinton, as mentioned in the introduction, described as a social phenomenon in which working hard and playing by the rules should lead to a chance to “go as far as your God-given ability will take you”¹⁴ resurfaces when people are not in the position to show what they are worth through ‘keeping up with the Joneses’. Wright mentions that Americans may have confused the American dream with, as he puts it, simple accumulation – with many Americans spending beyond their means to give off an impression of achievement. Analysing how the leading paradigms in American society have led the original dream ideology to morph into a materialist-driven concept, even claiming that the current interpretation of the ideology is a pervasive cultural misperception, he suggests that “(..)it would be well to remember that Adams specifically coined the term “the American dream” to warn of its possible death.”¹⁵ However much Thompson and Wright fear the death of the American dream, its mutable content implies the opposite. The American dream ideology has undoubtedly changed, but is still omnipresent and defining as a core ideology in American culture. This is reminiscent of Jacques Derrida’s language-philosophical notion of *différance*: the idea that meaning is not self-present in the sign, or in text, but exists in the gap between the signifier and the signified, as no sign is identical with what it signifies¹⁶. This ‘instability of the sign’ can be found in the American dream ideology – its non-materialistic contents have altered into a more capitalism-driven ideal because of changes in America, although the sign ‘American dream’ nor the signified have changed in essence. The fact that the sign continues to fluctuate and remains significant to American culture contradicts the fear of the death of the American dream.

Nevertheless, even the original concept of the American dream has its flaws, as Hochschild emphasises in her analysis of the ideology. Dissecting the contents of the American dream, balancing between Locke’s ideal, Adams’ definition and Wilson’s somewhat atrabilious vision, she claims that the American dream consists of tenets about achieving success, which come with their specific set of rules. Hochschild points out that these rules can be deceiving and may seem to embrace every hardworking American, but are undeniably flawed, as they propose a false claim to general achievability – each tenet contains constraints that exclude certain groups or classes from the possibility of achieving its content¹⁷. She argues that the American dream does not necessarily have to be individualistic in the narrow sense, claiming that, depending on how success is categorised, it can also be achieved for families or communities. She does however endorse that it is highly *individual* - it leads one to “focus on people's behaviours rather than on economic processes, environmental constraints, or political structures as the causal explanation for social

¹⁴ Hochschild, 18.

¹⁵ Wright, 199.

¹⁶ A. Loomba, *Colonialism and Post-colonialism* (New York 2005), 66.

¹⁷ Hochschild, 36-37.

orderings”¹⁸. Her analysis is reminiscent of Roland Barthes’ description of the myth, in claiming that the American dream, like the myth, makes certain relations – however much they are the effect of power structures – seem natural through the way the focus is built up.¹⁹ However, according to Hochschild, this focus itself is not a flaw, but in carrying a moral message, it does expose a weakness in the ideology. The American dream ideology almost seems to be founded on an unbridled optimism, wherein the promise of everyone who acts upon it gets the chance to go as far as their abilities take them might obscure the unambiguous fact that it is impossible for everyone to achieve everything, or even the American dream to the more realistic extent that President Obama sketched. The focus of the American dream ideology is undeniably gendered, and limits the achievability of the dream mostly exclusively to those of a certain race, age, and – regardless of its promise – descent. In that way, the American dream can be viewed upon as an ideology that is highly influenced by post-colonial values, its achievability significantly more realistic for white, high-educated males from wealthy families or areas. In spiriting away the power structures that highly impede the general viability of reaching the American dream, the ideology disregards a significant part of the group it appeals to. As Hochschild puts it, the idea of the blank slate, the almost-promise of success, the reliance on personal attributes and the association of failure with sin make it immensely difficult to realise that “everyone cannot simultaneously attain more than absolute success.”²⁰ The optimistic language of and methodological individualism built into the ideology, she claims, is fundamentally deceptive. For every win, there must be someone who loses. This idea is not at all incorporated in the American dream, where it seems like everyone can achieve anything. Mostly, however, Hochschild boldly claims, the idea “that everyone can participate equally and can always start over, is troubling to the degree that is not true. (...) [T]he myth of the individual mini-state of nature is just that – a fantasy to be sought but never achieved.”²¹

Hochschild points at racial and gender inequality, which, however decreasing in the last decades, are everpresent in American society and thus raise a blockade for the equal opportunities the American dream ideology presupposes. Hochschild acknowledges ascriptive constraints have been weakened, but points out how until the end of the 20th century, no more than a mere one-third of the American population genuinely believed in the first tenet of the American dream. The limitations to the dream have been exposed, but the dream remains an ideal in the collective imaginary – as philosopher Slavoj Žižek puts it, “the function of ideology is to provide men and women with a fantasised/phantasmatic scenic sequence of the possibility of its own social condition. In synthesis, ideology provides an idealised vision of a ‘society’ that cannot really exist”²². Americans may be well aware that the dream is a myth to a certain extent, but are still irrationally attached to the idealised contents of the world the ideology holds out.

