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Observations on the Concepts of Place in Post-Risk Societies

Kiel Moe

*The frailty of everything revealed at last.
Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness
and night.*¹

—Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*

Climate change is one among many global hazards taken up by recent literary and cinematic narratives. This attention is due to the fact that we live and work in a society characterized by technical and ecological systems of mounting hazard, a sport of networked limits and contested resources.

The German sociologist Ulrich Beck calls this “the Risk Society.”² The Risk Society is a phase of modernity differentiated as much by the proliferation of bads (tyranny, pollution, and catastrophe) as by goods (emancipating ideas, ideals, and materials goods). In our current context, the sources, sites, and effects of the bads at their worst—low-probability, high-consequence hazards—operate at the continental and the global scale. The ongoing globalization of modernity begets the globalization of risk. As risk becomes increasingly systemic and jumps scale, it becomes ever less predictable and ever less subject to individual expertise, control, and culpability. Risk at this scale is also indifferent to distinctions such as class and race or the developed and developing worlds. Risk now leaves no life, and no aspect of life, untouched.

Post-Risk Scenarios in Fiction

Recent post-Risk fictional narratives present what-if scenarios, in which contemporary canonical hazards such as climate change, genetic modification, and nuclear disaster escape management with sufficient velocity to fundamentally alter local, continental, and global settings. In each of these scenarios, individuals attempt to survive barely habitable, eschatological ecologies where all systems of life have either radically mutated or disappeared altogether. Familiar systems and infrastructures are chronically ruptured. Minor technologies (a shopping cart, a can of beans) become major advantages, and major technologies (boats, trucks) become minor possibilities of hope. In each case, characters are transformed from survivors of cataclysmic events into mere survivors of place.

In the film *The Day After Tomorrow* (Roland Emmerich, 2004), rapidly melting polar ice caps disrupt ocean current flows that trigger immediate and calamitous weather events around the globe. Monster waves inundate New York City, which is then instantly frozen by descending, super-cooled tropospheric air. The prescient protagonist and paternal-

istic savior of this plot is, needless to say, an underappreciated climatologist. Despite its Hollywood hyperbole and dubious science, the film visualizes many recurrent aspects of post-Risk place-making: mass evacuations and population displacement, surprise ecologies, survival by foraging, and the archetypal trek to safety, recovery, and salvation.

In Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road*, our country’s nearly four-million-mile transportation infrastructure appears as an endless, horizontal monument to the techniques and hubris of the twentieth century.³ McCarthy offers readers a disquieting account of human life barely able to plod through its dim, apocalyptic habitat—an ashy, scorched, post-nuclear landscape devoid of living systems or light. The only thing more cold, hostile, and dark than the novel’s interminable setting is the people its protagonists encounter along their way to nowhere:

*How long have you been on the road?
I was always on the road. You can’t stay in one place.
How do you live?
I just keep going. I knew this was coming.
You knew it was coming?
Yeah. This or something like it. I always believed in it.
Did you try to get ready for it?
No. What would you do?
I don’t know.
People were always getting ready for tomorrow. I didn’t believe in that. Tomorrow wasn’t getting ready for them.
It didn’t even know they were there.*⁴

In the films *I Am Legend* (Francis Lawrence, 2007, adapted from the 1954 novel by Richard Matheson), *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002), and *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006), set designs and art direction aim to depict worlds driven by genetic accidents that trigger pandemic infections and rapid social devolution. *I Am Legend* is set in post-Risk Manhattan, a ghost city overrun by vegetation and wild animals, emptied of human inhabitants by a genetic cancer therapy gone horribly wrong. Nocturnal flesh-eating zombies run amok and terrorize the sole protagonist, a military microbiologist on whose immunity, wit, physical prowess, and research the future of humanity depends. In *28 Days Later*, the protagonist awakes from a coma twenty-eight days after eco-terrorists have released monkeys infected with Rage, a bloodthirsty communicable disease that quickly drives the world into riots and chaos. He leaves his hospital on a post-Risk dérive through an empty London, attempting to understand what has come to pass. *Children of Men* imagines a world where

human beings have ceased to reproduce. It visualizes a pre-apocalyptic London and English countryside amidst unnerving chaos, as an increasingly totalitarian state clings to power over the collapsing social and political order.

