

The End is coming and we know it: Reading Post-Apocalypse in *The Maze Runner*

Dr. Sofiane Maafa

University of Tamanrasset, Algeria.

sofianemaafa@univ-tam.dz / sofianemaafa4@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT: *Post-apocalyptic fiction is one of the most controversial subjects of modern times. It predicts the end of the world as we know it today; offering insights on how it might end. Post-apocalyptic fiction is not only concerned with the possible end of the modern world, but it also provides a trajectory of how it would continue in case the end takes place. Studies show that post-apocalyptic fiction is receiving much acclaim because of the traumatic universal culture the world is living in today. There is no way the world should continue the way it does, these studies continue to argue. The present article will be divided into two parts: the first part will be concerned with the fact that the world is collapsing in terms of morals, ecology, and resources; ultimately it will come to an end. The second part that the present article will be dealing with is the depiction of a post-apocalyptic world that we might witness in the future; and that is according to James Dashner in his novel *The Maze Runner* (2009). The present article combines critical theory with a close-reading methodology of the target texts.*

KEYWORDS: Dystopia, End, Fiction, Post-Apocalypse, Trauma.

RÉSUMÉ: *La fiction post-apocalyptique est l'un des sujets les plus controversés des temps modernes. Il prédit la fin du monde tel que nous le connaissons aujourd'hui ;offrant des idées sur la façon dont il pourrait finir. La fiction post-apocalyptique ne concerne pas seulement la fin possible du monde moderne, elle offre également une trajectoire de la façon dont elle se poursuivrait si la fin avait lieu. Des études montrent que la prolifération de la fiction post-apocalyptique est probablement due à la culture universelle traumatique que le monde vit aujourd'hui. Il n'y a pas moyen que le monde continue comme il le fait, continuent de soutenir ces études. Le présent article sera divisé en deux parties : la première portera sur le fait que le monde s'effondre définitivement en termes de morale, d'écologie et de ressources ; en fin*

de compte, il prendra fin. La deuxième partie du présent article traite de la représentation d'un monde post-apocalyptique dont nous pourrions être témoins à l'avenir, selon James Dashner dans son roman « The Maze Runner » (2009). Le présent article adopte une combinaison de théorie critique ainsi qu'une méthodologie de lecture étroite des textes ciblés.

MOTS-CLÉS : Dystopie, Fiction, Fin, Post-Apocalypse, Trauma.

المخلص: رواية ما بعد نهاية العالم هي أحد أكثر الموضوعات إثارة للجدل في العصر الحديث. هذا النوع من الروايات يتنبأ بنهاية العالم كما نعرفه اليوم؛ كما يسعى إلى تقديم رؤى حول كيف يمكن لعالمنا أن تنتهي. لا تهتم رواية ما بعد نهاية العالم بالنهاية المحتملة للعالم الحديث فحسب، بل تقدم أيضًا مساراتًا لكيفية استمراره في حالة حدوث النهاية. تشير الدراسات إلى أن سبب انتشار رواية ما بعد نهاية العالم ربما يرجع إلى الثقافة العالمية المؤلمة التي يعيشها العالم اليوم. تستمر هذه الدراسات في القول إنه لا توجد طريقة لأن يستمر بها العالم بالطريقة التي يستمر بها الآن. تنقسم الدراسة الحالية إلى جزأين: الجزء الأول يتعلق بحقيقة أن العالم ينهار بالتأكيد من حيث الأخلاق والإيكولوجيا والموارد؛ ففي النهاية سينتهي الأمر. الجزء الثاني الذي ستتناوله هذه المقالة هو تصوير عالم ما بعد نهاية العالم الذي قد نشهده في المستقبل؛ وذلك وفقًا لجيمس داشنر في روايته "عداء المتاهة" (2009). تعتمد الدراسة الحالية مزيجًا من النظرية النقدية وكذلك منهجية القراءة الدقيقة للنصوص المستهدفة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصدمة , ديستوبيا , رواية , ما بعد نهاية العالم , نهاية .

Introduction

Post-apocalyptic fiction is a sub-genre of Science Fiction, it primarily deals with and foresight the possible survival techniques in a possible aftermath of an anticipated catastrophe. According to this type of fiction, the world we know today will ultimately end. Since the world is not running the way, it is supposed to be, it will come to a stop to be able to redirect itself in a new inevitable direction. One way the world is anticipated to end is that some virus would spread, usually due to a biological war or some failed medical test in some lab.

Another way the world is predicted to end is the rapid and severe change in weather. The ecological system of the earth is rapidly changing in such a worrying way. Experts worry that recurrent floods, earthquakes,

and famines are only the beginning; what is coming is worse they continue to worry. There is another group of experts who are afraid the world faces ultimate destruction as a result of a nuclear thermal war, whose pieces are gathered and ready to break out anytime.

The traumatic thought of a possible end of our world began as an imaginative artistic technique, usually after World War II in 1945. Since then, countless fictional and cinematic works have predicted a post-human life. Science fiction has since become a preferred destination for many to find an answer to how the world would end. Since then, fans of science fiction started waiting for humans to become zombies, or waiting for aliens to come and take over Earth.

Indeed, what started as an imagination is now becoming a reality. Especially after COVID-19, when the world finally became a small village, the entire global population was strangely forced to shut down and stay home. These new circumstances have triggered serious fears that the world might come to an end anytime, especially when many people started questioning whether the pandemic had human interference, making it biological warfare.

