

Vulnerability Studies: An Introduction

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Lecture- 02

Ecodystopia - I

Hello, so we return here to our discussion of ecodystopias and eco-precarity and you will recall what we have said about ecological precarity and we will continue into more specific forms that we shall be exploring in this particular session and the next one. The word dystopia is derived from the Greek words “*dus*” and “*topos*”, “*topos*” meaning of course place and if you put “*dus*” and “*topos*” together what it means is a sick or diseased or an unfavorable place. What is important to recognize is that dystopia as it is used today is not just the opposite of utopia. In the 20th century dystopia has meant a place which has been marked by, is marked by totalitarian governments, totalitarian regimes, an excessive technological use, technological dominance, in fact, capitalism and, for our particular purposes, environmental collapse.

The image you see before you is from the Will Smith starrer *I am Legend*, a particularly well-known popular text in popular Hollywood, right, and you can see here the image of deserted road avenue. It has been disused for some time as you can understand from the fact that the tarmac is overgrown with weeds and grass. The vehicles are stationed at the side, parked, there's no longer any fuel. It's daytime but the road is empty. There's no real sign of life.

This scene is not unique to *I am Legend* and you could discover similar images in practically any eco-dystopian film and novel and as a comparable example from a literary text you have the passage from Jim Crace's *The Pesthouse* which is also scrolling on your screen.

“They traveled together for a short distance until the escarpments at the edge of their road flattened out entirely into a broad, barriered semicircle and provided them with daunting views across a debris field of tumbled stone and rock, stained with rust and ancient metal melt. Colossal devastated wheels and iron machines, too large for human hands, stood at the perimeter of the semicircle, as if they had been dumped by long-retreated glaciers and had no purpose now other than to age. Hardly anything grew amid the waste. The earth was poisoned, probably. Twisted rods of steel protruded from the masonry. Discarded shafts and metal planks, too heavy to pull aside even, blocked their paths”

This is Jim Crace, *The Pesthouse* and if you put the description the literary description next to the image from *I am Legend* you can see the parallels abandoned machinery and automobiles empty streets devastation but not devastation in process but devastation more or less complete. I mean the world is empty. The world has been emptied.

Ecodystopian texts are reminders of the world as it once was; as it once was and what it has come to. So, you can see and imagine for yourself why are these narratives this set of examples that I've given here of streets once bustling with traffic and people and activity vehicles rushing across the road malls and places shopping places full of people etc and now silence. This is a typical eco-trauma or ecodystopian text that you have seen in screen or in print and Anil Narine in his work on eco-trauma cinema offers us a very pithy very useful way a summary of what eco-trauma cinema as a genre is and he argues that eco-trauma cinema has three major forms accounts of people who are traumatized by the natural world narratives that represent people are social processes which traumatize the environment or its inhabitants species and finally stories that depict the aftermath of ecological catastrophe often focusing on the human trauma and survival endeavors without necessarily dramatizing the initial event. So if you recall what we said about the apocalyptic tone adopted in the eco precarity text with ecodystopian text Narine is actually talking about that kind that there are people who are survivors and you will remember Will Smith in *I am Legend* or Denzel Washington in *The Book of Eli* and all of those people who are traumatized by the world, natural world but there are also the texts which show social processes which traumatize the environment.

So if you look at *Pesthouse* and other narratives they talk about human civilizational practices human cultural practices human technology that has devastated the environment and many other animals and life forms in the process. So, if you recall what we said as a definition for eco precarity it is not just the trauma of and upon humans but other life forms and the non-living that is important. So eco-trauma inflicted upon humans, eco-trauma inflicted upon other life forms and eco-trauma inflicted upon even non-living things such as water, air, rock etc. Eco-trauma cinema, according to Narine's third point, is usually about the aftermath of catastrophe and you will recall what we said about the post-apocalyptic earth in many of the popular literature and popular culture of people a small group of survivors struggling battling the elements not having technology there's no electricity, there's no fuel, there's no medical help and somehow managing to survive. And in some cases, the catastrophic event is not the focus as to what happened which has produced this kind of apocalypse is not always very clearly mentioned and the best example of that would be Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* also a successful film as some of you may be aware in which the nature of the original disaster is never made very clear what actually happened. Now we know that there are films about nuclear disaster, novels about the nuclear end of the world or pandemics that wipe out the world but there are also

novels and films in which the original cause the original catastrophe even is not spelled out.

