Apocalypse, Utopia, and Dystopia: Old Paradigms Meet a New Millennium

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As an undercurrent of Western imagination, apocalypticism is always with us.

— Saul Friedländer

What sort of happiness is on offer, and what is the price we might pay to achieve it?

— Margaret Atwood

If you are reading these words, it is likely that you are interested in "representations of post-apocalyptic utopias and/or dystopias" and do not need to be convinced of the topic's importance. Indeed, given the current prevalence and popularity of apocalyptically-themed cinematic and literary fictions, Saul Friedländer's 1984 observation cited above seems almost a platitude; however, in the interest of scholarly due diligence and for the benefit of anyone who has spent the last twenty or so years in a cave, here are a few significant figures: a subject search of the MLA Bibliography yields no fewer than 616 items containing some form of the word apocalypse published in the decade between 1999 and 2009. A similar survey offers 1,965 results for utopia (1,642) and/or dystopia (323). Moreover, such themes seem to permeate artistic genres both "high" and popular—hence the coexistence in this issue of...

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essays on such celebrated mainstream authors as Bernard Malamud (National Book Award, Pulitzer Prize, O. Henry Award) and Cormac McCarthy (National Book Award, Pulitzer Prize, National Book Critics Circle Award) alongside articles on science fiction and what is possibly the least respected of literary species, the zombie-themed graphic novel.

The call for papers challenged scholars to consider how speculative fictions invoke and alter the biblical apocalyptic narrative, and the relationships established between the nature of the cataclysm and the type of society arising afterward. How and to what ends do utopias or dystopias treat questions of race, gender, politics, sexualities, etc.? Is it still possible to speak of “utopia” and “dystopia”? Can these fictions effect social change? The essays received spanned works dating from More’s founding text in 1516 to television programs and serialized graphic novels still being aired or published; media from print to painting to screens small and large; genres including science fiction, fantasy, horror, anime, manga, and young adult fiction; and themes from A(pocalypse) to Z(ombies), so to speak. The articles selected are Christopher Pizzino’s “Utopia At Last: Cormac McCarthy’s The Road as Science Fiction,” Deborah Bailin’s “Evolution as Apocalypse in God’s Grace,” Adam Johns’s “‘The Time Had Come for Us to Be Born’: Octavia Butler’s Darwinian Apocalypse,” Jessie Stickgold-Sarah’s “‘Your children will know us, you never will’: The Pessimistic Utopia of Octavia Butler’s Xenogenesis Trilogy,” and Gerry Canavan’s “‘We Are The Walking Dead’: Race, Time, and Survival in Zombie Narrative.”

However, before discussing the articles themselves, it seems advisable to address what we mean when we say apocalypse, utopia, or dystopia—terms whose meanings have been altered, stretched, and blurred over centuries of use. As Lois Parkinson Zamora has lamented, the term apocalypse has come to be commonly used “as a synonym for ‘disaster’ or ‘cataclysm,’” ignoring that “the myth comprehends both cataclysm and millennium, tribulation and triumph, chaos and order . . .” (4; original emphasis). The word itself is derived from the Greek apokalyptein meaning “to uncover” or “to reveal,” and its biblical origin is St. John of Patmos’s Book of Revelation. This text prophesied a future after the destruction of the world as we know it, a future that would, as Frank Kermode has observed, make known the purpose and meaning of all that went before. Kermode proposes that apocalyptic fictions are a necessity of the human psyche, signaling “our deep need for intelligible ends. We project ourselves . . . past the End, so as to see the structure as a whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot in the middle” (Sense 6). He states that, while the age of belief in religious apocalyptic narratives may be past and “for us the End has perhaps lost its naïve imminence, its shadow still lies on the crises of our fictions; we may speak of it as immanent (Sense 6; original emphasis). To give meaning to
the past and present, humans create fictions (a term that for Kermode includes history, myth, and literature) concerning the end of the world. Revelation is thus a paradigmatic example of what Jean François Lyotard has termed a grand récit, or grand, master, or metanarrative, one that purports to provide a comprehensive, authoritative, and transcendent explanation of reality.3

Another oft-overlooked aspect of biblical apocalypse is its (doubly) utopian nature: the triumph of God’s faithful over Lucifer’s followers at Mount Megiddo is to result in Satan being confined to hell, ushering in Christ’s millennial reign on Earth—a period of peace, plenty, and harmony. The devil will then escape for four years before suffering a final defeat, at which time the dead are to be resurrected and the final judgment of souls will take place. Mass annihilation is therefore only the beginning of a process that will allow the righteous to enter into the ultimate, eternal Utopia, heaven, and the unjust to be sent to that dystopia par excellence, hell. Thus apocalypse, even in its scriptural source, is inextricably tied to the concepts of utopia and dystopia.