¹⁸ Hochschild, 36.

¹⁹ R. Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York 1991), 121.

²⁰ Hochschild, 37.

²¹ Hochschild, 27.

²² A. Elliot, *Teoría social y psicoanálisis en transición. Sujeto y sociedad de Freud a Kristeva* (Buenos Aires 1995), 242.

As will come forward in the following chapters, the American dream – despite Wright’s concerns that the current perception might kill the dream – is a persistent, although unstable, ideology, and could be powerful enough to still come forward in a society that is merely reminiscent of America, instead of still being the actual country in which the American dream ideology originates. Indeed, the persistence of the American dream ideology as a binding factor in American culture may even be of significance for the survival of American values in general. I will use *The Road* and *The Hunger Games* to illustrate the works of the American dream ideology as analysed in this chapter. Like in Adams’ original definition of the American dream, in post-apocalyptic literature, the dominant powers behind the present-day dream ideology have faded, as the apocalypse which has shaped the respective novels’ landscape, has swept away the economic elements that have reigned supreme. I have now postulated the American dream as an unstable, fluctuating concept with a profoundly ideological basis. However much the dream may mask reality, its ubiquity substantiates the notion that it may still be of value in the worlds of *The Road* or *The Hunger Games*, fictional worlds that – as I will explain in the coming chapters – could well be seen as a literary tool to voice criticism on contemporary culture. I will show how the American dream ideology is present in contemporary dystopian literature and demonstrate how the post-apocalyptic framework may offer a different interpretation of the American dream.

The persistence of the American dream in a post-apocalyptic world

What is the role of the American dream in a post-apocalyptic world? How is the ideology represented in dystopian literature describing worlds on the ashes of our current habitat? In the previous chapter, I have investigated why the American dream ideology is so persistent. This chapter will focus on how the ideology comes forward in *The Road* and *The Hunger Games*, two widely acclaimed novels that are known as influential examples of dystopian literature. These novels will serve as examples to determine the role of the American dream in the post-apocalyptic world, and will be used to see to what extent the dream can come forward in this type of literature. I have chosen to look into the way the stories are set up rather than base the analysis on close reading, as it is the general framework that I think paints a clear picture of how the dream ideology works in the novels, and consequently reflects on the work of the myth in American culture in general. The analysis of these dystopian novels therefore serves as an illustration rather than forming the main point of my thesis.

As argued in the introduction and the first chapter, the dream ideology is closely tied to the United States as a concept. In worlds that depict a post-America society, does the American dream still have a role? The answer to this appears to be 'yes', for a twofold reason that has the same fundament: even though the dystopian worlds in novels like *The Hunger Games* and *The Road* are no longer America, they are still reminiscent of that country, not in the least place because the dystopian picture can function as a framework for a social critique on present-day America. As explained by M. Keith Booker in his 1994 book *The dystopian impulse in modern literature: fiction as social criticism*, dystopias offer a fictional society that is marked by suffering, caused by human and political evils. His study has shown that literary dystopias can therefore be viewed upon as social criticism – as they build on and enlarge aspects of the current-day version of the society they describe and stripped these from their usual social context.²³ Concerning the American dream ideology, the problem of the ideology, as Hochschild points out, seems to be its functioning as a myth – the dream is appealing to many, but only achievable for few. It is therefore interesting to study how the ideology functions in a fictional society (if the worlds of *The Road* and *The Hunger Games* can even be named as such), that is based on and reminiscent of the United States, but is seemingly stripped of current-day dominant social paradigms through the dystopian framework.

The notion of the American dream in a post-apocalyptic world is closely tied to the concept of time development. In both *The Road* and *The Hunger Games*, parts of pre-apocalyptic American culture live on after the cataclysmic destruction of the place in which it was built. The American dream ideology has proven vital to the American collective imaginary and would logically survive as well. In its original religious context, the apocalypse would be a divine act – God's wrath leading to a world-ending Doomsday. In post-apocalyptic literature, nonetheless, as the term itself already implies, the world indeed

²³ M. Booker, *The dystopian impulse in modern literature: fiction as social criticism* (Westport 1994), 18.

