

THE ARTISTIC TIME IN POST-APOCALYPTIC NOVELS (A SURVEY THROUGH: ANNA KAVAN'S *ICE* AND MANON STEFFAN ROS'S *THE BLUE BOOK OF NEBO*)

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Abstract - In a world of disasters and uncertainties, post-apocalyptic literature is increasingly attracting the attention of readers and critics. This article examines Anna Kavan's *Ice* and Manon Steffan Ros's *The blue book of Nebo*, novels set in post-apocalyptic world - where humans struggle to survive against the disaster of nuclear war and the fury of nature; on the basis of exploiting the characteristics of artistic time in the two novels, thereby discovering philosophical and humane messages. It can be said that in the two works, Anna Kavan and Manon Steffan Ros have built a picture of a devastated post-apocalyptic world by clarifying the destruction of time. The world that the two writers created has broken the linear time model to clearly reflect the collapse of human civilization, the fluctuations in psychological depth and highlight the brutality of the battle for survival.

Key words - Anna Kavan; *Ice*; Manon Steffan Ros; *The blue book of Nebo*; the artistic time; post-apocalyptic novel

1. Introduction

In the context of the 21st century, as threats to human living environments become increasingly complex, post-apocalyptic novels are considered "an extended branch of apocalypse, exploring the theme of survival after the collapse of human civilization" [1, p.414]. This genre has marked a transformation of the apocalyptic tradition, shifting from ancient religious prophecies to reflecting the modern threats that humanity may face in the future. Early studies of this genre were often related to science fiction and socio-political contexts, particularly the anxiety over nuclear war in the twentieth century. Currently, research on the post-apocalyptic genre has shifted from analyses focused on genre motifs to studies addressing global issues [2].

Because it focuses on visions of the future, Marco Caracciolo points out that post-apocalyptic literature has a dyadic temporal structure, in which the pre-apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic worlds are sharply contrasted. Post-apocalyptic works often focus on the world after the disaster, yet implicitly evoke the previous world through memories, dreams, or lingering traces. Time in post-apocalyptic novels is typically depicted with a rupture between past and present, creating a sense of loss and nostalgia, while simultaneously highlighting the impact of catastrophe [3].

Thus, it can be seen that artistic time is a crucial element in the narrative structure of the post-apocalyptic genre, playing an important role in reflecting the crises of human

cognition and existence. In this article, we employ a poetics-based research method to investigate artistic time in Anna Kavan's *Ice* and Manon Steffan Ros's *The Blue Book of Nebo*, thereby identifying the characteristics of artistic time in post-apocalyptic novels and opening the door to exploring the unique artistic world of this genre.

2. Problem solving

2.1. Post-apocalyptic novels and artistic time in post-apocalyptic novels

2.1.1. An overview of post-apocalyptic novels

According to the Oxford Dictionary, "post-apocalyptic" means "describing or relating to a situation after the destruction of the world, or to an extremely bad situation that seems like the world has been destroyed". Simply put, post-apocalypse refers to the state of the world after a major catastrophe such as nuclear war, pandemic, or natural disaster. In this context, humanity must face the collapse of political systems, moral degradation, and the depletion of resources.

Post-apocalyptic novels are considered a sub-genre of science fiction, focusing on a world after catastrophe, but they do not merely depict devastation. Unlike apocalyptic novels, which center on the process leading up to disaster, post-apocalyptic novels portray the aftermath, exploring how people survive and adapt to a ruined civilization. Post-apocalyptic fiction is not just a story of survival but also "an effort to imagine a completely different future world" [4, p.8]. Houfková defined post-apocalyptic novels in *The Warning Function of Post-Apocalyptic Science Fiction* as "a sub-genre specific which depicts earth's civilization as collapsing or collapsed" [5]. This genre, therefore, opens up dimensions for researchers and readers to reflect on the consequences of technological abuse, environmental destruction, and the internal contradictions of modern society.