But what are we imagining when we speak of utopia and dystopia? Not only is it intuitively obvious that one person’s utopia may appear quite dystopian to another, and that the terms have meant different things at different times and in different places, but it is at least possible to hypothesize that our jaded postmodern sensibilities have made it increasingly difficult to conceive of what a utopia might look like. Moreover, the realities surrounding us would seem to make it challenging to select just one of the many dystopian possibilities they suggest. Even the etymological origin of the word utopia has been subject to debate, although I believe Margaret Atwood, who takes into consideration Thomas More’s reputation as a joker, may finally have resolved the matter: “‘Utopia’ is sometimes said to mean ‘no place,’ from the Greek ou-topos; others derive it from eu, as in ‘eugenics,’ in which case it would mean ‘healthy place’ or ‘good place.’ Sir Thomas More, in his own 16th-century Utopia, may have been punning: utopia is the good place that doesn’t exist” (n.pag.).4 The problematics of representing an ideal culture or its opposite is one of the issues with which the authors whose works are analyzed here struggle—as well as one of the elements that make their narratives worthy of interest.

A brief summary of Tom Moylan’s history of the development of the utopian genre should help to contextualize the essays in this issue. Moylan asserts that, in More’s time, imaginary utopian spaces were projected onto the geographical landscapes being explored by European colonizers, and offered models of perfect state, economic, and social structures. Following M.H. Abendsour, he affirms that, from circa 1850 to the late nineteenth century, utopias became heuristic in nature, emphasizing political and economic reform from within the system. Late nineteenth-century industrialization radicalized utopian
imaginings, converting them into process-oriented visions of how revolution against the system would lead to an ideal tomorrow. At the same time, the exhaustion of new lands to colonize caused writers to displace utopias into the future. According to Moylan, as the twentieth century witnessed the advent of modern social-economic-political projects that attempted to realize their own versions of a perfect society (socialism, communism, fascism, capitalist democracy), the utopian impulse was co-opted, channeled into either the service of the state or the cycle of production and consumer acquisition. He posits that the anti-establishment movements associated with the 1960s gave birth to the “critical utopia,” a genre that “reject[s] utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream” (10). It is a species in conflict with the status quo of its place and time, characterized by an awareness of its own limitations with regard to both the effect it may have on society and its own internal contradictions and imperfections. It therefore focuses on “dynamic alternatives” (11) to concepts of utopia as a static ideal future; as a result, I would conjecture that the concept of utopia has thereby also become predominantly indeterminate, as I hope to demonstrate below. Influenced by Foucault, Moylan observes that utopian politics and practices are now being portrayed not as a question of proletariat vs. bourgeoisie, of capitalism vs. socialism or communism; that is, not as system vs. system but as dispersed, heterogeneous points of power struggling against diffuse and equally heterogeneous elements of resistance (e.g., feminism, ecologism; various ethnic, political, and human rights movements)—each of which is itself internally diverse.

In a similar vein, Fredric Jameson has posited the existence of “two distinct lines of descendency from Thomas More’s inaugural text: the one intent on the realization of the Utopian program, the other an obscure yet omnipresent Utopian impulse finding its way to the surface in a variety of covert expressions and practices” (3). The first tendency would correspond to the elaboration of a determinate Utopia, the latter to an indeterminate strain, utopia. The articles presented in this issue attempt (apocalyptically?) to uncover the covert to which Jameson refers.