It is, therefore, believed by a great majority of people that planet Earth will end, or at least witness a transformation where it will have to shut down and restart at a different pace. It is like what happened with Noah when the world was flooded down and Noah's ark saved what remained of the world that was needed for the reconstruction in the post-apocalypse era. This is especially widely believed by the great majority of Christians, Muslims, and Jews, that the world should and will come to an end. Away from the infamous judgment day, the world is preparing for a sharp and abrupt shutdown. The traumatic weather, and biological, ecological as well and political unrest are symptomatic of a major apocalypse; that is perhaps worse than any previous one.

Looking back at the bombing of Hiroshima in 1945, the Holocaust in 1933-45, the Gulag in 1920-50 as well as the disaster of Chornobyl in 1986; these disasters are central to understanding any of the horrific anticipations. Moving forward to nowadays, the pandemic of COVID-19 together with the recent massive weather fluctuations around the world have increased these fears and made a lot of people seriously consider that. Many people worldwide strongly believe in the coming apocalypse and urge other people to start preparing by storing basic food needs and

different surviving essentials for the ensuing period of the post-apocalypse.

As mentioned above, post-apocalyptic fiction has played a major role in anticipating and dealing with the world's end. James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* (2009) is considered one of the most influential novels dealing with the post-apocalypse. In it, Dashner imagines a world struck by a pandemic. The lethal virus has somehow transformed the majority of people into zombies; or what is known in science fiction as the 'walking dead.'

As a result of this pandemic, most of the global population is infected; only a few remain somehow immune. Some laboratory scientists who go by the name Wicked¹ decide to find an ultimate cure for the virus and allegedly save the remaining uninfected population, therefore ending the malignant virus. As a result, unusual mazes are built to host young boys and eventually girls once every month.

The unusual maze is eventually revealed to be one of hundreds of dissimilar mazes that were designed and built by the Wicked Corporation to be able to find out what makes these boys so unique and thus immune to the lethal virus. These boys engage in a daily quest to find a way out of the seemingly endless maze. However, not everyone is a runner; only those with the capacity to run fast and a great physique can run the maze and come back before sunset because no one dares to stay in the labyrinth for it is time for Grievors to be released.

The dystopic features in Dashner's *The Maze Runner* (2009) are relevant to the continuous changes and unrest our world is undergoing. Today's world is witnessing major transformations at a large scale. It is not whether it will end, but rather when it will end. The rapid and violent weather fluctuations leave no room for doubt that the world is preparing for a massive transformation.

The main aim of the present article is to closely examine the dystopic, post-apocalyptic themes and the scenarios that seem mostly plausible considering the changes today's world is going through. These changes constitute the ground for the postapocalyptic speculations, and as long as the world is degenerating postapocalyptic theories will continue to flourish.

¹**WICKED:** World in Catastrophe: Killzone Experiment Department.

The present article will also have to clear the mist off the term post-apocalypse since the latter may either refer to the end of the present world as we know it or an aftermath in case an apocalypse happens. It is, therefore, important that the present article focuses primarily on the second scenario of the end of the world with an aftermath that ought to be different from the previous world.

Moreover, in the present article, the researcher will focus mainly on the post-apocalyptic scenario presented by James Dashner in his 2009 novel *The Maze Runner*; that is the world would witness a global massive virus outbreak. The latter will shortly sweep over the entire globe, where people will be mutated by this malignant virus into zombies. The researcher will further continue to illustrate in this article that the virus mutation of people has become so plausible in light of the late events of COVID-19; especially, when many rumored that the virus altered, or at least weakened vital genes of those reportedly infected.

In the present article, the researcher has come up with the following hypotheses: The first hypothesis is that the present world as we know it will surely come to an end, especially in light of the many disturbing events that are taking place; politically, economically, ecologically, and biologically. The second hypothesis is that the world will witness an aftermath where people will have to learn all the different survival skills, especially the ones mentioned in Dashner's *The Maze Runner* (2009). The third hypothesis is that the post-apocalyptic scenario of *The Maze Runner* (2009) is most probably the one that is going to happen, in light of the late outbreak of COVID-19 which brought the world to a temporary stop and paralyzed the entire world two whole years.

1. A History of the Post-apocalypse Fiction

Post-apocalypse is a term that usually refers to a period that comes immediately after an apocalypse. The latter refers either to the end of the world and thus the judgment day, or to an end of the modern world as we know it where it would reboot from a historical point of origin. Therefore, for a post-apocalyptic era, an apocalypse is needed. The post-apocalypse is strongly related to what is known as Survivalism. The latter is a term that refers to one fact; that is people in the post-apocalypse will have nothing else to do but to engage full time in a state of trying to survive.

Post-apocalypse fiction emerged especially after World War II, in the ensuing postmodern era. In this period, authors and short story writers became increasingly interested in the end of the modern world. World War II atrocities certainly demonstrated that humanity could go extinct in the blink of an eye, where it was reported that more than forty-five (45) million people perished only in the European continent. Such hard times always bring the theory of the apocalypse back to light. Accordingly, post-apocalyptic fiction does not come from nowhere. Rather, it stems from catastrophes and disasters that are both human and non-human-made. Thus, post-apocalyptic fiction connects with time and place contexts. The latest major disaster that hit mankind on a global scale would be COVID-19. There is plenty of post-apocalyptic fiction that is pandemic-related; some of them are relatively older than COVID-19 such as Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912), post-war novel *I am Legend* (1954) by Richard Matheson, and more recent ones like James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* (2009) and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014).

