



Imagining Civilisation After the Nuclear Bomb: A Cultural Studies Reading of Post-Apocalyptic Community in Dmitry Glukhovsky's *Metro 2033*

Karunia Putra Akbar^{1*}, Y. B. Agung Prasaja²

¹²Department of English Literature, Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, Indonesia
Email: karuniaputraakbar1@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines how Dmitry Glukhovsky's *Metro 2033* represents the reconstruction of civilisation after catastrophe, using Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined community as its central analytical lens within a Cultural Studies framework. Twenty years after a nuclear war destroys the surface world, the survivors of Moscow rebuild collective life underground, fragmenting into competing station-societies, each organised around a different ideology, belief system, and social order. Using a qualitative, descriptive-analytical design, the study analyses a purposively selected set of fifty-six passages drawn from a comprehensive page-by-page table of data covering the novel's full narrative span, addressing three questions: what forms of post-apocalyptic civilisation the novel represents, what factors define and shape those forms, and how civilisation affects individual characters, communities, and social structures. Findings show that the metro's fragments reconstruct seven structural dimensions of civilisation, government, urban organisation, job specialisation, literary communication, religion, art and architecture, and technology, unevenly distributed across six competing station-societies. These forms are shaped by four recurring factors: the survival imperative, ideological inheritance, control of knowledge, and spatial organisation. Civilisation in the metro operates less as a stabilising achievement than as a system of constraint that erodes individual moral agency, sustains chronic inter-communal conflict, and culminates in the destruction of the Dark Ones, beings who alone offer humanity a path toward a wider community. The study concludes that *Metro 2033* dramatises a fundamentally imaginative rather than political or economic problem: none of the metro's competing civilisations can conceive of community beyond its own boundaries.

Keywords: post-apocalyptic civilisation, imagined community, Cultural Studies, ideological inheritance, survival imperative

INTRODUCTION

Civilisation, understood through a Cultural Studies lens, is not simply a matter of architecture, government, or technology; it is, at its foundation, a shared imaginative act, a belief held collectively by people who will mostly never meet one another that they nonetheless belong to a single community. This premise underlies Benedict Anderson's theory of the imagined community, which holds that large-scale communities such as nations exist because their members imagine a shared connection despite the impossibility of ever knowing most of their fellow members personally (Anderson, 2017). Under ordinary conditions, this act of imagination is sustained invisibly, through schools, laws, shared media, and the daily rhythms of institutional life. Catastrophe strips this invisibility away: when the structures that normally do this imaginative work collapse all at once, survivors are forced to consciously decide, often under extreme pressure, what to preserve, what to invent, and who belongs.

This is precisely the situation dramatised in Dmitry Glukhovsky's *Metro 2033* (2010). Twenty years after a nuclear war destroys the surface world, the roughly fifty thousand survivors of Moscow live fragmented across dozens of independent metro stations. As the novel's own narration puts it, the war transformed "an object of civil defence, a huge fallout shelter, into a multitude of stations unconnected by" (Glukhovsky, 2010:13) any shared authority, each pursuing its own ideology, army, and government. The protagonist, Artyom, travels the length of this fractured metro on a mission to warn the scholarly station of Polis about a mysterious threat called the Dark Ones, and in doing so passes through a communist enclave (the Red Line), a fascist regime (the Fourth Reich), a merchant republic (the Hansa), a survivalist colony (VDNKh), and a cannibalistic cult (the Children of the Worm), each a distinct, mutually hostile experiment in rebuilding "civilisation" once the old world is gone.

Cultural Studies is well suited to this material. Emerging from the Centre for Contemporary

Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, the field treats culture not as a fixed body of artistic achievement but as a dynamic, contested terrain in which meaning, ideology, and power are produced and negotiated (Dyll & Tomaselli, 2024). As Stuart Hall (1980) argues, Cultural Studies is committed to examining how texts encode and are decoded through structures of power and ideology, an approach that reads a literary text not in isolation but in relation to the social and political conditions it represents. Applied to *Metro 2033*, this approach asks whose version of civilisation each station embodies, what fear or ideology holds each community together, and what the novel ultimately suggests about the cost of rebuilding "community" after collapse.