If it is possible to claim any common ground for the following essays’ interpretations of the nature of apocalypse in the texts they examine, it would seem that they coincide, at least implicitly, in seeing the fictional apocalypses studied as rejecting grand narratives. Whereas biblical-style apocalypses could be counted on to grant meaning to all preceding events, it seems that recent “revelations” reject, or at least avoid, offering closure and transcendent truth. If apocalypse has indeed become “immanent” as Kermode contends, it has, like utopia, also become indeterminate. In none of the works studied in this issue is the apocalyptic event ever presented in detail; for example, in Robert
Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* the origin of the reanimation contagion that created the zombies is never explained. In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, the catastrophe itself is never even explicitly mentioned, although certain details seem to suggest it was a nuclear war. Indeed, in Octavia Butler's *Parable* novels, there is no specific event, but rather a general economic and social entropy that gradually creates a dystopian world. In addition, and in direct opposition to the biblical paradigm in which apocalypse includes the beginning of an eternal static state, all the fictions treated here present a post-cataclysmic reality every bit as mutable as the one that preceded it. Moreover, both Octavia Butler's *Exogenesis* trilogy and Bernard Malamud's *God's Grace* arguably contain at least two apocalypses and, as the scholars argue in this issue, both present apocalypse as evolution (and evolution as apocalyptic); that is, as process and not event. Of greatest import, though, is the fact that all the fictions are polysemic and possess open denouements offering no final resolution (of course, the final chapter of Kirkman’s serial novel has yet to be written). All of the artists clearly invoke the biblical paradigm, yet the ambiguity of cause, the continuing alterability of reality, and the uncertainty of the ending—i.e., their indeterminacy—stand in direct opposition to the divinely-bestowed transcendent Truth provided in Revelation. One hardly thinks the prophet of Patmos would approve.

It would also seem that, diachronically, the utopian/dystopian characteristics of the fictions studied here seem to conform to and confirm Moylan's scheme outlined above. If a general critical consensus might be drawn from these articles, it appears that utopians have given up on fighting one master narrative with another. They interrogate, they suggest possible paths, but they do not propose answers or outline projects, nor are any utopias or dystopias presented as static or perfect. Such fictions thus seem both to exemplify Moylan's concept of the critical utopia and to manifest Jameson's Utopian impulse.

These common characteristics of indeterminacy are reflected in the scholars' critical lexicon. They speak of the fictions as presenting an “opening out onto” (Pizzino) utopian or dystopian “possibilities” (Bailin) or “horizons” (Pizzino); of a “making [them] thinkable” (Bailin from Giorgio Agamben), or even of an “open/contingent/incomplete/imperfect utopia” that is “post-utopian” (Johns). Gerry Canadan's essay is the only one to treat a post-apocalyptic dystopia for which no possible remedy is suggested but, even in that case, I would argue that it is possible to see dystopia as a call to pursue its opposite.

Christopher Pizzino’s essay “Utopia At Last: Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* as Science Fiction” claims for the novel “a utopian impulse that aligns it with science fiction.” *The Road* (2006) is the apparently simple narrative of a father and his young son’s journey over several months across a post-apocalyptic U.S. landscape toward the sea. Pizzino contests critical responses to the work that have
focused on the paternal figure as an embodiment of the value of "selfless parental love" or "overwhelming parental guilt," seeing the work as a "horror story with a conscience." Making use of Vivian Sobchack’s distinction between horror and sf in cinema, which posits that the former genre tends to center on moral conflict and the latter on discursive process, he finds "the question of narrative itself as a producer of value" to be central to *The Road*, reading it as a "process-oriented examination of what the apocalypse means and the changes it might lead to." Pizzino examines how values are transmitted—and transformed—from one generation to the next through the interplay between the narratives passed down from father to son and the particular realities of a radically altered existence. He posits that the novel suggests a world view based on "ethical commitments that open onto utopian horizons," offering "possibilities [of] a new, community-based morality, of shared responsibility for the survival of the human collective."