All these novels have one thing in common, and that is predicting a post-apocalyptic world. According to Adams (2008), the apocalypse is religiously defined by famines, death, war, or pestilence; it is the biblical Armageddon. However, in science fiction, the end of the world is catapulted by nuclear war, biological warfare, and ecological, geological, or cosmological disasters. Adams (2008) continues to argue that, with all that might trigger the end of the world, there will always be survivors and it is up to post-apocalyptic science fiction to anticipate what life would be like for those survivors (6).

The post-apocalyptic subgenre probably goes as far back as science fiction itself. The post-apocalyptic genre is hard to track; however, the earliest and most significant post-apocalyptic novel would probably be *The Last Man* (1826) by Mary W. Shelley who is most famous for authoring the famous *Frankenstein*. However, including a religious post-apocalyptic narrative as a literary narrative further takes the period back in history. Therefore, it is safe to claim that the subgenre may date as far back as the early creation of mankind.

Moreover, post-apocalyptic novels became more prominent after World War II. The latter is one of the most atrocious events in the history of mankind where a devastating atomic bomb wiped out entire cities

killing thousands of people with lethal effects remaining nowadays. The postmodern era has proved that the postwar world is changing drastically. With COVID-19, threats became imminent and the smell of death was all over the world. The biological disaster as some prefer to call it was the proof to many that the end was near.

In times of crisis, post-apocalyptic novels have thrived. Again, the postmodern era witnessed a lot of events that were described by many as tense. One of the most significant post-apocalyptic fictions is Stephen King's *The End of the Whole Mess* (1986). King strikes again with his unusual plots, where a narrator named Howard Forno is now living his last days after inhaling some unusual chemical disaster that his brother Bobby caused. In the end, Howard is writing his diaries with a huge number of grammatical mistakes, as a result of the chemicals affecting his dying brain now. While doing so, Howard is predicting the extinction of the human race as they are no longer capable of looking after themselves.

Jumping to the beginning of the twenty-first century, post-apocalyptic fiction rose again to prominence. This time Cormac McCarthy strikes with his Pulitzer post-apocalyptic novel *The Road* (2006) which was later adapted into a film of the same title in 2009. In this novel, McCarthy reveals the story of a father and his son embarking on a journey on a road after some unidentified disaster hit the modern human civilization leaving it completely crippled. Even when the cataclysm remains mysterious, the idea of a post-apocalypse remains prominent in the twenty-first century.

In his anthology *Wastelands: Stories of the Apocalypse* (2008), John Joseph Adams remarkably edited a book of twenty-two (22) post-apocalyptic stories starting with Stephen King's *The End of the Whole Mess* (1986). By collecting some of the best post-apocalyptic writers, Adams explores what it means to survive an Armageddon. The latter being the major apocalypse that mankind will ever witness, is now according to many just around the corner. Thus, according to Adams, Armageddon or the apocalypse is not a matter of if, but rather a matter of when.

In addition, the 2009 *The Maze Runner* by James Dashner brought back the post-apocalypse. This time Dashner designed a whole new post-apocalyptic scenario, where people are put in strangely-designed mazes

to be tested what made them so special and immune to an unidentified virus that struck the entire humanity around the world. The virus renders those who are infected into zombies; or as they are known the walking dead; and it is up to another mysterious medical corporation to find an alleged cure to save what remains of humanity.

With tensions still breaking the world apart, post-apocalyptic fiction never seems to be ceasing to flourish. *Station Eleven* (2014) by Emily St. John Mandel is another recent post-apocalyptic novel that predicts what a post-apocalyptic life would be like. The tale narrates a post-apocalyptic life after an epidemic called the Georgia Flu hits the population at a large scale leaving the world on the verge of maximum extinction. Years later a band of actors known as The Symphony tries to explore the post-apocalyptic world by performing Shakespearean plays. After miraculously surviving a dangerous man who is known as The Prophet, the band makes it back home to a haven that goes by the name of "The Museum of Civilization."

Emergency (2022) by Daisy Hildyard is another recent post-pandemic novel. Through the book, Hildyard did not attempt to re-envision the world after the COVID-19 pandemic paralyzed the entire globe. At first glance, the story seems plotless and missing the element of Survivalism as post-apocalyptic novels are usually equipped, but, with *Emergency* (2022), the unnamed narrator stays in an apartment while under lockdown reminiscent of her childhood years in a remote village in Yorkshire.

Hildyard successfully makes alterations to what seems to be a pastoral novel. She brilliantly draws a vivid picture of the scary changes between the past and the present. What started to be beautiful and innocent in the narrator's childhood during the 1990s has now become a world of cunning diseases and complex viruses. In the eyes of the narrator, life is no longer fun and the world is not safe anymore. The author also alludes to the fact that our ecosystem is our responsibility, therefore any abrupt and violent change of weather for example; then, the blame will be on us humans.

2. The Concept of Survivalism in Post-apocalyptic Fiction

The end is coming and there is no way to escape it. This is the common belief post-apocalyptic fans including many renowned scholars like Noam Chomsky and brilliant poets like T.S. Eliot are convinced with. Again, it is not a matter of if but of when; this 'when' seems to be very

soon. In his book *Capitalist Realism: Is there no Alternative?* Mark Fisher (2009) strongly confirms that "*it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism*" (8).

As argued before, the post-apocalyptic world is usually imagined to be a barren wasteland. What once was meaningful and full of nostalgic memories will all be lost only to become a desert-like wasteland. Thus, what constituted order and added meaning in the pre-apocalyptic world, is anticipated by post-apocalyptic fiction writers to be gone where it will be replaced by life in a wasteland where surviving is going to be a primary objective for those who would survive.

