

Eco-cinema mirrors societal fears on climate change and is an accessible medium for encouraging education and audience behaviour change

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Abstract: *Eco-cinema is a significant area of research within climate change communications, sociology and film theory. In particular, dystopic films with environmental themes serve as a reflection of societal issues and fears regarding climate change. This essay explores and analyses three dystopic films with underlying environmental themes: The Day After Tomorrow (2004), Soylent Green (1974) and Snowpiercer (2013). The Day After Tomorrow highlights the political and sociological landscape of the 2000's, focusing on the negative association of politicians in relation to the environment and how the most vulnerable in society will suffer when economy is chosen over climate. This film successfully created audience engagement by using narrative closure as well as familiar cities and landmarks in order to provoke a personal reaction from audiences. Soylent Green shows societal fears of overpopulation, food shortage and accurately depicts the patriarchal order especially with the commodification of women. The film demonstrates how utilising eco-nostalgia can affect viewers as it lets them reflect on a world that is still within their reach. Thirdly, Snowpiercer demonstrates a poetic journey of understanding the capitalist constraints of society by using a train as a symbol for the hierarchical class system. These films provide an accessible way of understanding the sociological effects of climate change and help audiences to address the need for behaviour change. The original version of this article was submitted as an essay for the CM3006 'Communication, Culture and the Environment' module (2021-2022).*

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This essay attempts to show how dystopian environmental films reflect the society in which the film was made and provides social commentary on societal issues. Eco-cinema is a significant area of interest within environmental communications and arguably more effective than other forms of environmental communications. As Brereton (2020, p.44) describes how it “promotes much needed behavioural change, together with the prospect of kick-starting more effective political engagement in addressing the greatest challenge facing the planet.” In order to explore how environmental films reflect society, this essay will discuss three environmentally themed films. Firstly, *The Day After Tomorrow* will be discussed in relation to societies' political battle between economy and climate and the inadequacies of the older generation of leaders and politicians in particular, towards protecting the most vulnerable from the effects of climate change. Secondly, the essay will look at *Soylent Green* and describe how the film mirrors 1970s conservative attitudes and values, particularly in its treatment of women and the ethical implications of dealing with overpopulation. Finally, *Snowpiercer* will be read as a poetic allegory of social class. In addition to looking at what specific societal issues are reflected in the films, this essay will discuss how effective this form of environmental communication can be in helping to change audience behaviour.

Firstly, *The Day After Tomorrow* directed by Roland Emmerich, is arguably not a cinematic masterpiece, but the film did considerably well at the box office. *It* provides a coherent commentary on the social issues of its time, alongside a commentary on the depiction of environmental science systems. It could be argued that in 2004, there was significantly less understanding of climate change and its impact. *The Day After Tomorrow* remains successful in its attempts to educate mass audiences in more basic terms, which in turn is more accessible in its approach. Scenes showing hailstones in Tokyo, snow in India, the destruction of the Hollywood sign etc., creates awareness of the significant impact nature can have on the world. The use of culturally important cities and signs resonate more

strongly with an audience - as Culloty et al. (2019, p.180) notes, “images with wider cultural import are valuable because they can provoke affective responses and promote lines of identification with visual subjects”. The opening scene clearly sets the tone by making the audience uneasy about the effects and chaos nature can bring. The slow wide-angle camera panning over the extensive rift in the ice shelf shows just how insignificant and inconsequential humans are in relation to the natural world.

The 2004 film presents a dystopic vision of global warming and is inherently focused on the politics of climate change and the perennial struggle between the economy versus the climate. The struggles of scientists striving to communicate the causes and consequences of climate change fall on deaf ears, with politicians more concerned about the economic impact. This is affirmed when the Vice President (Kenneth Walsh) argues “Our economy is every bit as fragile as the environment”. This illustrates how politicians tend to dismiss environmental claims as sensationalist and strive to protect the economy at all costs. The President and Vice President are eerily similar to the Bush and Cheney administration in America, who were in power when the film was released and reflected the society in which the film was made. The storyline also shows societies’ anti-immigration sentiment and racism towards Mexicans, which was prominent in this administration (*New York Times*, 2006). There is however a dramatic reversal of such immigration tropes in *The Day After Tomorrow*, as it shows American climate refugees storming the Mexican border following the shift in global temperatures and reversing long held perceptions around colonial interdependence.

There are strong familial themes throughout the film. An interesting point is a growing familial relationship between the main character, Hall and his son, Sam. At the outset, the film expresses a strained and broken relationship between the father and son, filled with broken promises. This fraught relationship in ways can denote the tensions between generations in the fight against climate change. The youngest and most vulnerable in society will be the ones who will most suffer the consequences, while the older generations and politicians fail to prepare for the future. The film echoes how our youth suffer due to the “pursuit of wealth in lieu of environmental consciousness” (Daniels, 2019).