Although a body of prior scholarship has examined civilisational reconstruction, survival, and identity in post-apocalyptic fiction more broadly, through narratological and ecocritical approaches (Machat, 2013), comparative survival-mechanism analysis (Mohammed & Abdulridha, 2024), and evolutionary and adaptive frameworks (Rajendran & Baghavandoss, 2024), among other studies, none of these apply Anderson's imagined-community framework specifically to Glukhovsky's novel, and none focus on the institutional dimensions, government, religion, economy, knowledge, and space, that structure how post-apocalyptic civilisation takes shape and what it costs the individuals living within it. This is the gap the present study addresses.

This study therefore investigates how *Metro 2033* represents post-apocalyptic civilisation through Cultural Studies, with Anderson's imagined community as its central theoretical framework, guided by three research questions: (1) what forms of post-apocalyptic civilisation are represented in the novel; (2) what factors define and shape those forms; and (3) how civilisation affects the characters, communities, and social structures depicted in the text.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive-analytical research design within the framework



of Cultural Studies, an extrinsic approach that reads a literary text in relation to its social, political, and ideological context rather than confining analysis to internal formal properties. Cultural Studies is an interdisciplinary field concerned with culture as a site where identity, ideology, and power relations are continuously produced and contested, rather than as a fixed body of artistic works to be evaluated on aesthetic grounds alone.

The primary data source is Dmitry Glukhovsky's *Metro 2033* (2010), restricted to passages depicting government and authority, ideological inheritance, religion, the control and transmission of knowledge, spatial organisation, and the social norms survivors construct within the metro's stations. Data collection proceeded in stages: (1) full textual reading of the novel; (2) construction of a literary table of data recording, for each relevant narrative passage, the page number, the key quotation, its literal meaning, and its thematic or ideological interpretation, developed through the Cultural Studies lens and Anderson's theoretical framework; (3) purposive selection, from this comprehensive record, of a fifty-six-row table of passages representative of the novel's early, middle, and late narrative arc and its full range of station-communities, following the principle of maximum variation; and (4) theoretical analysis connecting the selected passages to Anderson's imagined-community framework.

The research instrument is the researcher, functioning as a human instrument whose interpretive judgement decides what counts as relevant data and how a given passage should be connected to the study's research questions, supported by the literary table of data as a systematic, transparent, and replicable recording tool. Data analysis follows content-analysis procedures: introduction of the theoretical framework, close reading of selected passages, theoretical discussion connecting textual evidence to the framework, and synthesis linking each section's findings to the overarching argument about post-apocalyptic civilisation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Forms of Post-Apocalyptic Civilisation Represented in *Metro 2033*

The novel provides direct textual evidence for seven structural dimensions of civilisation, distributed unevenly across the metro's factions, confirming that no single station has rebuilt a complete civilisation on its own, but that the sum of the metro's fragments reconstructs nearly every structural category a pre-war civilisation once possessed.

Government re-emerges as a structural given rather than an optional feature: every surviving station produces some form of governing authority, though its form diverges sharply by faction. At Polis, government is representative and procedural, recorded in Mikhail Porfirievich's remark that its scholars are “all elected for a specified term. There, studies aren't at a standstill – there are still” (Glukhovsky, 2010:162) institutions functioning much as before the war. At the Fourth Reich, by contrast, government is authoritarian and performative: “‘To be hanged,’ the commandant concluded. There was a burst of applause which” (Glukhovsky, 2010:173) followed, the crowd's approval functioning as a ritual of consent rather than any procedural check on his authority. Government, in other words, is a structural slot each community fills differently, electorally or performatively, depending on the kind of imagined community it is trying to sustain.

The urban dimension is captured most vividly in a station whose “light marble that coated the walls was barely” (Glukhovsky, 2010:128) visible beneath decades of soot from cooking fires and survival practices, an image read as the metro's most precise architectural symbol: beauty obscured by the plain necessity of staying alive. Spatial organisation is equally political: at the Fourth Reich's border, Artyom's mind is already “convincing yourself that it wasn't your fault, it just happened all by” (Glukhovsky, 2010:171) itself, showing that the border disciplines those who approach it before they even cross the threshold.