Post-apocalyptic novels have evolved through many historical periods. Since ancient times, many civilizations from East to West have had stories about the destruction and reconstruction of the world and civilization - such as the "Mother Gourd" in Vietnam, the Ragnarok in Norse mythology, or the five ages of mankind in Greek mythology. Christianity also refers to the end times on Judgment Day. However, these ancient myths did not focus on rebuilding society after disaster. "To date, relatively few

studies have specifically examined post-apocalyptic novels as a genre distinct from science fiction. Therefore, post-apocalypse is often studied as a branch of apocalyptic or science fiction novels. The lack of a unified concept of the post-apocalyptic genre is partly due to the lack of consensus on the distinction between post-apocalyptic definitions and boundaries. Difficulty distinguishing between apocalypse and post-apocalypse is common in fields approaching this topic, from studies of popular culture, literature, film, and television to religious studies of the apocalypse" [6, p.25].

In his study *The Post-Apocalyptic Turn: A Study of Contemporary Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Narrative* (2014), Hyong-jun Moon also asserts that post-apocalyptic novels "have deep roots in Western literature, beginning with the Book of Revelation, but truly developed as a separate genre in the modern period, especially after World War II - in the 1950s" [4, p.2-8]. According to Brett Samuel Stifflemire, the genre places particular emphasis on the "interim period" - the time between the collapse of the old order and the emergence (or non-emergence) of a new one [6]. The 1950s saw the emergence of pioneering works such as *Earth Abides* (1949) by George R. Stewart, *The Day of the Triffids* (1951) by John Wyndham, and *On the Beach* (1957) by Nevil Shute, reflecting anxieties about nuclear disaster [5]. Recently, post-apocalyptic novels have continued to absorb postmodern elements such as fragmentation, intertextuality, allusion, self-reflexivity, and open endings to express profound concerns about themes of nihilism, finality, or the meaninglessness of life. *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy (2006) and *The Blue Book of Nebo* by Manon Steffan Ros (2018) are notable examples [6, p.9].

2.1.2. An overview of artistic time in post-apocalyptic novels

From a poetics perspective, researcher Tran Dinh Su asserts that artistic time "is the time created by the writer, reflecting both the state of humans in time and their perception of time, while also opening a pathway for readers to enter the world of the work" [7]. Unlike objective time measured by clocks or calendars, artistic time can be measured by many different measures. Here, the author can choose the starting and ending points, narrate events chronologically or in reverse, select perspectives from the past, present, or future, and cover the span of a moment, a lifetime, or even eternity. From this viewpoint, it can be seen that artistic time is an artistic category, an artistic image, and a way of existence for the artistic world. Through the creation of artistic time, the writer expresses their conception of humanity and the world. Readers can feel and experience time in literary works with different lengths, paces, and spans of past, present, and future.

Indeed, in post-apocalyptic novels, artistic time is a particularly important element in organizing the narrative structure as well as expressing the writer's artistic vision. It is common for time in post-apocalyptic novels to transcend the usual linear concept of historical time; instead, authors create a nonlinear temporal dimension -

where past, present, and future intersect. Hyong-jun Moon argues that time in post-apocalyptic novels is not only a sequence of events but also symbolizes the disruption of the current order [4]. Artistic time in post-apocalyptic novels serves as a means to reflect humanity's anxieties. Works in this genre since the 2000s have been associated with events such as 9/11, the SARS pandemic, and climate change, as people sense that history is not progressing but "circling or even regressing". By restructuring time, post-apocalyptic novels "imagines a completely different world" and opens up possibility of exploring "new worlds" as alternatives to contemporary society. Artistic time in post-apocalyptic novels often involves a rupture between past and present. Memories and relics from the pre-disaster world become "absent presences," losing their original meaning. Some post-apocalyptic works use artistic time to create cyclical structures, reflecting the hopelessness and lack of escape for humans.

Applying the poetics theory of on artistic time to the study of temporal organization in *Ice* and *The Blue Book of Nebo*, we aim to clarify the importance of the time element in the narrative structure of post-apocalyptic fiction.

2.2. The Organization of Artistic Time in *Ice* (Anna Kavan) and *The Blue Book of Nebo* (Manon Steffan Ros)

2.2.1. The time of the past and nostalgia

With the characteristics of the post-apocalyptic genre, destruction is not limited to tangible materials but also devastates intangible concepts such as time. Artistic time is a unique aesthetic category - a means of organizing the story, not identical to real-world time, and it reflects the consciousness and experiences of the characters. In both *Ice* and *The Blue Book of Nebo*, Anna Kavan and Manon Steffan Ros construct a timeline that is suspended in the past, deeply marked by the personal memories of their characters.