ceases to exist in its present state, but is not entirely washed away. Novels like *The Road* and *The Hunger Games* undeniably portray a dystopian world, but one in which the influence of the United States is still somehow visible. The position of this apocalypse in time development must therefore carefully be assessed, in order to determine the framework in which the American dream ideology is set. Authors McCarthy and Collins presume the remainder of several aspects of humanity and society, which in the context of the dystopian fiction, leads to a certain interpretation of the American dream ideology. In order to be able to analyse the work of the ideology in their portrayal of humanity, I will first demarcate the framework they have used for building this dystopian world. The notion of time development is a significant factor in defining this framework. Claims can be (and have been) made for the apocalypse being a milestone, if not the end, of a linearly developing timeframe, yet the apocalypse has also been placed at the terminus of a cyclical timeframe, being the crossroad before the leap to a new start of the cycle. The sinister, deserted America that is described in *The Road* seems to place the apocalypse at the climax of a linear time development – the Doomsday seems to have settled itself at the end of time development like a full stop at the end of a sentence. The father and the son, their journey and the few people they encounter during their hopeful quest towards a better life seem nothing more than the last convulsions of an unavailingly motivated father and his obedient son – a boy who has little choice but to follow his father. Nevertheless, as McCarthy unfolds his primarily ominous plot, the ubiquitous message of hope that can be found throughout the novel is finally authenticated when the son finds a better future in a family with children that has survived in the South. He now appears not only to have a chance of survival, but might also be of importance in increasing the possibility of a revival of reproduction. This message, suggesting a possible bright future after the apocalypse, seems to strike against the assumed linear development of time. The suggestion of a new start is not in accord with the idea of the cataclysm marking the end of time. The end of the novel, implying a possible improvement of the quality of life, suggests that an upward movement in time development may be imminent. In *The Hunger Games*, the apocalypse itself is not mentioned that directly. Nevertheless, it is clear that the natural disaster that ended the existence of America in its current form has not marked the end of the world. As mentioned in the novel, the post-apocalyptic nation of Panem has been around for more than 75 years. Although it is often reminiscent of an old Roman society rather than pre-apocalyptic America, there are definite signs of remainders of American culture, if only in the names of the characters and the use of the English language.

The reason for the occurrence of parts of pre-apocalyptic American society in *The Road* and *The Hunger Games* is arguably to be found in the frame the respective authors used to build their fictional worlds. In his 1994 essay *The Spectre of Ideology*, philosopher Slavoj Žižek mentions Althusser's idea of the topicality of the thought – the way a thought is inscribed into its object, or, as Žižek paraphrases into a more Derridean way of saying, “the way the frame itself is part of the framed content”.²⁴ Žižek claims that ideologies may

²⁴ E. Wright and E. Wright (eds.), *The Žižek Reader* (Malden 1999), 62.

change under the influence of the social framework in which they are located, and names Marxism as an example, arguing that its change from critique of political economy to critique of instrumental reason had to do with the changing world – it was no longer grounded in a concrete, social reality, but rather “conceived as a kind of anthropological, even quasi-transcendental, primordial constant that enables us to explain the social reality[.]”²⁵ A similar claim could be made for the American dream. The interpretation of the dream as coined by Adams is subject to a changing environment – as mentioned, changes in dominant American societal paradigms have arguably led to a more individualistic, capitalist-based version of the American dream ideology. The notion that the contents of an ideology can be situational endorse to the idea that the American dream ideology could survive an apocalypse. The original ideology, the idea that life could be richer and fuller for every person if they work hard enough to reach their full potential, is of course troubled in a dystopian environment, as full potential is limited by the boundaries that society (or the dominance of the Capitol in *The Hunger Games*) or a lack thereof (as portrayed in *The Road*) raise. Nevertheless, the plot in both novels revolves around the remainder of that ideal, with *The Road* following the actual journey of a man and his son towards better circumstances, whereas self-development even works as a means of survival in *The Hunger Games*: Katniss has to exert and extend her mental and physical skills to win the Games. The dystopian frameworks the respective authors have built strip away prosperity from the myth, and bring it back to the notion that working hard can lead to a better life – however relative this better life may be in the environments that are described the novels.

Žižek’s interpretation of Althusser’s ideas has an ambivalent meaning for the role of the American dream in post-apocalyptic literature. Using post-apocalyptic America as a framework for a dystopian narrative arguably results in the reflection of that framework within the portrayed world. It is therefore deemed logical that the presence of the American dream ideology is to be validated within such fictional worlds, mainly because the dystopian world is framed on present-day America. The ideologies that are present in the current state of the country are reflected in the novels, which in themselves, following Booker’s theory, may serve as social criticism. *The Road* and *The Hunger Games* provide the possibility to analyse the problems of cultural phenomena by placing them out of their cultural ‘comfort zone’. Using the apocalypse to show how America has self-destructive capacities, McCarthy and Collins seek to portray what would be built on the ashes of such a cataclysmic event, thus stripping the current circumstantial interpretation from the ideologies that help shape the contemporary American identity. As these dystopian novels reflect on the present, the characters that authors like Collins and McCarthy shape in their fictional worlds are also part of that framework, that is reminiscent of present-day America, be it in the setup of surroundings, a common language or the way characters pursue their actions. Although it seems like the characters have been placed in an unknown world, this post-apocalyptic environment, for which the United States in its current state has been used as a framework, inevitably is marked by traces of that original world – the novels denounce the concept of America as formed by its ideologies. Therefore, the assumption that the apocalypse in *The Road* marks the end of the world and consequently is to be

