There is a curious irony in the young adult male habit of indulging in survival fantasies while sitting idly on the couch. Digitally interfacing with fingers and thumbs, sheltered by modernity’s creature comforts—their bodies could not be further removed from the strife-torn apocalyptic landscapes depicted onscreen. The myth of regeneration through violence surely animates this brand of entertainment, but perhaps there is another psychodynamic at work that rivets viewers and gamers to specifically apocalyptic and dystopic virtual worlds. Trauma-studies scholar E. Ann Kaplan’s forthcoming work on “trauma future-tense cinema” explores what’s culturally productive in this genre of violent, seemingly gratuitous, spectacle.¹ Though I take her point that the traumatic function of these films rouses audience awareness of the politics of our contemporary moment, cultural studies of popular phenomena must also consider how genre conventions perpetuate a discourse that underwrites and often undermines political statement.

Genres speak to mass audiences, and the genres under examination in this essay are embedded with masculinist assumptions. I consider here how the Post-Apocalyptic, Survival, War, Western and Zombie genres comprise a wider generic field—a trans-generic cluster of shared tropes and conventions that spans film, television, video games, comic books, advertisements, etc. When analyzed through Dominick LaCapra’s model of “trauma, absence, and loss,” this generic field shows a problematic tendency to stage perceived
crises in masculinity in narrative terms as “paradise lost.” The assumption here is that historical events have eroded away an “essential” core of masculinity and the male hero must endure apocalyptic extremes in order to regain it. Although John Hillcoat’s 2009 film The Road, based on Cormac McCarthy’s titular novel, partakes in many of the tropes and iconography of the aforementioned genres, it distinguishes itself through its formal style and structure. In its mise-en-scène and strategic use of flashbacks and plot sequencing, the film creates an aesthetics of trauma that runs against the generic grain. It empathically unsettles viewers with a temporality of hopelessness and presentness so that they might glimpse an alternate, more ethical, representation of masculinity.

For some 20 years now, there has been a marked increase in apocalyptic and dystopic narratives in film, television, video games and other media. Kaplan understands this phenomenon as a cultural practice of vicarious trauma. She wonders if this proliferation might have a healing function, or if it merely fuels an ever-circulating feedback loop of anxiety. Trauma future-tense cinema refers to a cycle of films that include Children of Men (2006), 28 Days (2000), The Day after Tomorrow (2004), The Book of Eli (2010), The Road and others that are set in the near-future. Unlike other “futurist technological” sci-fi such as The Matrix (1999–2003) or The Terminator series (1984–2009), trauma future-tense films depict worlds that are “already seemingly possible given scientific projections (of, for example, the devastating impact of climate change).” Kaplan stipulates, “they insist on the probability of the worlds shown or . . . the possibility of these worlds already being here.” Images of civilization’s degeneration are inferred as the logical outcome of current socio-economic, political and environmental conditions. To the degree that these films construct an aesthetics of trauma in similar ways, Kaplan argues trauma future-tense cinema can be productive by helping to “demonstrate how we will get to any future we think of from where we are now.” For example, Children of Men warns of our present susceptibility to totalitarian control; it critiques late capitalism and the attendant issues of immigration, security and climate change.

Although Kaplan counts The Road as an instance of trauma future-tense, the film deviates from her model in an important manner. The setting is some 15–20 years in the future, after an unnamed catastrophe has devastated the planet to the point where no animals, plants or insects remain. All vestiges of civilization have collapsed, leaving a few bands of roving cannibals and scrounging nomads to endure the impossible landscape. The unnamed protagonists, Man and Boy (his son), uphold their moral imperative against eating human flesh as they slowly waste away from hunger. Foraging for whatever scraps have been overlooked by the thousands of dying scavengers who’ve passed before them, their sole aim is to survive the trek southward to the