Deborah Bailin’s article, "Evolution as Apocalypse in *God’s Grace*," also concerns how narratives transmit values; in particular, the principle of "human exceptionalism" (the belief that humans are a unique species and the only one capable of achieving "civilization") conveyed by religious and humanist grand narratives. Bernard Malamud’s 1982 post-nuclear holocaust dystopia takes place on an island inhabited by one human, Calvin Cohn, and several simian species, including chimpanzees that develop speech and to whom Cohn lectures on "civilization" and human values. Utilizing theories of the posthuman put forth by Giorgio Agamben, Lynn Margulis, and Gillian Beer, Bailin compares the tropes in the novel with those in Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*, a text she insightfully qualifies as "proto posthumanist." She concludes that Malamud subverts his protagonist’s discourse, and thus suggests "the possibility of an evolutionary future which can be, to use Agamben’s term . . . , appropriately ‘thinkable’ as neither human nor animal. Darwinian narrative . . . disrupts the ‘thinkability’ of this dichotomy . . . [making] posthumanism, as another critical and cultural paradigm, newly possible."

The next two essays address different multi-work series by Octavia Butler: her *Xenogenesis* trilogy consisting of *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and 1989’s *Imago*; and her *Parable* novels, *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998). All these novels share many of the same concerns: they speculate about the possible traits of a utopian society, but at the same time problematize the concepts *utopia* and *dystopia*. Both Adam Johns and Jessie Stickgold-Sarah address what scholars have criticized as the author’s "biodeterminism," her apparent belief that many human ills are genetically programmed into us.

In "’The Time Had Come for Us to Be Born’: Octavia Butler’s Darwinian Apocalypse," Johns asserts that Butler’s portrayal in the *Parable* novels
of a dystopian, nearly anarchic world of injustice, violence, and scarcity. “explore[s] new notions of utopia which accept . . . biodeterministic views of human nature which emanate from the sciences,” that the author asks “what utopian possibilities remain with biodeterminism granted: assuming that . . . hierarchical violence . . . is to some extent hardwired, what is to be done?” (author’s emphasis) He examines the key trope of “hyperempathy,” a genetic condition that the young, black, female protagonist Olamina shares with a small minority, and that causes those affected to suffer the physical and psychological pains of those around them. It is this evolutionary mutation that allows her to develop a religion founded on the belief that God is change, which Johns considers “her revelation, her apocalypse.” He analyzes the dialogue between Olamina’s religious narrative and that of the Christianity in which she was raised (recalling the role of narrative in the intergenerational transformation of values discussed previously in relation to The Road). He then moves on to consider Olamina’s founding of the community Acorn, a utopian endeavor, and her consequent promotion of Earthseed, an attempt to carry out what she perceives as humanity’s interstellar destiny to propagate her beliefs. He concludes that Butler “aspires to an open/contingent/incomplete/imperfect utopia, without in any way surrendering the utopian drive itself”; and that “Butler’s novels are concerned with unveiling the possibility of a utopia, and even a theology, for a purely material world which operates strictly by biological rules.”

It is also worth noting that Olamina, despite founding a religion, recording its beliefs in “scripture” and, like John of Patmos, prophesying humanity’s future, is not nor claims to be inspired by God, and hence claims no authoritative status for herself or her creed. Nor is her prophesying revelatory of a predetermined destiny; on the contrary, since for her God is change and hence malleable, she believes that humans create both God and our evolving species. Moreover, colonies on different planets will evolve in diverse ways. Again, the Christian grand narrative is at once invoked and subverted through a strategy of indeterminacy.

In addition to the question of biodeterminism, Stickgold-Sarah’s article “‘Your children will know us, you never will’: The Pessimistic Utopia of Octavia Butler’s Xenogenesis Trilogy” also responds to criticisms of her seemingly anti-feminist portrayal of motherhood, and to accusations that her visions of the future are entirely pessimistic. The trilogy tells the story of Lilith, an African-American woman who wakes two hundred years after an apocalyptic nuclear war to find that she and a handful of other survivors have been saved by an alien race, the Oankali. The extraterrestrials inform her that humanity’s possession of two contraindicated genetic traits, intelligence and hierarchy, make them self-destructive. The aliens intend to cure this ill by combining
human DNA with their own, at which time the hybrid race would be returned to a now-healed Earth. What the Oankali believe to be offering is salvation, but the humans see the genetic alterations as genocide.