²⁵ Wright and Wright, *The Žižek Reader*, 62.

considered the peak of linear time development may not be as logical and adequate as it may appear at first sight. In the world McCarthy describes, implications of a possible improvement of the quality of life in a post-apocalyptic America may as well indicate the apocalypse as part of a cyclical development of time. Both assumptions must be weighed in order to answer the question of how the mentioned apocalypse in post-apocalyptic literature can be placed within the concept of time development – as this notion is vital for the framework in which the American dream ideology comes forward.

In his work *Living in the End Times*, Žižek analyses the imminent end of the world by identifying and elaborating on the four factors that rush the world towards its approaching apocalypse, hereby identifying how the forthcoming failure of Western capitalism will steer the world towards its end. Nevertheless, Žižek also implies that the end of the world can also engage a new start, thus arguing against the apocalypse being the definite end of the world. Žižek writes as follows: “Fredric Jameson’s old quip holds today more than ever: it is easier to imagine a real change in capitalist relations – as if, even after a global cataclysm, capitalism will somehow continue. One argument more for the fact that, when our natural commons are threatened, neither market nor state will save us[.]”²⁶ He hereby points at the reluctance of national governments to take action when ecology is at stake, thus implying that a natural disaster like the one leading to the situation in *The Road*, a cataclysm of apocalyptic proportions, is not necessarily a divine act. It may well be caused by governmental reluctance to warrant ecology at the possible expense of capitalism, Žižek suggests. This possibility helps to explain the ambiguous stance the father takes with regard to the role of God in the apocalypse. As it is succeeded by a new type of world, this cataclysm possibly was not caused by God.

“The man watched him. How would you know if you were the last man on earth? he said.

I dont guess you would know it. You’d just be it.

Nobody would know it.

It wouldnt make any difference. When you die it’s the same as if everybody else did too.

I guess God would know it. Is that it?

There is no God.

No?

There is no God and we are his prophets.”²⁷

This critical stance towards the role of a divine power in ‘engaging’ the apocalypse is supported by German philosopher Dietmar Kamper, who in his essay *Between Simulation and Negentropy: The Fate of the Individual in Looking Back on the End of the World* suggests that human development appeals for a different interpretation of the apocalypse:

²⁶ Wright and Wright, *The Žižek Reader*, 335.

²⁷ C. McCarthy, *The Road* (London 2007), 180-181.

“[O]ne must speak of the loss of eternity. The new beginning of an eon that no longer bears the terrible traits of ancient times as promised in the ancient apocalypses does not pertain today. It concerns an apocalypse without transcendence, an inherent happening that is accelerating like a cataract, losing its meaning. Thus it would be appropriate to ask whether the model of history with beginning and end has not become meaningless today. (...) In the apocalypse would then lie the revelation that the finite event of history is only a historical obsession.”²⁸

Kamper’s claim coincides with the fact in the novel that the cataclysm has not called the world to a definitive end, which in fact indicates that there is no such thing as a finite event of history. In the world of *The Road*, it is hard to survive, yet it is possible. The fact that the quest to take the boy to a better place is apparently successful arguably legitimises Kamper’s question if the idea of a confined history is still appropriate. In the novel, the apocalypse leads to a different world instead of leading to its end. The logically acclaimed end of history is therefore no longer in existence as such. Be it a ‘historical obsession’, as Kamper claims, or more a matter of a shifting paradigm in the understanding of history, the original historical paradigm, with the world developing towards an end, is falsified when the world continues to exist for years after the apocalypse, seemingly not just for the last convulsions of a crushed world, but withholding the possibility of new creation in the end of the book, where McCarthy is clearly hinting on a possibility of reproduction, when the boy encounters the mother of the family.

“Do you have any kids?

We do.

Do you have a little boy?