So we need to keep this also in mind that the focus remains human trauma and human survival in a post-apocalyptic world which is also a characteristic of ecodystopian fiction and film. So ecodystopias focus on the end times and a more or less universal or global human and in many cases non-human tragedy. So, these show, as in these novels and films show several significant thematic concerns: the local and the global converge and you will recall what I said in the earlier session where we said there will be planetary destruction but the focus remains on one family or one group of people and maybe sometimes just one city so, Manhattan here, or some other place but it has to be seen as a symbol of the entire world being destroyed. So, because you cannot show the entire world being destroyed the entire planet being destroyed, they focus on one particular segment or one particular territory in which disaster has happened and further instead of showing the entire human race being devastated you take a small portion, maybe a family maybe a group of people maybe a village or a community which battles to survive. The first theme is this convergence of the local and the global or the planetary it is a reflection upon the present ways of human life and earth reduced to a shadow of itself.

So, as you remember what we said about some of the themes in eco-precarity and ecodystopian texts these texts in the post-apocalyptic world are a reminder of the world as it once was but they are also a critique or critiques of how humanity has come to this stage. The term we used was “anthropogenic” that the catastrophe the ecological catastrophe is human-made as it originates in the human and here you discover that it might be our excessive consumption it might be a bacteria or a virus engineered in a laboratory, it might be something to do with what we have unleashed in terms of deep mining which has unsettled the plates of the earth and caused tectonic shifts anything, and everything actually, with a background of human action of what we did. So much of the post-apocalyptic genre must be read as social critique of how we got here. So, for example the image of empty shopping malls and empty streets can be read ought to be read as a critique of our tendency as in our human tendency to hyper consumption excessive consumption our greed we produce we eat more than is required we produce more than required we take more from the earth than is required. So, it could be about excessive greed in terms of food consumption fossil fuel usage our focus on extracting more oil more this that and the other from the earth and so on.

So we will look at some of these in a little more detail as we proceed. So, the local and the global dystopia, one of the more famous novels well before climate change actually became a byword in our public discourse in our commonplace talk is J.G. Ballard's 1962 novel *The Drowned World*. *The Drowned World* is actually something that anticipates

what IPCC and several climatologists are telling us more temperatures means the sea waters will rise and several coastal cities will be drowned.

In J.G. Ballard's novel a lot of the action takes place in and around London the sea waters have risen and London is drowning. In fact London is one of the many cities is scheduled to be completely drowned. More recent works like Stephen Baxter's *Flood* is about water levels rising at the end of Stephen Baxter's novel even Everest even Everest goes underwater. So, the final scenes of the novel focus on people standing and watching and where are the people standing the people are on very large ships they are called typically of course arcs, a-r-k-s, and they watch and they note millimeter by millimeter centimeter by centimeter the water is rising and the levels reaching this level and then finally Everest is also drowned, is covered under water. So that is the focus, London here or Everest there, but it's about the planetary level a planetary water levels rising everywhere.

Eco-disaster films such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still, 2012, The Day After Tomorrow* connect various parts of the planet and the catastrophe which is happening in, say, New York is also happening in Tokyo. The devastation that is occurring in London is also happening in Tibet or Sri Lanka or Australia and if you have watched the films you will see this Baxter's novel does something similar and gives us information that this is happening in the extreme west it's happening in the extreme east it's happening in the middle of the earth everywhere. So, what is being suggested is a sense of planetary consciousness where we become aware as in the viewer or the reader becomes aware that what can happen to London can also happen to Manhattan and Toronto and New Delhi and Sri Lankan cities or Australian towns, right. So, a catastrophe planetary in scope but broken up into segments to show that this is happening in this particular region but it is also happening elsewhere. So, this link between the local and the global is a characteristic of eco-dystopia. The very well-known now cult text Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy you look at Octavia Butler's *Parables* and *Xenogenesis* series the two series that she is famous for and fiction as different as Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Jim Crace's *The Pesthouse*, Maggie Gee's *The Ice People* from which we have already seen quotes are worlds in collapse or have already collapsed, okay?

So, these are some of the examples and most of them do what I have just said the link between the global and the local. Eco-dystopian texts are always trying to make this connection that what is happening here is happening elsewhere. Now take a look here at an excerpt from Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. This is McCarthy's sparse, minimalist prose that you are seeing.

“Perhaps in the world’s destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence.

The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever.

Tall buildings vaguely askew ... softened in the heat and reset again ... melted window glass hung frozen down the walls like icing on a cake”

Note the minimalist prose and yet the effect is absolutely stunning. McCarthy's coinage “counterspectacle” is what demonstrates, as captures, I think, the entire question of ecodystopia and that has to do with things winding down as he says. The world was built up right, human civilization was built up, culture was built up. We have passed through several evolutionary stages and starting from nomadic through agricultural to the present we have come a long way.