Job specialisation persists despite catastrophic material conditions. Traders operate established inter-station routes at severe risk; the gunsmith's own trade is confirmed almost as confession, framed by the observation that “the murder has been committed with the help of your device! That's” (Glukhovsky, 2010:95) simply what his profession supplies. At Paveletskaya-Ring, an entire betting economy has been rebuilt around “well-groomed pets in little cages” (Glukhovsky, 2010:209), a specialisation that serves no survival function at all, showing that some communities possess enough stability to specialise even in leisure.

Literary communication survives unevenly, ranging from informal habit at VDNKh, where reading persists (Glukhovsky, 2010:51) without any institutional mandate, to Polis's forty-million-volume archive at the opposite extreme. Elsewhere it visibly degrades: campfire storytelling accumulates exaggeration “somewhat; but in any case, he was telling details of the sort” (Glukhovsky, 2010:8) that grow with each retelling, and already-read books are burned for warmth (Glukhovsky, 2010:238), their value treated as exhausted once consumed.

Religion achieves its most complete governing form within the Children of the Worm, whose founding doctrine is recited as scripture: “Everything will be as I said, because this world henceforward is mine. And he began” (Glukhovsky, 2010:353) speaking, before doctrinal content specifies that human flesh may be taken only from “enemies” (Glukhovsky, 2010:354). Yet the cult's own priest privately confesses he was “sincerely convinced of the existence of a higher power, but that I was fulfilling the” (Glukhovsky, 2010:364) role rather than believing it, showing that religion can function as a governing institution even without faith underlying it. Elsewhere, pre-war religious iconography survives only as décor, its sacred meaning drained out within “this small Sodom, buried deeply in the” (Glukhovsky, 2010:147) commerce of a market station.

Art and architecture survive as inherited pre-war grandeur, decayed, repurposed, or redeployed

ideologically, the Fourth Reich's arches and preserved trains weaponised for spectacle and intimidation, while identical inherited resources serve entirely different ends depending on which community occupies them. Technology ranges from adaptive engineering, VDNKh's tunnels converted for underground food production, to entropic decay elsewhere, confirming that the metro's relationship to inherited technology is selective rather than uniformly preservationist.

2. Factors That Define and Shape Civilisation

Four recurring factors explain why identical catastrophic conditions produced such different civilisational outcomes across the metro's stations.

The survival imperative underwrites the metro's economy directly. When Bourbon offers ammunition as payment, he does so “acting normal” (Glukhovsky, 2010:84), currency and killing instrument treated as one and the same without need for explanation. This same imperative eventually overrides personal loyalty: Artyom's late reflection acknowledges that his mission was to protect a community that shelters people ready to “kill strangers' children and eat adults, and so that the” (Glukhovsky, 2010:426) metro's violence could simply continue, unresolved.

Ideological inheritance shows that imagined communities can outlast the material conditions that produced them. The Red Line's peace treaty with a rival faction is narrated by each side as its own victory, so that neither the treaty “nor for either to make. The confederation lost” (Glukhovsky, 2010:21) is described identically by the two parties who signed it. The cumulative cost of this inheritance culminates in Artyom's admission that, having passed through communism, fascism, commerce, and cannibalistic theology, he no longer could “know which of the two of them was right” (Glukhovsky, 2010:410).

Control of knowledge and its transmission determines which communities sustain a coherent identity over time. A fifty percent casualty rate among traders circulates as



ordinary commercial gossip (Glukhovsky, 2010:55), informal knowledge that spreads more reliably than any archive. Within the Children of the Worm, the community's founding prohibition against eating fellow believers coexists uneasily with doctrine specifying who may “comprehend what” (Glukhovsky, 2010:358) the rule actually permits, while practical knowledge, Bourbon's own advice that one is “seriously, ‘you're better to be” (Glukhovsky, 2010:92) guided by reading rat behaviour, transmits successfully even where formal, archival knowledge does not.

Spatial organisation operates as a system of power in its own right. The same border passage discussed above, “the walls was barely” (Glukhovsky, 2010:128) visible beneath soot, and the Fourth Reich's disciplining threshold, “yourself that it wasn't your fault” (Glukhovsky, 2010:171), together confirm that power in the metro is exercised chiefly through the organisation of space, the management of visibility, and the disciplining of bodies through architecture and institutional practice, well before any formal law or doctrine is invoked.