We have a little boy and we have a little girl.” (McCarthy 303-304)

Nonetheless, the possibility of cyclical time is to be questioned when a population is still in some way attached to its past. A notable problem regarding a cyclical development of time is raised by philosopher Francis Fukuyama, who, in his work *The End of History and the Last Man* elaborates on the possible aftermath of a cataclysmic event, such as the apocalypse after which the stories of *The Road* and *The Hunger Games* take place. Fukuyama suggests that such a cataclysm can only be embedded in a cyclical time development when it urges the remainder of the civilisation to start over without considering the modern natural science that was known in the previous condition, claiming that a truly cyclical history is only conceivable if we posit the possibility that “a given civilization can vanish entirely without leaving any imprint on those that follow. This, in fact, occurred prior to the invention of modern natural science. Modern natural science, however, is so powerful, both for good and for evil, that it is very doubtful whether it can ever be forgotten or “un-invented” under conditions other than the physical annihilation of the human race,” Fukuyama notes.²⁹ He claims that if the grip of a progressive modern natural science is irreversible after an apocalyptic event, a directional history and its economic, social, and political

²⁸ D. Kamper et al., *Looking Back on the End of the World* (New York 1989), 62.

²⁹ F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York 1992), 87.

consequences are not reversible in any fundamental sense either.³⁰ With this analysis, Fukuyama exposes a vulnerable vein in the cyclical time notion. The father in *The Road* has lived in the pre-apocalyptic world and therefore is acquainted with the knowledge of his civilised generation. The state of Panem in *The Hunger Games* is partially based on American values. Although this knowledge may not have been passed on deliberately, the post-apocalyptic born son in *The Road* and the people of the Districts of Panem, even though they are born some 75 years after the apocalypse, cannot be considered a mere product of a new cycle.

Especially in *The Road*, where inhabitants of the pre-apocalyptic world are still alive and trying to find their way on the ashes of the world as they knew it, the pre-apocalyptic influence may well hold the cycle together. The father – along with the other adults (Ely, the father and mother of the ‘new family’) that play a role in the novel – gives the new generation a kick-start into a new America.

Throughout the novel, the father uses his last powers – physical as well as intellectual – to guide the boy towards a better life in the south, thereby justifying Fukuyama’s statement that it can be doubted if modern natural science can be forgotten if the human race is not completely annihilated. In *The Hunger Games*, the annihilation of the pre-apocalyptic race is suggested, but the existence of the Hunger Games as TV programme and the functioning of popular culture as a means of Capitol propaganda show how elements of pre-apocalyptic society have survived. Furthermore, extending the Fukuyama statement to a wider notion, the father in *The Road* also inflicts his prior cultural knowledge on his son. If a cyclical development were to occur, the beginning would not merely be a start of something new, but of everything new. The father’s sentiment towards American pre-apocalyptic products, as is portrayed in the Coca-Cola scene, is clearly visible for the boy, who immediately recognises and adapts the significance of these American symbols.

“By the door were two softdrink machines that had been tilted over into the floor and opened with a pry bar. Coins everywhere in the ash. He sat and ran his hand around in the works of the gutted machines and in the second one it closed over a cold metal cylinder. He withdrew his hand slowly and sat looking at a Coca Cola.

What is it, Papa?

It’s a treat. For you.

What is it?” (McCarthy 22)

The can of Coca-Cola may well function as a symbol of America, of the American dream perhaps, but rather, the symbolism the father finds in the nostalgia of collecting a can of soda from a vending machine instantly inflicts an emotion on the boy. The significance of the Coca-Cola scene has been debated in various articles. “The supermarket scene,” Brian Donnelly argues, “establishes the tension that the text will continue to exploit, between pre- and post-apocalyptic worlds, between the excessive - yet enjoyable - consumption signalled by the can of Coke and the horrific cannibalistic consumption of the novel’s

³⁰ F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, 87.

present,”³¹ thereby pointing at the dark underbelly of the American dream and the sinister way the novel points at the flawed tenet in the dream ideology that seems to disguise plain fact that success cannot be achieved by everyone. Donnelly goes on to assess the correlation between Coca-Cola and *The Road*, but has already made a strong case for a re-interpretation of the apocalypse in time development. The fact that a post-apocalyptic world contains tensions between that world and its predecessor suggests that the apocalypse in novels like *The Road* and *The Hunger Games* proves to be a definite setback in development and prosperity. It is certainly the end of the world as we know it, but not the definitive end of the world, as the original definition of the apocalypse entailed. A cyclical development is practically ruled out as the apocalypse has not washed away all of the previous society, as Fukuyama claimed would be necessary. If society is not washed away, its ideologies still have a place in their new form. Strikingly, this conception shows parallels with Žižek’s notion of situational ideology. Changes in society have changed the interpretation of the apocalypse as well as they have facilitated the changing American dream ideology. The idea that ideologies can be subject to change endorses to the idea that a form of American dream is definitely viable, even if the dystopian post-apocalyptic world is only vaguely reminiscent of the place in which the original paradigm was shaped. The following chapter will elaborate on how the American dream is shaped within these new worlds, and how the characters should be analysed in relation to the ideology.

³¹ B. Donnelly, ‘Coke Is It: Placing Coca-Cola in McCarthy’s *The Road*’, *Explicator* 1 (2010), 160.