From a framing and narrative perspective, *The Day After Tomorrow* is both generic and formulaic and certainly is not unique in its structure. Like most apocalyptic films it follows a “clearly coded cautionary format” (Brereton, 2018, p.98). The narrative structure follows a set of main characters, including a strong male lead, as they strive to brave climate change and, of course, survive in the end. According to Mulvey (Penley and Mulvey, 2013, p.63), “Man's role in making things happen...structuring the film around a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify.” This structure is seen in many disaster films due to the audience’s desire for “narrative closure” (O’Leary, 1994, in Brereton, 2018, p.99). As well as narrative closure, the main character’s survival is vital to keep the audience engaged and not create a largely negative effect regarding conventional audience engagement. This is characterised as “narcissistic visual pleasure” which “can be derived from self-identification with the figure in the image” (Smelik, 2016, p.2). The narrative structure is certainly successful as it shows the chaos and destruction of climate change. The structure also evokes an empathetic reaction from the audience, while still regaining narrative closure. Brereton (2018, p.99) goes so far as to assert that “[E]ngaged (environmental) media spectators apparently take vicarious pleasure in the destructive forces of nature, from the safe distance of their cinema seats”. The provocative narrative can cogently call attention to environmental issues and provokes a sense of wanting to take action in order to save the climate.

The next film which will be discussed is *Soylent Green* (1974), a dystopian ecological thriller directed by Richard Fleischer which is a precautionary tale of human overconsumption, overpopulation and is successful in its sociological storytelling for an earlier generation. The dystopic imaginative visions of the future do well to reflect on the societal issues of the time. This classic film, set in the year 2022, looks at the controversial ecological impact of overpopulation and food

shortages. This theme is not foregrounded in many contemporary films as Brereton (2004, p. 170) confirms, “the issue of human population control is so divisive and emotive, it is less often addressed in ecological texts”. This particular eco-disaster film provides environmental messages which serve as part of a public debate that mirrors the environmental fears of the time, including the “population bomb” (Murray and Heumann, 2005, p.26). In addition, Sully (2016, p.100) confirms, “[T]he outpouring of popular science fiction film in the 1970s is among the most concentrated cultural expressions of popular anxieties about population.”

Similar to *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Soylent Green*'s structure is also broadly patriarchal in its construction, although arguably more brutal. Patriarchal representation is still hegemonic in *Soylent Green*, with the difference between men and women portrayed in this dystopic society appearing quite similar to society in the 1970s. According to Brereton (2004, p.168), women's objectification in this film reflects the “‘local’ regressive 1970s attitudes and values.” Throughout, male characters call women “furniture”, denoting objects to buy and sell. The narrative structure shows how “the image of woman can only signify anything in relation to men,” as women are only defined by their use to the male characters in the film (Smelik, 2016, p.2). As well as the specific commodification of women, audiences see that women are considered of lesser importance to their male peers. A scene showing a dead mother on the ground with her child tied to her is harrowing and reflective of the film's representation of society. The mother is left to rot on the ground, while the male child is protected and sheltered by the main character Charles Heston, who serves as the film's moral compass. Smelik (2016, p.1) describe that in the 1970's “women were portrayed as passive sex objects of fixed stereotypes oscillating between the Mother (“Maria”) and the whore (“Eve”).” Mulvey (Penley and Mulvey, 2013, p. 58) describes how the silent image of woman is “still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.” The treatment of women within the film is of particular interest within ecofeminist studies in which women are spoiled and used just like environmental resources. In Mies and Shiva's *Ecofeminism* (2004, p. xi), Salleh argues how ecofeminism shows that the “material’ resourcing of women and of nature are structurally interconnected in the capitalist patriarchal system”.

A captivating scene within *Soylent Green* is at the euthanasia clinic. The visual representation that is used during the euthanasia ceremony to show the dying a glimpse of an environment that no longer exists is a form of “eco-nostalgia” or an “eco-memory”. Murray and Heumann (2005, p. 15) describe how this form of narration can affect viewers as it lets them reflect on a world that is still within their reach; “these films reflect a nostalgia for a world that does still exist for its viewers, both in the 1970s and today”. The film successfully creates audience reflection on their current environment, while demonstrating the harrowing possibilities of the future.