The concept of the wasteland is closely associated with a post-apocalyptic world. Similarly, survivalism is also strongly tied to this idea. People who endure a major apocalypse will continuously strive to survive the harsh conditions they encounter in a post-apocalyptic environment. For instance, survivors in McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) have to sustain themselves daily by scavenging food and fighting different dangers and risks on the road that were not existent in the pre-apocalyptic world.

In the post-apocalyptic world, it is also expected that the idea of surviving will not be an easy task. What once was simple and often gotten through money, would now be complicated and dependent on how efficient surviving skills are. In the post-apocalyptic world, money—especially paper currency—will not be so meaningful in such a meaningless world. The idea of trying to survive daily would not be interesting since the post-apocalyptic world is imagined to be cold and colorless as opposed to the warm and colorful world in the pre-apocalyptic era.

Moreover, post-apocalyptic fiction writers can hardly imagine the post-apocalyptic world without the concept of nostalgia. According to them, survivors in the post-apocalypse would have to live in agonizing pain, not only for trying to survive the daily dangers and risks but also for losing what once was beautiful and sweet. It is therefore agonizing for those survivors to live in nostalgia and cry over a lost world that would probably never be regained.

In a harsh environment like a post-apocalyptic world, it is hard to imagine communities resembling those of pre-apocalyptic times. Humans are inherently social creatures, meaning to survive alone is impractical

and could lead to the swift downfall of the remaining human race. So, communities will have to continue to exist in the post-apocalyptic world to ensure the continuity of the human race.

Nonetheless, post-apocalyptic fiction writers doubt that these communities will have the same structure as in the pre-apocalyptic world; for these communities will depend in the first place neither on money or real-estate ownership nor on political or religious affiliation. Rather, much will depend on the survival set of skills each individual would have. Truly, all that existed and constituted the pre-apocalyptic world would be irrelevant. This would lead these post-apocalyptic communities to be weak and easy to detach by the smallest crisis; for what bonds these survivors will not be any of what people were accustomed to in the pre-apocalyptic world, such as religion, political affiliation, or racial belonging. Rather, the bond would be based on mutual interests among the people and once the interest is gone; the community would be gone.

Human beings were born to survive. Even in the pre-apocalyptic world, many people try to survive the different hardships and dangers daily. All this is covered with an ornamented and fake reflection of a civilization. According to James Wesley Rawles (2009), modern societies are only covered by a thin layer of civilization. What lies underneath is ugly, and it does not take much effort for that layer to disappear. Rawles (2009) continues to argue that what pacifies the modern, pre-apocalyptic citizen is the availability of water, beer, drugs, television, and warmth together with other pacifiers. Once these pacifiers are taken away, all the savagery within will surface. It is like an onion; it gets smelly once the outer layers are removed (6-7).

Moreover, the concept of Survivalism is strongly connected to trauma and memory. Depending on the nature of trauma, memory will play a major role in defining the meaning of Survivalism. Now with the anticipated major apocalypse that is just around the corner, memories will be plagued and the trauma will be more than one can bear. Those who would survive the major apocalypse will have to resist the shock waves that will follow. Thus, the themes of trauma and memory are vital in the analysis of the post-apocalyptic genre; for there will not be a trauma without a shocking apocalypse.

In this regard, survivors must survive their plagued memories more than the physical hardships that challenge their daily routines. All things considered; survivors will have to survive; this is their basic job in a post-apocalyptic world. All the uncherished indulgences in the pre-apocalyptic world will be dearly cried over. In the end, people will not have to do anything else except survive in a bleak world; for "*survival is the key word to remember victory, not conquest, just survival*" (Brooks 2003,xiii).

3. Post-apocalypse: Fiction vs. Reality

The world has indeed reached the point where it has become the most developed, most and, most violent. Truly, and despite all the technological and economic development mankind has attained. Yet, it remains crudely true that with this unforeseen development came unprecedented violence and injustice. People seem unaware of the imminent danger they are heading to. It is just a matter of time before everything is over soon. Now, of course, there will be many people who would prefer to remain skeptical rejecting this whole idea but choosing not to believe in the devil does not mean it does not exist.

Certainly, there is a debate over whether the post-apocalypse will ever occur. This is the purpose of the present article; to prove it is going to happen by offering experimental evidence. *The Maze Runner* (2009), by James Dashner, is considered one of the most controversial post-apocalyptic novels in the twenty-first century. The plot centers around a group of people teenagers who mysteriously wake up in a large enclosed space called The Glade. Strangely enough, these teens' memories seem for some reason all wiped out; they wake up remembering nothing. The reader later learns that some of the teens who arrived at The Glade earlier had "learned" the basic survival skills, for example; learning how to grow vegetables and other skills necessary for their primal sustenance.

Dashner (2009) remarkably invents a whole new world for teens. Beyond The Glade lies what constitutes the biggest challenge for these teens; that is The Maze. The latter is a set of intricate labyrinths, designed to keep moving and constantly changing its structure so that the teens find it nearly impossible to keep track of its sequence. The teens are so organized that they created a whole community where everyone seems to have a particular job to do; they all have to do their part to guarantee the safety and continuity of the community they now have created. It seems

the most important group is the ones called The Runners; these are the ones who run through the maze every day trying to track down a possible exit so that they can make it out. The biggest problem for these teens is that they can neither remember anything about their previous world nor the current world outside. Now the newcomer who goes by the name of Thomas suddenly "*want[s] to be a runner*" (Dashner 2009, 22).