Changing surroundings, changing ideologies?

Having analysed the history and foundations of the American dream ideology, and having examined to what extent the American dream ideology is powerful enough to surpass America in its current form, my next step is to define how the American dream comes forward in dystopian literature, once again using *The Road* and *The Hunger Games* as an example. Dystopian literature, as said, frequently incorporates a form of critique on the current state of the subject it enlarges and decontextualises. I will therefore try to determine to what extent the way the American dream ideology comes forward in the selected novels endorses to the prevailing criticism on the current state of the ideology, as mentioned in the previous chapters.

Both *The Road* and *The Hunger Games* are characterised by a strong protagonist who is different from the usual type of literary hero. In a 2012 article in the *New York Times*, provocatively titled *A Radical Female Hero From Dystopia*, editor Manohla Dargis claims that Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist of *The Hunger Games*, may therefore be speaking to so many. She is not merely a new kind of female character, but may also represent “an alternative to an enduring cultural type that the literary critic R.W.B. Lewis described as the American Adam.”³² Although Lewis already coined his term in 1955, the concept can still be considered strikingly contemporary. The American Adam, an often emerging type of protagonist, is described as a natural hero, “ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources.”³³ This type of hero can be viewed as the embodiment of the American dream ideology – someone who works hard to reach his goals, thereby enlightening himself and reaching what he strives to achieve. Adams endorses to this notion, claiming that this contemporary picture of the literary hero serves as a mirror to society. He claims that the picture is therefore not a dishonest one, but remains frozen in outline nonetheless.³⁴ Since, as he states, “it contains within it no opposite possibilities on which to feed and fatten,”³⁵ he sees the common appearance of the American Adam as a type of hopelessness in disguise. Adams’ views can in part be seen as supporting Hochschild’s arguments *avant la lettre*. Similar to her description of the mythical, deceitful interpretation that surrounds the American dream ideology, Adams points out how the plain heroic ideal of the American Adam is somewhat simple-minded, “opposed only by that parody of hope which consists in an appeal for ‘positive thinking’, “[...] based upon a wilful ignorance, momentarily popular in the market place of culture but with no hold at all upon the known truth of experience.”³⁶ The ‘momentary’ popularity of positive thinking that Adams denotes has not lost anything of its significant position in culture, which only emphasises the actuality that his analysis still holds.

³² A. Scott and K. Dargis, ‘A Radical Female Hero From Dystopia’ (4 April 2012), <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/08/movies/katniss-everdeen-a-new-type-of-woman-warrior.html?pagewanted=all> (12 May 2012)

³³ R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago 1955), 12.

³⁴ R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam*, 195.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam*, 196.

In his renowned work *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (1984), Paul Brooks builds on Lewis' notion of the American Adam by describing a dominant dynamic of plot, namely that of ambition. Ambition, Brooks states, drives the protagonist forward, "assuring that no incident or action is final or closed in itself until such a moment as the ends of ambition have been clarified, through success or else renunciation."³⁷ This analysis is closely tied to the ideology of the American dream, in itself a textbook example of ambition. As this ideology, as Hochschild pointed out, appeals to so many Americans – and has become inherent to the national identity, it makes sense that it is a steering factor for so many American protagonists. Strikingly, as well as is the case in contemporary America, the ability to act upon that ambition in fiction is often confined to a more select group than is drawn to the ideology, Brooks indicates. He claims that ambition is inherently totalising and moves forward through the encompassment of more – striving to have, to do, and to be more. Ambition as a plot structure, as Brooks defines it, can be considered the narrative variant of the American dream ideology, as it builds on the same values and has a comparable appeal. Therefore, it seems to prove logical that Brooks names ambition in fiction as mostly confined to men of a certain origin, in regard to wealth, class and race. He names this phenomenon 'the male plot of ambition', claiming that men in fiction take a less complex stance toward ambition than women, whose role tends to come forward in a 'plot of endurance', in which their desire is "a permitted response to the expression of male desire."³⁸ The contrast between this concept and the new kind of hero that is to be found in Katniss Everdeen can be viewed as significant for the changed interpretation of the American dream ideology within the post-apocalyptic world that Collins created. Whereas the American Adam, in being an individual that is "emancipated from history" and "happily bereft of ancestry" is characterised as standing alone and self-reliant, Katniss is – as Dargis claims – never liberated from history or ancestry, but deeply formed by them. Being influenced by her cultural inheritance actually helps her survive.