These recent evocations of post-Risk place exhibit some important differences from earlier speculations about the future. For example, in both the film *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982, based on Philip K. Dick's novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sleep?*) and William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer*, individuals with resources simply leave Earth behind for other utopias, manifesting the extraterrestrial flight Hannah Arendt described in her prologue to *The Human Condition*. In their futuristic mise-en-scenes, accelerating technologies and genetic science drive both life and plot. In the post-Risk narrative, however, there is no such escape. Protagonists must remain and adapt to life within the new milieu. Premodern technics and archaic modalities surface alongside the hulk of twentieth-century technics to collectively give the new place its shape and character.

Post-Risk fictional scenarios incorporate a vast range of popular imagination and scientific speculation, from the sober to the absurd. More often than not, narratives exploit the ethical extremities of science, blended with generous quantities of pop journalism and eschatology. As entertainment inspired by science, the evocations of place in these films and novels employ varying levels of realism in scenarios that are driven as much by plot as by probability. Yet, science itself ultimately strains against both nature and culture as the last best hope of enlightened rationality and solutions to its own ills. In fiction and in life, science, by itself, is insufficient to master or even contain the mutations of the real. Its authority alone no longer offers a guarantee. Thus, the places of recent, real post-Risk spectacle—Chernobyl, or the central Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina—emerge precisely when the certitude of scientific calculations and risk assessment fail. For Beck, the perpetual expansion of interconnected practices that are just less than catastrophic is a prime characteristic of the Risk Society. Eventually such practices fail, triggering a contagion of post-Risk places.

Post-Risk Scenarios in Reality

With respect to real places, what is perhaps most significant about the aforementioned scenarios is that they occur primarily in film and literature rather than in the fiduciary speculations of architecture, landscape architecture, and planning. Although environmental designers routinely consider life-safety issues such as structural failure, fire, and flooding, using standard risk-mitigating protocols,

these large-scale risks occupy little if any of our disciplinary attention and imagination. At minimum, our professions ought to engage the possibility of current and future post-Risk environments and conceptualize a response.

The British Sociologist Anthony Giddens has identified four “adaptive reactions” to our current phase of modernity, which hovers on the cusp of a post-Risk world: *pragmatic acceptance*, *sustained optimism*, *cynical pessimism*, and *radical engagement*.⁵

Pragmatic acceptance is characterized by acquiescence today and mere survival tomorrow; a blunt cocktail of accepted futility, maintenance, and limited efficacy. *Sustained optimism* is the blind extension of an Enlightenment faith in technical transcendence and scientific calculation to solve any problem at hand in post-Risk environments, a utopian scale of gambling with technology's escalating capabilities and culpabilities. *Cynical pessimism* is a kind of post-Risk noir utilitarianism that makes do and is alternately humorous and humane, depressing and doomed.

Radical Engagement holds the most promising path for designers. It is characterized by a contingent recognition of the risks and “contestory action” to confront and mitigate, if not transcend, them. As Giddens states, “its prime vehicle is the social movement.”⁶ If the risks and their resultant environments are perceived as real, planning and design professionals might choose to engage in low-stakes scenario planning, a minor discourse on post-catastrophe planning, other forms of “contestory action,” or nothing at all. We choose at some risk: in the end, as these fictional narratives all routinely demonstrate, plan A is only as good as plan B.

Notes

1. Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), p. 28.
2. Ulrich Beck, *The Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: SAGE Publications, 1992). The first chapter (pp. 19–50), “On the Logic of Wealth and Risk Distribution,” is of particular interest here.
3. Richard T. T. Forman, *Road Ecology: Science and Solutions* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2003), p. 43.
4. McCarthy, *The Road*, pp. 168–69.
5. Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 134–37.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 137.