So things have built up. Now McCarthy is asking how is this built down? How is it winding down? In order to do that, he says, let's go back to the time when all of the things we have built are slowly falling into disrepair, are falling into disuse, unable to work anymore. Right? So, think about this as a counter spectacle he says. The spectacle is the grand buildings we have made. It's to do with the very large structures we have built, the bridges, the skyscrapers, the spacecraft, our big cities, our civilization, things we have taken pride in and now those are slowly, slowly, slowly winding down.

Things have stopped. Things are no longer working. So that is one major theme. Then something I have emphasized a couple of times before this: ecodystopian texts as critique and here is an excerpt from Margaret Atwood's volume one of the *MaddAddam* trilogy, *Oryx and Crake*. What they were looking at was a large bulb-like object that seemed to be covered with stippled whitish yellow skin and Jimmy: “What the hell is it?” It's a very strange looking thing right. “Those are chicken”, says Crake, “Chicken parts, just the breasts on this one. They have got ones that specialize in drumsticks too, twelve to a growth unit and Jimmy says “But there aren't any heads” and he so grasps, understands the concept. “That's the head in the middle”, said the woman. “There's a mouth opening at the top, they dump the nutrients in there. No eyes or beak or anything. They don't need those”. “This is horrible”, said Jimmy. The thing was a nightmare. It was an animal-protein tuber.”

What is being suggested here? What is being suggested here is that this is a creature created for the exclusive purpose of being food. So it is supposedly a chicken but as the description shows it doesn't have the conventional anatomy and physiology of a hen, of a chicken, of the beast that we know, of the creature that we know. Why? As the person says there is no need for eyes or beak or anything. They don't need those. What the ecodystopian text shows in this rather horrific and rather visceral description is creatures created for the exclusive purpose of being food for humans. So, creatures are not creatures in their own right.

These creatures have been modified, mutated, genetically manipulated into becoming just food. Nothing else matters. So, we are talking about genetic engineering, right. and you do know and I'm sure you are aware if you look at public discourses around these that crops, all sorts of edible plants, all sorts of animals are being genetically modified constantly to provide higher yield. So that they become more productive and more economically useful and extraneous elements have been removed. So, we even today know that these are being done to all sorts of crops, all sorts of fruits and vegetables and some animals. Now carried to its logical extreme why does a hen need beaks, feathers, feet? They are not consumable.

So you eliminate those parts so that only the fleshy part which will be available for consumption is created. That is what Atwood is talking about. Now why is this a critique? It's talking about how humankind manipulates other life forms exclusively for humanity's consumption. That whether it is the plant and the analogy is very clearly stated there, it looks like a tuber, it looks like a potato or any other vegetable of the tuber variety because there's nothing else. What we have known, what you have understood as fowl, as hens, as chicken is not what you see here.

It is an animal meant to, designed for, human consumption. Okay? So this is how the critique emerges. This critique here is of the instrumental use that mankind has made of the world, of other life forms, of the planet itself. If you think of eco-dystopias as social critique, as critique of some kind or the other, then the novels, the films speak about our cultural practices, our technological practices that have instrumentalized the world, that have transformed the planet into something we can utilize. Here is another example from Paulo Bacigalupi's novel *The Waterknife* and this speaks about, this novel is about the control and privatization of water in the United States set some time in the future and here if you look at the description, the Native Americans who had control over the waters have signed over their rights millions of acre feet of water.

“...they could dig new and deeper canals. Rechannel the Colorado away from California, away from Nevada. Pour water into a different set of deserts and a different set of cities.

A few simple sheets of paper with the power to make Phoenix and Arizona the arbiters of their own fate instead of a place of loss and collapse”.

So, what you are seeing here is that there is a total control over natural resources. If you are thinking of eco-dystopian texts as critique, in the Atwood text she is pointing to the agro-food industries, agricultural food industries of today, not just in the future. What does the agro-food industry do? The agro-food industry produces animals, plants with a higher quantum of edible components. It could be the higher component of meat for consumption which in this particular excerpt we have seen.

By showing these hybrid forms of non-human life, Atwood is critiquing technologies of food production and the nature of our greed, the nature of our consumption and the fact that all life forms other than human are instrumentalized for our purposes. Bacigalupi's excerpt from *The Waterknife* points to again patterns of excessive consumption, the privatization of natural resources, the monopolization of water and the consequences of this drought. So eco-dystopian literature is actually a map of the present condition and a critique of how we live now. What do these texts do? These texts are in effect as the excerpt from *Hoda Zaki* shows that if we continue like this, as in if humanity continues to live like this, there will come a time when drought will be a norm, where water levels will rise. Dystopias are instances of how if our present mode of living goes unchecked, unmodified, one-day eco-disaster is inevitable.

So the focus is primarily as social critique on not the future, but the inevitability of the future if we continue to live like this without modifying. So, this is one set of points we need to keep in mind about eco-dystopias. We'll be back for more. Thank you.