



DANNYOLIVA/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM



Prof. Grażyna Gajewska

is a literary and cultural studies scholar and lecturer at Adam Mickiewicz University. She depicts the future in contemporary prose and films across a variety of fictional genres, including new weird fiction, science fiction, horror, and fantasy. Her research utilizes tools developed by theories of posthumanism, cyborg anthropology, feminism, and ecocriticism. grazyna.gajewska@amu.edu.pl

THE DEMONS OF ECOPATHY

On the speculative potential of eco-horror, eco-fiction, climate fiction, and solarpunk.

Grażyna Gajewska

Institute of Film, Media, and Audiovisual Arts
Faculty of Polish and Classical Philology
Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland

During a seminar with students at the Institute of Film, Media, and Audiovisual Arts in 2019, one student expressed concerns about alarming reports regarding climate change and its social

consequences. These reports were so troubling, she said, that she and her peers were afraid to start families. The discussion revealed that their greatest anxiety was being unable to ensure a healthy, safe life for future generations. Similar concerns were voiced by young people gathered in front of the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw during the Women's Congress in 2019, held under the slogan "Equality, Ecology, Democracy." Young men and women raised issues of a "hollow future," a life marked by the fear of losing access to water, clean air, and food.

The topic of motherhood – or more broadly, parenthood – in the era of anthropocentric futurology

resurfaced in the Polish online group “*Dziewuchy Dziewuchom*” (Gals for Gals) where someone admitted she was reconsidering having children in view of the grim eco-future forecasts. She sought advice from other women, and responses varied, from those emphasizing the importance of parenthood regardless of the times, through moderate skepticism, to those sharing the author’s concerns. The latter two options were the most prevalent. This scenario aptly illustrates the condition cultural and media scholar Timotheus Vermeulen has termed *ecopathy*.

According to Vermeulen, the experience of the Anthropocene is a dominant feature of contemporary culture, an important structure for our feelings, sentiments, and moods. The Anthropocene does not merely reside in our minds but rather in our bodies and emotions. It is like asbestos fibers, entering the body and causing devastation, with harmful effects that may not be immediate but might manifest themselves even decades later. Diagnosed in this way, ecopathy appears almost as a cultural precondition for functioning in an era marked by climate change, biodiversity loss, and massive pollution. One might more vividly describe this as being akin to the experience of swimming through a sea of garbage and toxic waste, passing by the exhausted bodies of marine flora and fauna, rarely encountering coral reefs, but constantly brushing up against plastic bottles and single-use bags, while fearing a tsunami wave or being cast ashore on a desert island entirely devoid of fresh water, vegetation, and animals.

The paths and trends of contemporary culture where ecopathy is clearly revealed include fictional literature and film. Undoubtedly, in this genre and its various subgenres (fantasy, science fiction, weird fiction, horror), ecological and climate issues have long been significant themes. This is evidenced by the growing number of novels, films, and series addressing the consequences of environmental devastation for human and non-human protagonists. Alongside this trend in literature and film, relatively new subgenres of fantasy have emerged, such as eco-horror, eco-fantasy, and climate fiction. Following Vermeulen, one might argue that these works bear the hallmarks of ecopathy – a crisis experienced and felt, a fear of what is to come, a discomfort of living on a polluted, devastated planet that seems less alive year by year, and anxieties reacting to the unbearable reality that we ourselves, to varying degrees, are responsible for.

Literary and Cinematic Expressions

Many literary and film works within the broad genre of fiction fit into this understanding of ecopathy:

- fear of social and biological engineering experiments (e.g., H.G. Wells’ novel *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, George Langelaan’s short story *The Fly*, Mary Shelley’s epistolary novel *Frankenstein*, and especially their later adaptations, as well as Jeff VanderMeer’s ambiguous novel *Borne*),
- doubts related to synthetic biology (the *Jurassic Park* film series),
- getting palpably “entrapped” in waste (the animated film *WALL-E* by Andrew Stanton),
- the sense of environmental injustice and the associated fear of losing health, home, livelihood, and life (as in the magical realism-infused drama *Beasts of the Southern Wild* by Benh Zeitlin),
- the horror caused by isolation and the breakdown of social bonds resulting from pandemics, which awaken old demons and create new monsters (as in the horror films *Host* by Rob Savage or *Twelve-Day Tale of the Monster That Died in 8* by Shunji Iwai).