Dargis' argument indicates a shift in ideological interpretation, as the shift in heroism is arguably an effect of the context in which the American dream is formed. Hochschild pointed out the genderedness of the American dream ideology in its present surroundings. In *The Hunger Games*, Collins seems to advocate that this flaw to the ideology is as situational as the rest of its contents. The persistent American Adam is rooted in literature because it portrays the hero that suits America's common identity, which, as Hochschild argued, is appealing to many, but based and focused on merely a small, fortunate part of the American dream myth's audience. In introducing Katniss Everdeen as the heroine of the story, Collins underlines Hochschild's notion. The absence of a traditional cultural hierarchy paves the way for a more open approach to the myth. She exists, claims Dargis, in a dystopian nightmare that "has its utopian moment (...) in that race and gender stereotypes have become seemingly irrelevant."³⁹ Alternatively, Collins' posing of a female heroine, who is significantly different from the dominant type of protagonist in American literature, in a dystopian environment, can be analysed as criticism on the current dishonest

³⁷ P. Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York 1984), 39.

³⁸ P. Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 330.

³⁹ A. Scott and K. Dargis, 'A Radical Female Hero From Dystopia'.

interpretation of the American dream ideology, focused on keeping up with the Joneses rather than self-development. It can even be argued that the wide appraisal of Collins' protagonist highlights the flaws of the American dream – the laudatory response to the non-genderedness of the plot of ambition illustrates how deeply the actual genderedness of the ideology is rooted in American culture. Katniss' appeal as a protagonist may well be steered because it proposes a plot of ambition which is free from any form of racial and sexual prejudice. In winning the Games, in themselves an example of a success that everyone wants to achieve (if selected, that is) but that is merely reserved for the lucky few, gender does not seem to play a significant role. A male and female contender are chosen to participate for each district, but this does not influence the role they play in the Games, or the chance they have of winning. Even the love story between Katniss and her enemy cum star-crossed lover Peeta shows no signs of male dominance. Rather, Katniss' initial cold-hearted approach to his feelings and her forward actions in the usage of the love story's popularity are more in line with the traditional male-dominated plot of ambition than Peeta's stance, which is more reminiscent of the traditionally female plot of endurance.

There are several ways in which Collins' criticism has been analysed. "You can see it as a savage satire of late capitalism," Katha Pollitt noted in a 2012 *The Nation* article, pointing at how in Panem, "the 1 percent rule through brute force, starvation, technological wizardry and constant surveillance."⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the occurrence of such a heroine as Katniss seems to happen due to the absence of western cultural values, rather than a hyperbolic portrayal of western capitalism – Katniss' heroism being as situational as the absence of her type of protagonist in most American fiction. Dargis sees this as the utopian moment in a dystopian environment, but it is still at least remarkable that it takes a dystopian environment to let a protagonist bloom, whose ambitions are not restricted because of cultural background or gender. Katniss is as individualistic as the American Adam, but is deeply formed by her ancestry nonetheless. The reason these two – in literature traditionally opposing – characteristics work well together is the absence of the social-cultural paradigm in which the 'regular' American Adam would normally step up as the hero.

A similar development occurs in *The Road*, in which the American dream ideology is of as much as a grim nature as it is in *The Hunger Games*. The American dream, however deceptive, normally is a positive ideology, speaking of chances and ambitions, but is interpreted in the rawest way possible in Collins' and McCarthy's respective dystopias, for the mere reason that society (or the lack thereof) does not have much more to offer than a struggle for survival, surviving is the ambition that steers the character. A caring father normally wouldn't leave another man to die, let alone actively take part in causing his death, but because survival is driving the dream, it becomes a more grim ideology than it is under its current circumstances. Circumstances lead the father to act differently than he assumingly would have done in the pre-apocalyptic world, because he only has the survival of his son at stake. The lack of society, culture and therefore hierarchy blurs the face of America, but does create more equality in the possibility of achieving the dream – however grim the nature of the dream may be in these fictional dystopias. Like Collins,

⁴⁰ K. Pollitt, 'The Hunger Games' Feral Feminism', *The Nation* 17 (2012), 10.

McCarthy seems to criticise the current state of America and its ideologies by portraying what could happen on its ashes. Strikingly, the original contents of the American dream seem to survive. Be it because the American dream is rooted in the identity of American authors Collins and McCarthy, and/or because their protagonists are raised on the ashes of current-day America, their critical approaches to the country through dystopian fiction make it clear that the American dream is deeply rooted in the fundament of America. The way Brooks and Lewis analyse how ambition of a male dominance is a steering factor in American literature shows how the American dream ideology and the flaws that it contains come forward in American culture. Collins' and McCarthy's dystopian-themed criticism shows how a breakthrough in the genderedness of the American dream ideology can be forced through disregarding or washing away the dominant social paradigm that limits the achievability of the dream. The way the American dream ideology steers the characters anyway does however show how incredibly strong and defining it is for the American identity. In criticising America as it is, and maybe giving off a warning as to the current attrition that America has created in inequality (*The Hunger Games*) and ecology (*The Road*), both authors show that the heavily criticised American dream ideology is alive and kicking.

