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## Cinema as Eco-critical Criticism: Can Movies Represent the Conscience of the Anthropocene?

**Abstract:** This paper critically questions the postulate that an ecological conscious cinema performs the task of raising global awareness and generates knowledge about the real problems of the Anthropocene. Interrogating the possibility that a cinematic “eco-mind” could be formed within eco-conscious movies, the author discusses the consequences of the interest displayed by many filmmakers towards the environment and the representation of the multitude of crises our planet faces today. By putting to the test the speculations and methods of eco-criticism, the author returns to the classical method used by Marx and Engels in “Die heilige Familie” and suggests that there is a third option, a path rarely taken, positioning interpretation between the optimistic eco-critical perspective and the hypocritical ecologist propaganda. Denouncing also the eco-Marxist revisions and proposing a reading of contemporary cinema based on the critique of the critical critique, this paper illustrates how this method of interpretation can be used in film studies and could produce an alternative practice in the ever-growing field of *environmental humanities*.

**Keyword:** cinema, eco-criticism, eco-Marxism, environmental humanities, critical thinking, dialectical methods.

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We are all ecologists today. With Donald Trump self-proclaimed as the “biggest ecologist” of the planet and Joaquin Phoenix fighting for the rights of animals from the stage of a multi-billion dollars industry, our planet seems to be in good hands. In fact, the ultimate hypocrisy of capitalism today is that, in a time when the Amazonian forests are burning and are transformed into agricultural lands, where soybeans are grown to feed the eco-vegetarians of the affluent parts of the globe, a company named Amazon has become richer than many single countries on Earth. As actors have

become the revolutionary vanguard for promoting an environmentally sustainable future, moviemakers appear to be advancing useful ideas for humanity, showing the way in which we can change the destiny of the planet. It would seem there is nothing to fear, all the troubles of the world are solved by movies like *Joker* (2019), which was described by film commentator Katie O'Reilly (2020) as an indictments "of the failings of the very system that ushered in the Anthropocene".

In the following interpretations I intend to put to the test these speculations, often presented as ultimate truths, claiming that movies "at their essence" can somehow be forms of environmentalist consciousness. My intellectual problem is whether or not we can identify another critical perspective that could take us away from the hypocritical illusion claiming that eco-movies can change (or even save) the world. The impetus of my own contribution to this debate is based on the observation that the existing critiques of cinema, both those coming from an eco-Marxist approach and the eco-critical perspectives are following a failed logic. In a similar fashion with Braidotti and Bignall (2018) who asked if the "redemption of humanity" in the Anthropocene is possible by engaging the issues of posthuman ecologies (7), my simple questions interrogate the capacity of cinema to provide solutions to the global ecological issues. Can it be that cinema and its representations is actually a part of the problem? Or, in a more complex fashion, how could movies function like an intellectual combat outpost of global consciousness, promoting values and advancing humanity towards a better future, when the movie-making industry is at its very core an expression of capitalism? While Braidotti and Bignall go far away with their approach, suggesting the advancement towards a post-Anthropocene moment, overcoming the era in which a "supremacist" human centered vision dominates, and abandoning the anthro-centric attitudes, my retrograde proposition is to return to the good old-fashioned dialectics.

Together with Edgar Morin (2020), who repeatedly wrote warning articles about the "misfortunes" of our triumphant entry into the "ecological era", I am supporting the necessity to "ecologize the human beings" (*écologiser l'homme*), that is to re-orient our thinking towards a humanistic vision, a fundamental factor in the humanist thought of Morin himself. The French philosopher was, since the 60s and 70s, a proponent of the "greening" of our thinking, yet for Morin the "political ecology" must not be confined to the defense of animals, or the dire warnings about the effects of global warming. It is about making a future for humans and the human species on this planet. Morin's vision is that of an "ecological capitalism", brought forward by a much needed "ecological conscience", which is still weak and fragmented. In order to reach the "Year Zero" of the ecological era, the French thinker claims that we must revert the entire philosophical system of the Western civilization, beginning with Descartes and ending with Marx, who all tried to place man as a dominator of nature.

Here I dissent from Morin's otherwise extremely pertinent observations, as I do not share his optimistic views about the future of capitalist society. As claimed in his previous manifesto about the notion of "Terre-Patrie" (Homeland Earth, the English translation in 1999), Morin envisions the realisation of an anthropological solidarity, manifested as a "planetary consciousness", a product of the "planetary era" that brings about a "planetary ecological consciousness", an awakening to our condition as citizens of the Earth (145). We need to question the pathways taking us to this auspicious outcome.