3. Civilisation's Effects on Characters, Communities, and Social Structures

The metro's civilisational apparatus systematically constructs the Dark Ones as a radical Other that cannot be admitted into any of the seven structural dimensions catalogued above and must therefore be destroyed rather than engaged with. Fear-based narrative about “the dark ones . . . He'd” (Glukhovsky, 2010:27) already been told to expect danger, is instilled in Artyom before any direct knowledge of the Dark Ones is available. Their advance into machine-gun fire is recorded without resolution (Glukhovsky, 2010:28), and Hunter's authoritative account of watching them approach until the observer begins to shake, delivered with the warning that “can see them” (Glukhovsky, 2010:38) is itself frightening, carries institutional weight rather than functioning as one man's private anxiety. The novel's closest approach to genuine contact comes at the ruined Leninka library, where a grey-eared, green-eyed figure begins to speak,

cut short beside “Daniel's tipped-back head, followed by a” (Glukhovsky, 2010:288) shot that ends the one moment when the Dark Ones' behaviour might have contradicted the fear built up around them.

At the individual level, the survival imperative steadily erodes Artyom's moral agency. His arc begins with spontaneous, uncalculated compassion, stopping mid-flight to “help someone who'd fallen. He lingered with one of” (Glukhovsky, 2010:151) the wounded despite the danger to himself, and ends in a statement of total nihilism, describing his mission and human survival alike as worthless, an empty “mission and man's attempts to survive in a” (Glukhovsky, 2010:378) tunnel between birth and death, the Camusian absurd stated as geography.

At the structural level, the novel's climax reveals that the metro's civilisational apparatus was, all along, organised toward the Dark Ones' destruction rather than toward the wider community they had been offering. As the missile strike unfolds, Artyom watches from the Ostankino tower as someone “went out onto the balcony. Something had” (Glukhovsky, 2010:428) already changed irreversibly below; the revelation that follows, that the Dark Ones had been extending a hand to humanity and were met again with hatred, reframes every government, technology, religion, and border catalogued across this chapter as instruments ultimately mobilised toward this single act of foreclosure rather than toward the broader community the Dark Ones had offered.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Metro 2033 represents post-apocalyptic civilisation through Cultural Studies and Anderson's theory of imagined community. Regarding the forms of civilisation, the analysis identified six distinct post-apocalyptic societies, communist, neo-fascist, commercial, scholarly, survivalist, and theological, each shaped by different inherited and improvised resources, confirming that identical catastrophic conditions produce radically different social formations depending



on which ideological and cultural materials each community chooses to preserve. Regarding the factors shaping these civilisations, the survival imperative, ideological inheritance, control of knowledge, and spatial organisation together explain why stations facing an identical baseline of total collapse produce such divergent answers to what a rebuilt community should look like. Regarding civilisation's effects, the analysis found that civilisation in the metro operates less as a stabilising achievement than as a system of constraint, conflict, and catastrophe: at the individual level, the survival imperative steadily degrades Artyom's moral agency; at the community level, the metro's incompatible imagined communities prove unable to coordinate even for collective survival; and at the structural level, the metro's deepest civilisational failure is its systematic construction of the Dark Ones as a threatening Other, a narrative that forecloses genuine encounter and culminates in the destruction of the only beings offering humanity a path beyond self-destruction.

Taken together, these findings support the conclusion that *Metro 2033* uses its post-apocalyptic setting to dramatise a fundamentally imaginative rather than political or economic problem: none of the metro's six competing civilisations is able to conceive of community beyond its own boundaries. Anderson's theory of imagined communities proves not merely applicable but structurally central to the novel: the various station-states are divided not simply by ideology or resources but by mutually exclusive acts of imagination, each community projecting a bounded sense of “us” that necessarily produces an excluded, threatening “them.” The novel's climax, in which humanity destroys the Dark Ones despite their attempt to offer contact and understanding, is the logical endpoint of this pattern: a civilisation built entirely on imagined boundaries cannot recognise an invitation to imagine community differently, even when its own survival depends on doing so. In this sense, *Metro 2033* extends Anderson's framework beyond nationalism into a broader claim about the human tendency to rebuild bounded, exclusionary communities

even under conditions, catastrophe and near-extinction, that would seem to demand the opposite.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank the thesis advisor, Dr. Y. B. Agung Prasaja, M.Hum., for his guidance throughout the research and writing of this article, and the Department of English Literature, Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Surabaya, for its academic support.

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