Conclusion

The American dream: unfair, but alive

This thesis on the American dream ideology and its appearance in post-apocalyptic literature has showed once again how troubled this ideology is, yet how it is ever-present and unabatedly significant for American culture. Examining the history of the American dream has shown that the ideology has constantly altered as a consequence to changes in the American cultural and economic landscape. Although James Truslow Adams' initial definition explicitly entailed a phrase that elaborated on how the American dream should not merely be focused on material well-being, it seems to have developed as such anyway, following the increased influence of capitalism on American culture – thereby sparking a competitiveness in the American dream that is known as 'keeping up with the Joneses' and a more economic approach to the ideology in general. This has even led critics to believe that the death of the American dream is near.

The persistent omnipresence of the American dream, in whatever way the ideology's contents have altered, can be explained through the notion of *différance*: the true content of the dream is not to be found in the sign or the signified, but in the gap that exists between them. The contents of this gap have proven to be situational and highly influenced by the state in which America finds itself. This does however not change that it is in fact a flawed ideology, its work comparable to how Barthes describes the myth – appealing to many, yet only achievable for few, because the ideology is deceptive in its disguise of power structures through an unbridled optimism and appealing proposals. The notion that many Americans have mistaken (or altered) the ideology of potential for an ideology of accumulation only further highlights that the American dream ideology is severely gendered and influenced by post-colonialism. While suggesting that whoever works hard and plays fair can achieve whatever he or she desires, an American dream that focuses on materialism and economic values is only achievable for the happy few, mostly white males of a wealthy descent. The dream nonetheless remains a common ideal in American culture – the idealised world that the ideology proposes causes Americans to be irrationally attached to the American dream, even if its promises are unrealistic.

Literary dystopias can be viewed upon as social criticism. Analysing the role of the American dream ideology in post-apocalyptic novels *The Road* and *The Hunger Games* can therefore help reflect on the works of the ideology in general, as the enlargement and decontextualisation of several cultural phenomena arguably enhances insights in the current state of these values. Using the apocalypse to show how America has self-destructive capacities, McCarthy and Collins seek to portray what could be built on the ashes of such a cataclysmic event. *The Road* is particularly interesting in its ambiguity concerning the linear and cyclical characteristics of time development, and consequently the occurrence of the same principle in ideologies like the American dream. The American dream is stripped from its situational content in these dystopias, which indicates the powerfulness of the ideology – the absence of all societal circumstances that make it what it is does not result in the death of the American dream. Rather, as long as society is not

entirely washed away, the ideal of searching for a better life and achieving it if one's work is hard and fair enough remains, and comes forward convincingly in a framework where survival is the raw version of the American dream. In doing so, the novels denounce the concept of America as formed by its ideologies. Changes in society facilitated the changing American dream ideology. The idea that ideologies can be subject to change endorses to the idea that a form of American dream is definitely viable in a world that does not contain America in its current form.

The persistence of the gendered American dream is not only visible in the way it is shaped in these novels, but also in the way it comes forward in literature and literary theory. The illogical heroes of *The Road* and *The Hunger Games* counter the notion of the American Adam as the heroic protagonist – rather than following a traditional 'male plot of ambition' or 'female plot of endurance', the protagonists in these novels are formed by history and free from gender prejudices. Stripping away the American social context from the ideology that still steers the characters reveals the genderedness and post-colonialism that surround the ideology in contemporary America. The lack of society, culture and therefore hierarchy blurs the face of America in the novels, but – however dingy the American dream is in the novels – creates more equality in achievability. The absence of a traditional cultural hierarchy paves the way for a more open approach to the myth, as well as for the tenacity of the characters in their struggle for survival. Both Katniss and the father in *The Road* are as individualistic as the American Adam. They are, however deeply formed by her ancestry nonetheless. These two traditionally opposing characteristics work well together because of absence of the social-cultural paradigm which is decisive for the contents of the American dream ideology, a paradigm in which the American Adam would normally step up as the hero.

The traditional literary structures that Collins' and McCarthy's dystopian-themed criticism (assumingly purposely) lacks shows how a breakthrough in the genderedness of the American dream ideology can be forced through disregarding or washing away the dominant social paradigm that limits the achievability of the dream. These structures, however, show how the American dream ideology and the flaws that it contains remain significant and omnipresent in American culture, and show how incredibly strong and defining the ideology is for the American identity. In criticising America as it is, Collins and McCarthy actually show that the heavily criticised American dream ideology is far from dead – the ideology that keeps coming forward and derives its meaning from the societal circumstances that make up the *différance* is in fact alive and kicking.

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