From the opening lines of both books, the way Anna Kavan and Manon Steffan Ros handle novelistic time already marks the uniqueness of post-apocalyptic literature. However, their approaches to time in these two works show distinct differences.

In *Ice*, Anna Kavan does not narrate according to a conventional timeline; instead, she recreates an unstable reality through fragmented flashbacks, coincidental and random scenes experienced by the narrator - a man obsessed with a young woman fleeing in a world collapsing under ice. The moment of the catastrophic event has permanently frozen physical time. Therefore, time in *Ice* is primarily constructed as an obsession in the protagonist's mind. Memories of the mysterious woman he pursues lack a clear chronological order; instead, they are disjointed, haunting fragments. The repetition of events, each time with different details, illustrates how memory is altered through subjective perception. The character immerses himself in the flow of nostalgia, recalling memories of the woman who once fascinated him. This not only expresses obsession but also creates a contrast between the frozen present and the "warm," albeit vague, past. "At times, the

book enters the era of thermonuclear disaster, of climate change... but sometimes it returns to a somewhat poetic summer. Moreover, Anna Kavan introduces elements of the Middle Ages, where the boundaries of space and time blur, creating a nearly surreal novel that transcends reality, reaching into boundless creative spaces" [8]. Thus, the memories of "yesterday" never close but always haunt and dominate the character's process of "living". This makes time in *Ice* feel like an endless loop, with the protagonist's psyche frozen and trapped in haunting recollections. Through this, the author expresses the chaos and disintegration of the post-apocalyptic world, highlighting the link between personal emotion and the broader tragedy of humanity.

In contrast, *The Blue Book of Nebo* uses the diary form to preserve concrete memories of the time before the disaster. The novel is a compilation of entries by Rowenna and her son Dylan - survivors of a nuclear catastrophe. Their writings reflect how each experiences time from different perspectives: Rowenna, as an adult, writes with a sense of reminiscence, while Dylan, growing up after the disaster, records his acceptance of the new world. This difference creates two parallel timelines in the work - one is a memoir of the old world, the other is a diary of a new life. Rowenna's memoir is filled with nostalgia for the past, for what has been lost, for life before the disaster. For her, time is suspended in memory, tied to regret and pain: "Life in those old days was so easy. So easy that we used to laugh in the face of death" [9, p.119]. Meanwhile, Dylan's perception of time is different - not about loss, but about accepting reality. For Dylan, the post-apocalyptic world is both strange and the only reality he knows: "I don't want anything to change, I don't want this to end. I fit this place, this time" [9, p.102]. However, Dylan still imagines a beautiful past through books and remnants of the old civilization. Writing in the notebook becomes a symbolic act, expressing the human effort to preserve personal identity in a completely transformed world. Thus, in the novel, the past and nostalgia are not only elements of the plot but also tools for exploring human values in times of crisis. By weaving together present and past, Manon Steffan Ros creates a complex picture of loss and hope, of rebuilding personal identity and community.

The narrative techniques of the two authors also differ significantly. Anna Kavan employs a nonlinear, surreal, and ambiguous narrative style, evoking the sense of an unstable reality that constantly shifts in tandem with the character's psyche. In contrast, Manon Steffan Ros adopts the diary form, enabling readers to track character development over time and to perceive the contrast between past and present. This approach gives readers a clear sense of loss and nostalgia, while also exploring the adaptability of people in harsh circumstances.

Both authors use memory as a bridge to delve deeper into human existence amid upheaval. The timeline - interwoven and jumbled memories - recreates the contradictory state of people caught between hope and despair, desire and helplessness. In *Ice*, memory becomes a vague space where the boundary between reality and

hallucination is blurred, reflecting the protagonist's instability in a disintegrating world. In *The Blue Book of Nebo*, memory serves as a means of sustaining hope, with the past becoming a source of spiritual strength for survivors.

In summary, both Anna Kavan and Manon Steffan Ros use the past and nostalgia not only to explore the nature of memory but also to highlight the catastrophic post-apocalyptic landscape. This demonstrates that time in literature is a crucial factor in shaping the meaning of a work. Despite their different approaches, both *Ice* and *The Blue Book of Nebo* reveal the powerful influence of memory when people confront profound changes in perception and experience in the present.