The author’s book
Ekofantastyka.
Ujęcie sympojetyczne
[Ecofantasy:
A Sympoietic Approach]
Cover design: Kinga Szurpit.
Adam Mickiewicz
University Press

An apartment block in a neighborhood of Milan in Italy, with trees and bushes growing from the balconies



CHRIS BARBALIS CBARBALIS, CCO, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

These works serve as testimonies to the social imagination and emotionality in the Anthropocene era. They further add to images known from decades ago, which instilled fear of a nuclear World War III (such as the 1970s Polish television was the American series *Planet of the Apes*), then the fear of a sudden ecological catastrophe caused by human error (as in the 1986 Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant disaster), and current imaginations of a future filled with (un)predictable horrors, such as zombies created by a deadly virus (the coronavirus pandemic certainly intensified these imaginations). Together this project a picture of a nurtured naturocultural ecopathy, developed over different contexts and generations.

However, it would be a mistake to reduce eco-horror and dystopian science fiction merely to a mere “scares tactic,” a manipulative mechanism of instilling fear. An important function of these genres is to reveal what is hidden. If eco-horrors portraying animals consuming or hunting *homo sapiens* are used for entertainment (as in Baptiste Rouveure’s *Anonymous Animals* and Hans Stjernswörd’s *The Farm*), they make viewers feel discomfort. This role-reversal draws attention to the conditions of industrial animal farming and slaughter, forced insemination, and methods of milk production that most people prefer not to see, know, or feel, while simultaneously consuming products derived from animal suffering. Essentially, these eco-horrors serve as a form of ecological and ethical education. Narratives about suffering biotechnologically-modified creatures in Jeff VanderMeer’s *Borne* raise questions about interspecies justice and the legal and social tools needed to control medical experiments. The film *Gaia* by Jaco Bouwer highlights the threat of mutated fungi attacking humans and turning them into animal-vegetable

zombies, drawing attention to non-anthropocentric perspectives on life and death and the importance of non-human entities in sustaining and transforming life on Earth.

Various Forms of Life

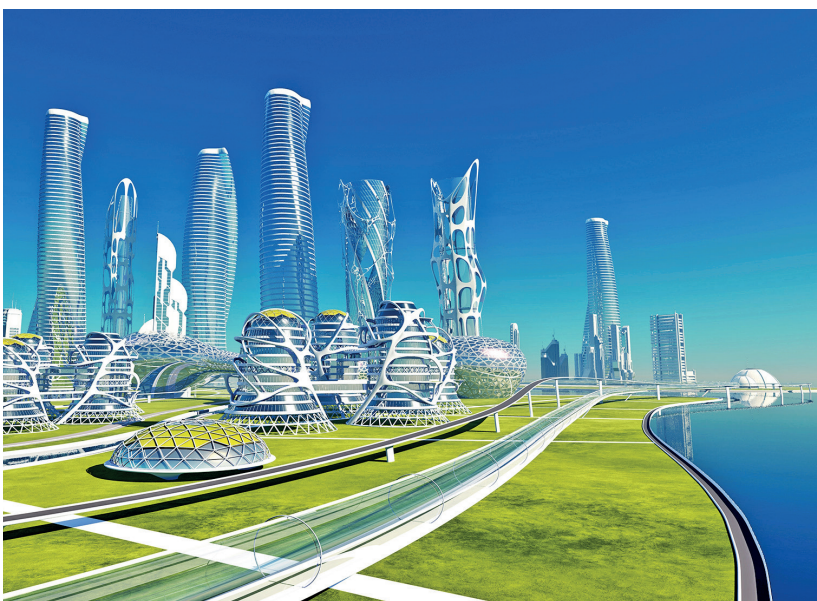
As shown above, contemporary ecofiction reveals an ecopathy that seeks to reformulate care for human and non-human beings into *kainos* – something new and revitalizing, something that begins in thinking about relationships with non-human forms of life and Earth as both planet and soil (*khthôn*). Combining the meanings of these words, posthumanist Donna J. Haraway has coined the term “Chthulucene,” evoking notions of interspecies exchange and care, to contrast with the term “Anthropocene,” which has clear catastrophic connotations.