As mentioned before, the organization which is known as WICKED takes it upon itself to allegedly find a cure for The Flare virus by making these 'orphaned' teens go through a series of designed hardships in strangely-designed mazes, to study what makes them immune to the deadly virus. It seems that The Flare gradually eats out the brains of the infected leaving them in a cannibalistic zombie-like state. This situation might sound fictional involving exaggerated stories of zombies, however; after COVID-19 and the scary rapidity of the virus spreading all over the world in such an unforeseen manner.

The woman who addresses Thomas and the teens after they make it through the maze, and who also seems the one in charge, states that The Flare was "*a horrible, horrible thing. Only the richest can be treated, no one can be cured*" (Dashner 2009, 206). This serious statement shows that Dashner's post-apocalyptic scenario is no more fictional, rather it seems so realistic and very existent in our modern world. Certainly, in times of crisis, only the richest get immediate access to cures and medical help. Whereas, those who are not rich depend very much on how lucky they are.

By incorporating this universal truth, Dashner remarkably closes gaps between fiction and reality in the post-apocalypse. There is another fact that Dashner deliberately did not miss, and that is the fact that WICKED who was supposed to find a cure was the one responsible for the endless miseries and ongoing hardships Thomas and his companions have experienced while in the Maze. The reader, then, suddenly notices that WICKED is a pun; as if Dashner wanted to tell us that this medical organization was supposed to find an ultimate cure for The Flare and save what remains of humanity; yet, it was a wicked organization whose members were hell-bent on draining out what was left in these teens in their alleged cure.

Thomas, who is different from the other boys reveals to the reader that he is a member of WICKED, and cannot remember anything about

his past. Ultimately, he is the one who will bring down the entire WICKED organization. It turned out that the strangely-designed creatures, the beetles, who are also known as the Grievors, were in Alby's words made so that the 'Creators' would keep a watchful eye on the boys. Yet, what baffled Thomas were the mysterious words etched into the bodies of the Grievors. He found himself captivated by the strange inscriptions, wondering what secrets they held. Regardless of its creepy shape, *"Thomas couldn't imagine why that one word would be stamped on the beetle blade unless to announce to the Gladers that it was evil. Wicked"* (Dashner 2009, 72).

Dashner's post-apocalyptic vision in *The Maze Runner* (2009) seems more logical and closer to reality; this is in part due to its feasibility in the real world. The dystopian novel exhibits another fact already existing in our modern world, and that is for one part a man-made calamity causing the near-extinction of the human race. The other part is that medical laboratories that claim to discover cures to save humanity are hell-bent on spreading the virus at a larger scale to gain the maximum profit by selling their anti-viruses. *The Maze Runner* (2009), features WICKED as the major player who was the direct cause of the spread of The Flare, as well as the endless suffering of a group of teens, forcing them to live an early adulthood.

Furthermore, Dashner probably created strangely designed creatures identified by the Gladers as the Grievors. The latter are described as monsters with *"Wicked instrument-tipped appendages protruded from its body like arms: a saw blade, a set of shears, long rods whose purpose could only be guessed"* (Dashner 2009, 24). These monsters might seem all newly invented in Dashner's dystopian, post-apocalyptic novel. However, if the post-apocalypse takes place, then nobody is sure what unearthly creatures will show up in an unprecedented post-apocalyptic world. The Grievors, far from being mere figments of imagination, serve as a powerful symbol in Dashner's narrative, challenging the notion that a post-apocalyptic world is solely a work of fiction.

Another dystopian fact about the reality of Dashner's post-apocalyptic vision in *The Maze Runner* (2009), is the fact the teens inside the maze were the perfect subjects for WICKED's ruthless experiments in their alleged attempts to find a possible cure for The Flare which they

caused in the first place. The question is where are all the families of these teens? Are they dead or alive? If they are dead, then are all the families dead? And if they are alive, then why are they not claiming for kids? The answer is shocking, most of these teens' families were killed either during the chaos of the apocalypse or by getting infected. Thus, the majority of the strangled teens are by force orphans.

The reason why these teens are the perfect subjects for WICKED's inhumane experiments is not only because they have no one to claim them; but also, because their memories are all strangely erased by WICKED, and the only thing they seem to remember are their names. Even their names strike the reader odd, for example: Thomas sounds like Thomas Edison, and Newt reminds the reader of Isaac Newton, whereas; Alby sounds just like Albert Einstein. Such names of famous scientists can only be the creation of a mysterious corporation like WICKED.

Raphael Zähringer (2017), better explains how in dystopian societies, governments tend to deprive citizens of the basic relationships of families, social groups, and any private bonds. He states:

To make people devote themselves to the state entirely, one needs to take away other relations that establish strong bonds, namely families, unions, and other social groups. Therefore, citizens of dystopias/anti-utopias also tend to have hardly any private life ...Technology functions as another means to keep people in check, either by surveillance (cameras, bugs, drones) or control (genetics, brainwashing, drugs).(10)

Besides the fact that medical corporations like WICKED are notorious for being ruthless in their real endeavors to make the maximum profit in times of crises, the idea of quarantine is also so real and away from fiction. See, to WICKED, the immune teens are a valuable treasure that is why they placed them into maximum security quarantine inside the maze, to ensure they would never escape. It was alright for WICKED that some of the teens would die since many did while in the maze. However, WICKED would never tolerate anyone escaping from the maze and possibly falling into the wrong hands.