2.2.2. Fractured time

Post-apocalyptic time is organized in a uniquely divided way. Time splits into "the present" and "the past". The "past" represents everything that once was, containing all the beauty and order the world used to have. The "present" stands for the post-apocalyptic world - a harsh reality for the characters. Since all that was good has been left behind in the past, the present seems to lose its significance [10]. Globally, time becomes suspended; there are no clear markers of the passage of time in post-apocalyptic fiction. Instead, time revolves around the daily survival of people after the disaster. Both *Ice* by Anna Kavan and *The Blue Book of Nebo* by Manon Steffan Ros engage with this temporal fragmentation, though each from a different angle.

In *Ice*, the world is gradually engulfed by ice - a harbinger of doom. Within this context, the very concept of time loses its usual meaning. Anna Kavan weaves together present, past, future, dreams, and memories in a dense and complex pattern. Time in the novel flows non-linearly, constantly distorted and fragmented. Events repeat with slight variations, as if the narrator's memory is unreliable, making it impossible to determine an objective timeline. The entire story feels like a cycle of obsession - a nameless man haunted by a woman, trapped in dreams and memories (or flashbacks?), drawing the reader into his endless loop of fixation. This temporal dislocation allows imaginary time to invade real time, resulting in a hazy temporal structure typical of post-apocalyptic novels. By linking time to the character's psychological obsessions, Kavan enriches the novel with deeper insight into the character's inner life.

The story opens with the unnamed narrator questioning his own motives in searching for the woman he once loved: "I myself do not understand what compels me to meet the girl, she has been in my mind all the time I was away... when I arrived here she had become an obsession" [11, p.14]. On this journey, he expresses unease about reality: "Reality is always something that asserts its quantity for me. Sometimes this can be unsettling" [11, p.15]. Memory is no longer fixed or reliable altered by the character's psyche and circumstances. When confronted with a seemingly familiar scene, the man cannot pinpoint when it belongs: "This place seems vaguely familiar, a distorted version of

something I only half remember. I think I recognize it, think I've seen it before, but I can't be sure" [11, p.19]. The fracture of time is further emphasized by the changing seasons: "I had only been here before in summer, when everything looked completely different" [11, p.19] - the character's memories no longer align with reality: "It is midsummer now, the weather very hot, the leaves outside rustling with a pleasant, cool sound" [11, p.20]. The image of summer and peaceful air evokes a clear memory, but soon, time becomes chaotic as seasons shift abruptly from summer to winter and back: "Huge ice blocks are closing in from every side. The fluorescent light, that icy, extremely cold light casts no shadow. No sun, no shadow, no life, a deadly cold" [11, p.25]. This sudden switch from summer warmth to icy desolation is not just a spatial change but a sign of broken linear time. The narrator seems trapped between the gentle memories of the past and the haunting vision of apocalypse. This is a hallmark of post-apocalyptic fiction, where time no longer follows conventional rules but becomes a fragmented, jumbled sequence.

Kavan constructs the narrator's memories through a series of interruptions, abrupt scene changes, and sudden shifts in time and place, disregarding any conventional order. For example, while observing the ruins of a fortress, the character's thoughts suddenly shift to a memory of meeting an artist: "When I accepted, I suspected he had some hidden motive for inviting me. He was an artist, not really serious, a dilettante type; the kind who always has money though he seems to do nothing" [11, p.19]. The reader cannot tell if this is a deliberate recollection or a random thought prompted by the scene. Either way, it reflects the deep-seated anxiety in the character's mind, keeping him in a state of suspicion and alertness. Throughout *Ice*, the world is chaotic - nothing is certain, not even time, space, or people.

The fragmentation of time in the novel is not merely formal; it also reflects the unstable psychological state of the narrator. He frequently loses control, making the timeline disjointed and hard to follow. Through overlapping moments, abrupt transitions, and the use of time to reveal the character's psyche, Anna Kavan creates a world of instability, pulling both character and reader into a whirlpool of confusion and disorientation.