Following Patricia Collins, Stickgold-Sarah contends that “Butler thus engages with, rather than proposing, a dystopian narrative: . . . the very real dystopian history of Black women as slaves” and that the writer thus “challenges this dystopian content in order to make a formally utopian proposal.” The key to resistance of Oankali genocide for Butler, Stickgold-Sarah affirms, is through parenting (again one notes the intergenerational transmission of values): Lilith creates a private sphere in which practices of quotidian resistance can be taught and learned (recalling Moylan’s critical utopia). Stickgold-Sarah is thus able to conclude that, far from being at odds with feminism, “to ‘mother the next generation’ begins to mean something very different. Lilith becomes something a little closer to Adam: the founder of the race.”

Furthermore, she replies to other scholars’ complaints that, by creating an externally imposed solution for our species’ problems, the novelist gives up on real-world political alternatives, suggesting that “Butler, imagining that perhaps such action will be insufficient, reaches past ‘human action’ to imagine a way in which biology can still be remade” through “a reimagination of DNA as malleable, manipulatable and accessible,” permitting the complexly utopian aspects of her work. This allows her to conclude that the trilogy’s utopianism consists of “the move past, not biological essentialism, but the idea that such an essentialism marks the end of the line.”

To Stickgold-Sarah’s perceptive analysis, one might add that the godlike Oankali’s intervention into post-nuclear holocaust Earth’s history and its metaphorical “judgment” of humanity’s genetic “sins” clearly parallel St. John’s apocalyptic model, but, as she notes, the Xenogenesis works are indeterminate: is the extraterrestrials’ verdict salvation or genocide, heaven or hell?

Gerry Canavan’s essay “‘We Are The Walking Dead’: Race, Time, and Survival in Zombie Narrative” addresses the renewed popularity of the zombie genre. He contests three explanations of the recent “zombie mania” phenomenon: Steve Shaviro’s Marxist contention that it is a result of this revenant’s symbolic relationship with contemporary globalized late capitalism, Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry’s explanation that the zombie figure is the posthuman descendant of Donna Haraway’s cyborg, and Deleuze and Guattari’s affirmation that zombie narratives constitute a work myth and not a war myth. Canavan asserts that they are both—and hence also a colonial and racial myth, proposing that “one of the ways the State apparatus builds the sorts of ‘preaccomplished’ subjects it needs is precisely through the construction of a racial binary in which the (white) citizen-subject is opposed against nonwhite life,
bare life, zombie life—that anti-life which is always inimically and hopelessly Other, which must always be kept quarantined, if not actively eradicated and destroyed.” He examines the “biopolitical origins of the zombie imaginary” in order to “come to terms with the historical and ongoing colonial violence of which the zombie has always ever been only the thinnest sublimation.”

Canavan takes as a case study Robert Kirkman’s continuing comic book series The Walking Dead, begun in 2003. Utilizing a theoretical apparatus informed by the work of Vivian Sobchack, Laura Mulvey, Achille Mbembe, Garrett Hardin and, above all, John Rieder’s theories of the “postcolonial gaze” in sf, the author studies what fictions of zombie apocalypse have to tell us about our reactions to real-world catastrophe—and what those reactions in turn tell us about race relations, about ourselves.

The author affirms that “Zombies—lacking interior, lacking mind—cannot look; they are, for this reason, completely realized colonial objects. Zombies cannot be recognized, accommodated, or negotiated with; once identified, they must immediately be killed.” He contends that the coding of the zombie figure in the biopolitical terms of epidemic is evidence that “The biopolitical state . . . needs to create this sort of racial imaginary in order to retain its power to kill.” He observes that, central to the fears of “moral chaos” present in zombie narratives, are our anxieties concerning (racial) reproductive futures: “the need to ‘protect’ women and children cannot be glossed over. ‘Proper’ control over wombs, and anxiety that they will somehow be captured, polluted, or compromised”—by the zombies that, Canavan notes, are not subtly coded as African-Americans.

In the final part of his essay, the author examines the behavior of white suburbanites in post-Katrina New Orleans, the U.S. news media’s coverage of post-earthquake Haiti, and the U.S. military’s policies regarding aid distribution on that ravaged isle, to make a convincing case that the zombie is a metaphor of “our only possible future, our already actual present.”