To ensure the success of their experiments, WICKED first designed an unescapable maze whose walls are constantly changing in what seems to be a random pattern. Second, WICKED placed cameras everywhere inside the maze to keep a constant watchful eye on everything that was going on inside the maze. Third, WICKED placed an implant inside the brain of each teen in the maze to study the brain

patterns as they go through the different challenges placed before them. The brain implant was inferred by Alby after he was stung by a Griever. Thomas desperately begs Alby to tell him of what he saw since the sting seems to bring back memories. However, Alby, scared, refuses to tell Thomas anything explaining that it "*Might be something they got in our brains to control us—just like the memory wipe*" (Dashner 2009,112). Dashner (2009), thus, suggests that technology will be placed in the wrong hands in the post-apocalyptic world; where corporations like WICKED would seek to control humanity.

4. Utopia vs. Dystopia

Utopia refers to a world in its perfect state where everyone seems to live happily ever after. Dystopia, however, is quite the opposite; it refers to a world that is all doom and gloom where everybody seems to live in a continuous state of agony and pessimism. Utopia seems to date way back in history than dystopia. The first attempt at a Utopian world in fiction was probably in Plato's *Republic* (375 BCE), where he invented an ideal city called Kallipolis. This city, Plato imagines, is ruled by philosopher-kings who would render it an ideal place for everyone; where justice would prevail.

A utopian world never existed on Earth. The only place it did exist was in fiction, making it a purely imaginary world. The dystopian world, on the other hand, has always been very real; even though it might be sort of exaggerative where everything tends to be very bad. Dystopia does not come from anywhere; instead, it is stemmed from times of wars and crises. Thus, the modern pre-apocalyptic world has become dystopian par excellence. This fact was supported by major events, such as; the Second World War (1945), Watergate (1972-74), and the Vietnam War (1955-75), together with many other crises (Zähringer 2017, 3).

In the dystopian novel *The Maze Runner* (2009), Dashner reminds the reader that people in the post-apocalyptic world will be merely treated as lab rats. The novel indeed tells the reader that WICKED was trying to find an ultimate cure for The Flare, thus their actions were all justified. However, the fact that a group of orphaned teens were forced to live in complete isolation away from everything that once belonged to them; is purely a cold-dystopian behavior. Therefore, the ill-treatment of teens —some of them aged only twelve— with the pretext of finding a possible cure at any cost; shows that these Creators in WICKED have

long given away their humanity, becoming just like the infected zombies whose brains were all destroyed by the virus.

The strange thing about Dashner's characters and what happened to them in *The Maze Runner* (2009) is that it is all true and did already exist in our world. The general setting of the Glade as well as the Maze where a society of fifty boys are compacted in such a high-walled facility, reminds the reader of only one thing; and that is prisons or mental hospitals. The proof that WICKED was serious about these experiments, is that a lot of these teens died in the maze. The Gladers even had their graveyard situated right next to the forest. When Thomas came to know about the graveyard, he simply could not understand the fact that a group of boys needed a graveyard in the first place. Perplexed, Thomas asks Minho how many of the boys have died so far. Minho abruptly replies: "*at least twelve*" (Dashner 2009, 67).

WICKED is good! The expression written on Teresa's forearm left Thomas in a bewildered state. What added to Thomas's confusion, was that when he asked Teresa what that meant; she replied she had no idea. This made Thomas even more skeptical of why he and Teresa were sent to the maze in the first place. Coming to look at it, the expression 'WICKED is good' signifies a pun. Perhaps, WICKED is wicked after all, and their alleged claim that they were trying to find an ultimate cure for The Flare was one big fat lie. All these questions were running fast in Thomas's head, and he needed an immediate answer.

The wickedness of WICKED is simply another proof of the dystopian nature of the post-apocalyptic world; the more the post-apocalyptic world approaches, the more dystopian it becomes. *The Maze Runner* (2009) far exceeds the mere fact of being simply a post-apocalyptic dystopian fiction. Rather, the novel refers to actual major historical as well as essential scientific events, warning against the calamitous world shortly. Having said that, the novel is no longer fictional; instead, it documents already existing events such as illegal experimentations on jailed or orphaned humans treating them as guinea pigs, thus proving somehow the existence of secret government labs conducting dangerous biological experiments (Alkhafaji and Yaroub 2019, 1127).

Moreover, dystopian fiction usually incorporates the notion of monomyth. Joseph Campbell's notion of monomyth suggests a personal

journey taken by the hero in a tumultuous and chaotic world, then the hero should come out of this journey all changed and ready for the next stage. In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell (2004) explains how the hero would embark on a journey of monomyth, he states:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (Campbell 2004, 28)

Based on Campbell's definition of a hero's monomyth journey, it becomes evident how Thomas also embarked on a monomyth journey where he was faced with numerous challenges and hardships that would help him mature and upgrade for the next challenges still ahead. Thomas who was sent by WICKED as was shouted out by Ben, was now on the verge of becoming a leader of the group. However, that would never be possible until he would undergo a monomyth journey; just like any hero would do.

In the end, the whole idea of a dystopian post-apocalyptic world can be said to have been generated from the fact that humans are constantly trying to create a utopian world. As a result of humans' unquenchable greed and selfishness, this utopian world always reverts to a dystopian one. This is pretty much what Dashner did with his *The Maze Runner* (2009), showing all hell breaking loose. All of this Dashner, brilliantly, demonstrated started with the good intentions of big government-funded labs; such as: WICKED. The latter brought more misery and pain to the world, more than doing any good whatsoever.

As he arrives at the Glade for the first time, Thomas seems to have lost his memory. His lack of knowledge of the previous world leaves him disoriented and lost. However, soon after, having to cope with the new environment, Thomas is face to face with learning a new set of survival skills that help him transcend his monomyth journey. Dashner describes Thomas's first encounter with the other boys at the Glade, saying:

Thomas realized with a sickening lurch that he had no idea how old he was. His heart sank at the thought—he was so lost he didn't even know his age. "Seriously," he said, giving up on the show of courage. "Where am I? (Dashner 2009, 8)

This moment emphasizes Thomas's confusion, insecurity, and lack of identity. Being surrounded by so many eyes staring at him adds to his sickening confusion. Now that he cannot even remember his name, where he comes from, or where he is, is a testimony to the first step into his monomyth journey that all heroes go through.