In contrast, *The Blue Book of Nebo* alternates between the past and the post-apocalyptic present through diary entries about life after "The End," written by two narrators: Dylan and his mother, Rowenna. Each writes about their own experiences and thoughts, without reading the other's entries, creating a fragmented, multi-perspective structure: "So Mum and I agreed, we would write *The Blue Book of Nebo* together. Mum writes about the old days and 'The End.' I write about the present, about how we live. And we will not read each other's parts, unless something happens" [9, p.16]. The author never directly explains what happened; instead, details about "The End" are gradually revealed through diary fragments, requiring readers to piece together the timeline. The mother and son do not tell their story in a continuous narrative; instead, events appear

in the diary as random thoughts. Some details are repeated at different times, with changing perspectives and tones, allowing readers to feel the fluidity of memory and perception. In this "new" world, the past is not preserved in the usual way - it is distorted, forgotten, or recalled only when triggered by specific events. Through the diary structure, Manon Steffan Ros reconstructs memory in a non-linear way, reflecting the turbulence of the post-apocalyptic world.

After the nuclear disaster, the concept of time for both mother and son is fundamentally altered. In their notes, Dylan and Rowenna often recall the past to compare with the present. With no work schedules or technology to measure time, they rely entirely on subjective. These memories do not follow a specific chronological order, but appear randomly, reflecting the rupture and overlap between pre- and post-apocalyptic time: "But I remember The End. I was six then, finally six... Before The End, Mum always had short, dyed-blond hair. Now her hair grows wild like a bush, thick as animal fur, and black as the night sky, with silvery strands here and there" [9, p.12]; "sometimes I think about my old self. Neat, tidy, always, always trying. Makeup, straightened hair and painted nails. Dieting since I was twenty, now I am thin, tough, and tired, anxious, withdrawn" [9, p.24]. Through these recollections, Steffan Ros emphasizes the uncertainty of the characters' sense of time as they search for meaning in a radically changed world.

The discontinuity in the narrative is not just an artistic device but also symbolizes the collapse of the old world. When society is erased, time - like all other structures - no longer operates by the old rules; everything becomes fragmented and ambiguous, mirroring the shattered lives of the survivors: "But I can't remember... I've tried many times, but the more I try, the less I remember. Like trying to recall a dream that's already gone" [9, p.15]. Even as society collapses, memory endures as an inseparable aspect of humanity. The book Dylan and Rowenna write is humanity's way of preserving stories of the past, so as not to forget what once was. By weaving together past and present, the novel not only reflects a ruined, broken world but also illuminates the human capacity for adaptation, resilience, and storytelling. This is one of the factors contributing to the novel's appeal and depth.

The element of time in post-apocalyptic fiction not only helps the writer shape the narrative structure but is also a powerful lens through which human nature is examined in the face of ruin. By using time as a flexible artistic tool, Anna Kavan and Manon Steffan Ros show how time loses its former stability to become an unpredictable flow, directly affecting the psychological depth of their characters. This very rupture exposes the characters' uncertainty in a chaotic world, their haunting memories, and their survival instincts. In *Ice*, time "slips" away from all concrete boundaries, drifting through memory, delusion, and a bleak future. In contrast, *The Blue Book of Nebo* approaches time in a more orderly, yet subjective way, as memory becomes the means for characters to reconstruct the world from what is lost. But do these

memories have the power to replace reality, or are they merely a vague, illusory reconstruction? Perhaps, in the collapse of time, people are truly confronted with themselves and forced to change their perspective on life. When nothing can guarantee tomorrow, is time still the ultimate proof of human existence, or is it just a cycle of memory and hope?.

3. Conclusion

Thus, the study of artistic time in Anna Kavan's *Ice* and Manon Steffan Ros's *The Blue Book of Nebo* has shed light on two prominent temporal modes: the time of the past and nostalgia, and fractured time. In post-apocalyptic novels, time is no longer a tool for measuring progress; instead, it becomes a psychological and symbolic experience, reflecting rupture, repetition, longing, and the desire to exist. The interplay between memories of the past, doubts and dead-ends in the present, and the interruptions and fractures in the flow of time allows for a deep exploration of the characters' inner worlds, opening up philosophical reflections on humanity and the meaning of life after destruction. In a world where everything can be erased, time ceases to be the marker of life and instead raises the question of human choice: to continue existing, to remain trapped in the obsessions of the past, or to write new "lives," however uncertain and fragile. The disappearance of clear temporal boundaries becomes a method for readers to approach post-apocalyptic literature.

By highlighting the combination of these two temporal modes in post-apocalyptic novels, this paper clarifies one of the genre's key characteristics and suggests a new direction for reading post-apocalyptic fiction in Vietnam.

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