Once again, in The Walking Dead we see a cataclysmic event with an unknown cause, causing tribulation and a war apparently between good and evil. However, as Canavan has demonstrated, all the living are not good (the heroes become increasingly emotionally hardened), nor are the zombies necessarily responsible for their actions, thus blurring the clear biblical line between the two contending sides. Moreover, the living know that they are already infected (original sin?) and that, upon their death, they too will be reanimated. It should be recalled that, according to the model set forth in Revelation, those still living will be joined by those brought back from the dead for final judgment. Will a cure for reanimation be found and “salvation” obtained? And is there anyone left that could be judged worthy of redemption? Causal and moral uncertainty,
and the play of similarity and difference between the biblical model and The Walking Dead, are consistent with the indeterminacies described above. Despite the series’ dystopian pessimism, in the same way that Stickgold-Sarah suggests Butler takes biodeterminism as given and tries to get beyond it, is it not possible that the recoding by Kirkman of our own very real human problems itself implies a utopian desire to overcome them? Perhaps hope is still in place at the bottom of the post-apocalyptic Pandora’s box.

What the works examined in this issue, and the articles that analyze them, offer, I think, is an interesting constellation, to borrow a metaphor from Walter Benjamin. Benjamin’s concept of the constellation constituted an attack on the notion of history as linear and the associated post-Enlightenment narrative of history as progress. The idea posits, in a manner foreshadowing Foucault, that the metaphor of history as line or series of unbroken points should be replaced with a non-linear, non-causal, three-dimensional metaphor: the constellation. Historical events consequently are represented as stars whose gravitational fields mutually influence each other. These recent imaginings of apocalypse, utopia, and dystopia can metaphorically be viewed in the same way, as aesthetic events suspended in the three-dimensional field that is history, influencing and being influenced by the times and thus offering a vision of the same. The fictions seem to manifest a rejection of master narratives, a preference for questions and doubts over answers and certainties, an impulse toward utopia over political or economic programs or models. What the authors of these articles seem to have revealed in the works treated are Jameson’s “covert expressions and practices”: the importance of telling the right stories to the next generation, the shared values of mutual aid and cooperation over those of revolution—or perhaps a new view of revolution-as-never-ending-process (God as change as revolution?). In any event, fiat utopia.

Notes

1. I cite here the call for papers, which may be seen at: http://core.ecu.edu/forl/knickерbockerd/cfpExtrapolation.mht

2. Friedlander is not alone in making such an observation: Frank Kermode has identified an “an apocalyptic strain in modern literature; . . . we find in that literature transformations of a variety of apocalyptic traditions” (“Apocalypse” 85), and Matei Calinescu notes “the constant, obsessive recurrence of the idea of the end” in twentieth-century literature (172). For an opposing view, written soon after the turn of the millennium, see James Berger’s article which, given the recent global financial crisis, ironically seems more dated than Friedlander’s. I consider the MLA Bibliography’s listings to be a valid metric because (to paraphrase Freud), where art goes, scholarship soon follows, and space prohibits even a brief listing of the
many recent examples of apocalyptic, utopian, and dystopian fictions. However, for lists of primary sources falling into these categories, see the following web sites that, while not necessarily scholarly, are useful as points of departure: http://www.apocalypticmovies.com; http://www.listology.com/list/utopian-novels; http://en.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/28112.

3. For Lyotard, postmodernism consists of “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv).

4. Most critics and dictionaries affirm that it means “no place,” from the Greek out-topos, but there are representatives of both the former and the latter that posit its origin in eu-topos (“good place”).

5. Based on Wolfgang Iser’s ideas, my use of “indeterminate” refers to the multiplicity of possible interpretations of given textual elements and of the work as a whole, and the resulting impossibility of claiming any definitive meaning or ultimate arbiter for it. In this essay, I extend the concept to refer to a general (but not of course without exceptions) attitude toward apocalyptic, dystopia, and utopia in recent fiction. This is similar to Jameson’s use of the term “undecidability” which he posits is a “deep-structural” or inherent characteristic of utopian texts (xv), a position with which I respectfully disagree.

6. It is also interesting to note that the still-human survivors’ wanderings in the post-apocalyptic “desert” and their taking refuge in walled cities are also reminiscent of Old Testament topoi, and the zombie virus could equally be considered the symbolic equivalent of a biblical plague.

7. For more on this idea, most clearly expressed in his final essay “On the Concept of History,” see Carol Jacobs’s study and the essay by Christopher Rollason.

Works Cited


Contributors

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