After the last lift brought Theresa up to the Glade, Thomas feels somehow the two were connected; maybe they knew each other in the previous world. Still not able to remember his name, Thomas still could not fathom the huge amount of knowledge suddenly surging through his mind:

He didn't understand how this could be possible. His mind functioned without flaw, trying to calculate his surroundings and predicament. Knowledge flooded his thoughts, facts and images, memories and details of the world and how it works. He pictured snow on trees, running down a leaf-strewn road, eating a hamburger, the moon casting a pale glow on a grassy meadow, swimming in a lake, and a busy city square with hundreds of people bustling about their business. (Dashner 2009, 5).

The next phase in Thomas's monomythic journey takes place when he is nominated "a runner," next to Minho. Despite his curious and adventurous self, the nomination of course raises in him growing worries. However, against all fears, and like any other hero, Thomas knew that he had to do it as if his life depended was depending on it: *"Thomas swallowed, wondering how he could ever go out there. His desire to become a Runner had taken a major blow. But he had to do it. Somehow, he knew he had to do it"* (Dashner 2009, 24).

Thomas's monomythic journey continues to grow to reach the level of responsibility. Somehow, he blames himself responsible for bringing calamity down on the boys in the Glade. Even though almost everyone else in the Glade was raising concerns regarding the true endeavors of Thomas, somehow, he "bore the responsibility anyway—and it was growing heavier the more he thought about it. *"I just ... feel like I need to save everyone. To redeem myself"* (Dashner 2009, 178).

Thomas's monomythic experience took a toll on him. His stay in the Maze —despite brief— *"felt like a hundred years ago. Like a dream"* (Dashner 2009, 209). However, towards the end, surviving the Maze trials is alone a victory for Thomas: despite the tragic fate of Chuck.

Thomas's monomythic journey renders him a whole new person; who is more mature, and more responsible. The nearly happy expression Thomas had at the end of the novel showcases the final successful phase of his monomythic journey when he brings himself and everyone else out of the Maze into safety.

5. Artificial Intelligence and the Apocalypse

Artificial intelligence refers to the modern advancing technology that is considered by many as moving toward replacing human beings shortly. Coming to look at, AI was designed to help and facilitate people's daily activities. Starting from the trending ChatGPT, moving toward scarily human-like robots which are constantly ameliorated by excellent developers; both for civil as well as military purposes. AI technologies are rapidly spreading in today's world that many speculators doubt will not take over our world, thus leading to a robotic dystopian post-apocalyptic world; just like in The Terminator franchise. Thus, the question raised by many is: is AI technology replacing us anytime soon in the future?

The existential threat that AI is possibly threatening the very existence of humanity is concrete and well-founded. Truly, human alienation by AI technologies is scarily growing to the point that many started raising concerns. A considerable number of jobs, for example, are expected to be utterly lost to AI machines and robots in a matter of just a few years. Many jobs have already been lost to AI technologies. In their 2023 forecast of Generative AI jobs impact in the US, Forrester published a forecast of jobs between 2023 and 2030. According to Forrester, 0.09 million jobs have already been lost to AI in 2023 in the US only. The report further forecasts that by 2030, 2.40 million jobs will be lost to AI in continental US only.²

Building on Forrester's forecast report, millions of jobs will be lost to AI in a matter of only a few years. Moreover, many scholars believe that most of the current AI systems are super intelligent; yet still subdued and underrun under human control. However, the same scholars are well aware and concerned that if a super-intelligent agent does not share the

²Forrester's 2023 Generative AI Jobs Impact Forecast, US
(https://www.forrester.com/report/forresters-2023-generative-ai-jobs-impact-forecast-us/RES179790?ref_search=0_1698243606644).

values of those who designed it, then "*an AI might therefore be more likely to pursue a risky course of action that has some chance of giving it control of the world*" (Bostrom 2014, 110). If such a dangerous event would take place, then all hell would break loose. The idea of a super-intelligent agent taking control of our world means that human beings will no longer be on top of all species. This would increase human vulnerability making them more susceptible to extinction.

Nonetheless, with all these possibly-factual threats of AI systems threatening the very existence of humans; then why tolerate such an imminent threat? There are two ways to answer this question: one might be that humans are simply stupidly curious to see what it would be like to live in a world controlled by super-intelligent entities. The second more probable answer, might be that human beings are hell-bent on creating and developing AI systems to help us remove some of what might be perceived as limits of planet Earth. For instance, some people strongly believe that the limitations of space travel for humans might be solved shortly by superintelligent systems. The problem with these super-intelligent systems is that they might get too intelligent for our good and turn against what they were built for.

Indeed, the results aspired by many scholars and developers of these intelligent agents might bring undesirable irreversible consequences. If such a thing would even be possible, then, not only humans will increase the limitations of space travel; but also, we might as well be leaving planet Earth and trying to find another habitable planet after these super-intelligent entities have taken over our world. All these are just thoughts, but what if?! When further investigating similar questions and thoughts, science fiction transforms into science fact.