The third film which will be discussed is *Snowpiercer*, a post-apocalyptic action film based on the climate fiction novel *Le Transperceneige* (1982) by Jacques Lob. The film is directed by South Korean director Bong Joon-ho, most notably remembered for *Okja* (2017) and *Parasite* (2019). *Snowpiercer* is a perfect example of an environmental film that reflects the societal issues for when it was made. The entire film is an allegory for the world and society at large. Kerr (2017, p. 122) describes how “the train can be seen as an allegory of current conditions of extreme inequality in security, wealth, privilege and distractions in advanced liberal policies.” Bong Joon-ho takes the audience on a poetic journey of understanding the capitalist constraints by using the train as a symbol for the class system in hierarchical society. The further up the train one travels shows the increase of social class and is characterised as a “linear hierarchy” (Kerr, 2017, p. 122). This allegory of class culture shows how resentment of the lower classes can lead to revolution. The train exemplifies the claustrophobic constraints of linear capitalism and how difficult it is to form radical change when people have tunnel vision, only being able to move forwards or backwards. There is no other option. Furthermore, Curtis's failed rebellion demonstrates how in ways he was only preserving the system by maintaining the social

order (Kerr, 2017, p. 122) instead of promoting systemic change. The violence used to get further up the train mirrors the violence used against the lower classes. The colours used to represent the failed rebellion are particularly interesting; spoiled white can be seen as Curtis' innocence, spoiled due to his revelation that he is a cog in the engine of a man-made broken system. The use of cool colours like white, grey and blue command the frozen landscape outside the train signifying the harshness of a world in which humans cannot be a part of. Throughout the film, characters refer to the world outside as "dead" and "cold", however by the end we see that other species, like the polar bear, can survive in such a world. The concept of humanity's relationship to nature is determined as worthless if the human species cannot survive, which reflects societies' pursuits of commodifying the environment for their own gain. In a similar fashion to the previous films discussed, *Snowpiercer* also conforms to a patriarchal narrative, leaving no opportunity for female characters to demonstrate their strengths or motivations outside the typical motherhood archetype. While Curtis' goal is to create systemic change and take control of the engine, female characters' goals, like Tanya's are reduced to embracing motherhood. The film solidifies how nature and women take a backseat in driving the film forward.

A lack of windows in the train further confirms how Bong Joon-ho wanted to show how the characters are confined to this train as their totalising world, and a world which many of them have only known, with no other outside perspective. Culloty and Brereton for instance argue that "the concept of place is important" because "it mediates people's emotional and affective relationships with their environment". They quote Cresswell whereby "place is not just a thing in the world...place is also a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world" (2004, in Culloty and Brereton, 2017, p. 140). Being unable to see much less perceive the outside world prevents those from questioning what other options are out there. This is seen for instance when the character Namgoong shows his "train baby" daughter Yona dirt, in an attempt to educate her about the world outside of the train, while presenting a form of "eco-nostalgia" (Murray and Heumann, 2005, p. 15). This aspect is further recognised in *Soylent Green*. Such recognition is particularly important from an environmental perspective; for instance Brereton (2020, p. 44) notes that these texts "speak to the urgent need for active political engagement and help to bridge the gap between individual agency and the necessity for top-down political and systemic change."

The importance of environmental films reflecting societal issues like politics, economics, culture and morality cannot be understated regarding the long term effects of audience engagement. According to Culloty and Brereton (2017, p. 139), an audience will be less likely to change behaviour when just given sufficient climate change information; instead, attitude and behaviour change "requires engagement with a broader set of ideas about non-scientific spheres". The three films discussed in this essay all are successful in their own ways in creating visual representations of climate change and using non-scientific spheres. Brereton (2018, p. 12) describes how fictional media can "contest and re-frame such ideological polarising positions and help audiences find a way through the morass of so much pontification around various perspectives while learning how to critically engage with such multi-faceted environmental debate." There is a constant running theme of encouraging audiences to think outside the box throughout these popular movies.

This essay has discussed how dystopian films with environmental themes can reflect societal issues of their time. Firstly, *The Day After Tomorrow* was discussed to illuminate the political and sociological landscape of the 2000's. In particular, the negative association with politicians and leaders in relation to the environment was illustrated. *The Day After Tomorrow* also successfully created audience engagement by using familiar cities and landmarks in order to provoke a personal reaction. *Soylent Green* meanwhile represents the particular fears of the 1970s, especially the environmental impact of overpopulation. As well as a chronicle of the fears of the "population-bomb" (Murray and Heumann, 2005, p. 26), *Soylent Green* shows an accurate depiction of the patriarchal order in the commodification of women throughout as well as illustrating how *Snowpiercer* reduces women to the

typical motherhood archetype. The feminist works of Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure" (Penley and Mulvey, 2013) and Smelik (2016) were used to discuss and explain these effects. The third film which was discussed in this essay was *Snowpiercer* which poetically illustrated the hierarchy of social class and class struggle in light of environmental catastrophe. Bong Joon-ho encourages audiences to imagine potential worlds and structures outside the ones we have already known and asks audiences to challenge our values and ideals in order to strive to create a better world for all. These dystopian films with their provocative environmental themes reflect the society for when they were made and illuminate societal issues, as well as looking at how audiences can be impacted to take action around contentious environmental issues and hopefully provoking action.

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