Attempts to shift the focus from the Anthropocene to the Chthulucene are evident in works that broaden the meaning of kinship and familial care to include non-human subjects, such as companion species like dogs and cats. This narrative of kinship and interspecies care can be found in Shaun Tan’s collection of fantastical stories *Tales from the Inner City* and in Joon-ho Bong’s film *Okja*. The idea of interspecies exchange also includes plants and fungi, despite the fact that they function in radically different ways from humans, presenting numerous epistemological, ontological, and axiological challenges. Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach* trilogy (plus Alex Garland’s film *Annihilation*, which was inspired by its first part) addresses these dilemmas, revealing both the fascinating nature and the incomprehensibility of plant and fungal organisms, even their intellectual and sensory inaccessibility to humans. Despite their radical otherness, they are fundamental to sustaining and developing life on Earth, as the characters in Rene Daalder’s film *Habitat* argue. It is not human survival but rather the survival of plants and algae that is essential for maintaining life on the planet.

The goal is not to eliminate humans from the imaginary of life and death but to place them among many actors in a network of dynamic relationships between all actors. The Chthulucene weaves together the lives and fates of human and non-human organisms in various ways, as in Richard Powers’ nested epic *The Overstory*, about men and women who understand trees, live among them and together with them, while simultaneously leading distinct lives.

The World of the Future

Eco-horror and dystopian science fiction, which draw on ecopathy – understood as the cultural condition of living in an era marked by climate change, loss of biodiversity, massive planetary pollution, and growing





AEROSCAPE & LINDO ZEDDIES, CC BY-SA 4.0, VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

environmental injustice – have recently found a narrative and aesthetic counterbalance in solarpunk. This subgenre’s name combines elements from cyberpunk, the new weird, and fantasy. It shares cyberpunk’s countercultural, anti-capitalist, and decolonizing ethos encapsulated in the term “punk”; the new weird’s love for speculative fiction and the use of technological devices in storytelling; and fantasy’s fantastical, plant-based, fairytale aesthetics and mythological influences.

Solarpunk moves away from the dystopian vision of a post-apocalyptic world with its gray, smog-filled metropolis (typical of cyberpunk) towards a vision of the future that embraces sustainable development, biodiversity, and cooperation between nature and advanced technology to create a good living environment for all, both human and non-human. Solarpunk aims to go beyond the bleak visions of inevitable destruction, instead directing speculative thinking towards building responsible pro-ecological attitudes. These narratives are mainly aimed at young audiences (such as Brad Bird’s youth-oriented film *Tomorrowland*) and aim to teach individual and collective responsibility for the future of the world. However, this genre also includes works aimed at more

age-diverse audiences, emphasizing the coexistence of living and non-living nature, and the cooperation of human and non-human communities (as seen in the solarpunk film *Remote* by Mika Rottenberg and Mahyada Tousi, which depicts a racially and professionally diverse group of women forming a supportive community, by harnessing nature and technology).

The issue with these works is that they often follow well-worn paths of thinking about nature and culture, and about their coexistence. For instance, the solarpunk aesthetic of trees and shrubs growing on the balconies and rooftops of metropolitan skyscrapers may look eco-friendly at first glance. However, it is essentially another way of incorporating flora into a capitalist-futuristic aesthetic. Trees on balconies and rooftops or monocultural fields of crops surrounding solarpunk metropolises (as in the film *Tomorrowland*) do not create something naturoculturally new but rather repeat patterns of subordinating nature to human needs. For these reasons, solarpunk can be viewed as a hopeful subgenre of fantasy (which is much needed) – but, ultimately, at the same time immature, insufficiently critical, and not visionary enough to lay the foundations for a new naturocultural future. ■

A solarpunk-style graphic depicting a simulation of central Berlin, featuring vast expanses of greenery, clean water, balloons, and airships

Further reading:

Gajewska G., *Ekofantastyka. Ujęcie sympozytyczne*, Poznań 2023.

Marzec A., *Antropocięń. Filozofia i estetyka po końcu świata*, Warszawa 2021.

Morton T., *Mroczna ekologia. Ku logice przyszłego współistnienia*, Warszawa 2023.