Dashner (2009) did not miss to incorporate AI in his novel. Right from the start, he made it clear that this is not just another out-of-this-world sci-fi novel; instead, he made it to be more realistic and about our modern world. Starting from the intricate virus that spread all over the world making it hard to track down, moving toward the mysteriously-designed maze and finishing up with the Grievers which look and act so stunningly. These AI elements are not just like any other elements found in sci-fi; rather, they seem from our modern world and quite feasible.

In *The Maze Runner* (2009) Dashner informs the reader that dystopian societies, despite their general cold features, are marked by AI

development. The more AI develops the more dystopian societies will be. This is just another fact referred to by Dashner where our modern world depends so much on AI systems, that almost no one is free. Cellphones, social media platforms, search engines, etc. are just another step to restrict human freedom; each single one of the aforementioned AI elements is being placed under acute surveillance every minute they are being used or visited.

In *The Maze Runner* (2009), Thomas and his friends are constantly being placed under surveillance, where the Creators keep a watchful eye on what seems to be one of the cruelest and cold-blooded experiments ever tested on human beings. These intricate cameras are just another step ahead using AI technologies. What was designed to help facilitate people's lives, has suddenly become a means to control and limit human freedom. These monitoring cameras helped further imprison a group of teens whose only fault was being orphaned teens.

Moreover, the maze itself is another AI system. The maze reminds the reader of those ancient Greek labyrinths whose purpose of existence seems to serve no earthly reason. The idea of the constantly changing maze was to keep the group of teens firmly imprisoned. However, the way it was designed brings to mind that these so-called Creators were serious about what they were doing. The large amount of expertise, effort, and money were equally significant as to the purpose of making them in the first place. Thus, AI again seems will be used to further control and imprison people in post-apocalyptic dystopian societies. Strangely enough, the teens inside the maze were somehow happy for being imprisoned; because at night the Grievers would roam the walls, these were Newt's words of advice to Thomas: "*Be thankful for these walls*" (Dashner 2009, 24).

In addition, in his novel, Dashner (2009) even invents mysteriously designed creatures who are half beasts, half robots. These grumpy-looking creatures further add to the suffering of the group of teens. Life does not seem to be any easier around AI technologies. Again, the more AI gets advanced, the more dystopian our world will get. The Grievers who are even stranger than the mysterious maze itself, get Thomas to constant thinking; he simply cannot understand where they came from and what their purpose was. Seeing one of them, Thomas described it as "*a roving robot on an alien planet looking for signs of life*" (Dashner

2009, 73). This seemed to be the most probable reason for the existence of these creatures. In a hauntingly bleak post-apocalyptic landscape, the rise of AI marks yet another chapter in humanity's struggle, tightening the chains of freedom even further. What was once a beacon of innovation has transformed into a tool of oppression, leaving survivors grappling with the chilling reality of a world where technology governs every aspect of their lives.

Ultimately, the true purpose of all these AI technologies remains mysterious. On the outside, the AI agents were all designed to keep the teens locked up to find an alleged cure for the Flare. Then, what about the fact that these teens were unjustly and cruelly shoved to the toughest of hardships, that some of them even died? Nonetheless, they were also given some tools to help them defend themselves; such as the fact that the maze closed its gates at night, thus offering the boys a chance for safety. In addition, every once in a while, a couple of ready injections of what looked like an antidote against the Grievors' deadly sting were provided through the Box. All these facts help make the true intentions of the Creators even more ambiguous.

6. Conclusion

As a conclusion, *The Maze Runner* (2009) exhibits one of the most fascinating, most out-of-this-world post-apocalyptic dystopian scenarios. Through his novel, Dashner (2009) succeeded in convincing his readers that post-apocalyptic dystopian society is not part of any conspiracy theory. Rather, he magnificently had foreseen an ending caused by a sudden out-of-nowhere virus outbreak. The novel was published in 2009, and Dashner strangely enough sort of predicted a similar scenario of COVID-19 taking place ten years later.

The idea of an apocalypse caused by an epidemic or pandemic is not new. Numerous writers tackled the issue throughout history. Take for example Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague* (1912), Richard Matheson's *I am Legend* (1954), Stephen King's *The Stand* (1990), Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2004) and Emily St. John's Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2015). All these writers foresee a pandemic apocalypse. In light of the late COVID-19 events, a lot of people started reconsidering their conspiracy theories.

To further investigate the aforementioned hypotheses, it is worth mentioning that the world has certainly not come to an end yet. However,

all signs and clues indicate we are heading in the right direction of a major apocalypse. This is just to say that Dashner's 2009 post-apocalyptic scenario seems most probable, because a similar scenario of COVID-19 took place just three years ago, where many people thought it was the anticipated apocalypse. In the end, it is also worth mentioning that speaking of a post-apocalyptic dystopian world does not necessarily mean the absolute end of the world as we know it. Instead, it can be a temporary pause of the modern world where life will be restored in a different form; and paradise lost will be once again paradise regained.

Consequently, Dashner's *The Maze Runner* provides a compelling examination of the post-apocalyptic genre, touching upon contemporary pressing anxieties regarding social collapse, survivalism, and the search for lost identity. With its dystopian setting and horrendous maze trials, the novel engages with essential themes of memory, human strength, and control. By placing its protagonist Thomas in a world lacking basic answers, the novel highlights the tension between the search for knowledge of survivalism and the risks accompanying the process of exposing disturbing truths.

Being a post-apocalyptic literary work par excellence, *The Maze Runner* reflects not only modern-age concerns but also the permanent human commitment to trying to find meaning and hope, even in the most distressing predicaments. Eventually, Dashner's novel serves as a deterring narrative and a demonstration of the human resilient spirit facing immediate annihilation, making it a significant literary work in the broader sense of post-apocalyptic fiction.

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