### Cinema and the Anthropocene effect

The underlying premise of my approach to the overall issues regarding the relationship between ecoconsciousness and film representations opens with the assumption that cinema constitutes an integral part of the problems of the Anthropocene while pretending to offer solutions. This dialectic conflict is visible also when trying to define the Anthropocene. The common usage of the already classicized sense was prescribed by Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen (2002). There is a geological era dominated by human actions, in which our technologies generate an impact close to destruction, depleting the resources of our planet and affecting the entire ecosystem.

Without attempting to solve "the Anthropocene dilemma", it can be better understood when comparing it with the "Superman dilemma" (is it a bird, is it a plane?). We are in fact conceptually trapped between two contradictory formulas. One is used by historians and cultural critics, for whom the Anthropocene can be best described as a "moment in human history". The other predominant definition belongs to geologists, who first observed that humanity has become the most important "geological force" of the planet, having a major impact and affecting all life forms Earth. As noted by Clive Hamilton (2016), geographers and "soil scientists" define this new epoch as a geological time, using their own research instruments. In my understanding we can use the tools of cinema studies to determine a cultural separation line, in which movies represent an integral part of the "Anthropocenic" process.

The study elaborated by a group of researchers at the University of California in 2006 concluded that the environmental impact of Hollywood filmmaking and the footprint of cinema generated an extremely significant effect. Global moviemaking practices, as the study coordinated by Charles Corbett and Richard Turco (7-8) estimated, are extremely polluting and environmentally harmful. The overall output of carbon dioxide emissions related to movie making industry reaches about eight million metric tons. Thus, even if Lewis and Maslin (2015) place the date of the beginning of the Anthropocene between 1610 and 1964, I would suggest that the Anthropocene has started together with the expansion

of global cinema and other visual media institutions having planetary wide environmental consequences. It was with the advent of cinema that a collective environment was created, initially described by media theorists like Marshall McLuhan as the global village, later expanded by Bruce Powers (1989) as one of the major influential powers of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### **Cinema and Ecocriticism: A field with positive perspectives**

Another conceptual problem is raised by the field of film studies, where eco-critical approaches represent a major contribution. Following the wider principles of ecocriticism, generally described as “earth-centered” approaches to humanities, the cinematic component of this method was developed gradually from the literary methods, in turn expanded into a larger field broadly defined as “environmental humanities” (Sörlin *et al.* 2013). The *ecocritical perspective* is now used in many fields of study, and the pathway of reading movie “ecocritically” represents today one of the most trendy academic occupations. From the “global ecogothic” studies (Smith and Hughes 2013), to the more peculiar version of ecotheology (Brunner *et al.* 2014), eco-criticism produces numerous studies on various subjects. The ever-growing field of environmental humanities now includes several major theoretical areas and methods, each related to eco-approaches: eco-feminism, eco-imperialism, eco-phenomenology, eco-semiotics or postcolonial ecocriticism. Film studies and cinema theory have quickly integrated all these critical discourses, from postcolonial studies linking ecological issues with imperialism and resource exploitation, to denouncing racism and male dominance at planetary level, visible in films and television productions (DeLoughrey and Handley 2011). There are dozens of ecocritical perspectives, from ecological poetry to ecofeminism and ecosemiotics. Ecocriticism, like the ancient animistic beliefs of primitive humans, is in everything and everywhere. As noted by Oppermann (1) ecocriticism is “transnational, multicultural, interdisciplinary and pluriform”. The “greening” of everything, from philosophy to household cleaning products, is undoubtedly necessary. Even the impetus for more “earth-centered” attitudes is natural, in fact we are all “earth centered” simply by the force of gravity, if not by our consciousness.

Nevertheless, as John Tallmudge and Henry Harrington (ix) conceded early on, the issue with ecocriticism is that actually there is no common method, the critical practice in the field is nothing more than “an attitude, an angle of vision, and a mode of critique”. Naturally many in the field deplore this lack of methodological coherence and in order to compensate for what seems to be an impossible task of elaborating a coherent ecocritical method, a more practical and pragmatic dimension was considered attainable. Some are suggesting the need for involvement, thus an activist component is added in order for ecocriticism to be able

“to change things”, as indicated by Estok (2011). As Cheryl Glotfelty (xix) observed, the entire foundation of ecocriticism is based on a two-legged stool, in all fairness maybe more like the gigantic Colossus of Rhodes, one theoretical and the other practical, one cultural and the other natural. Lawrence Buell (4) called it the “environmental doublethink”, the peaceful and paradoxical coexistence of cultural and artistic productions that scare us with the dangers of global environmental collapse and our practical behavior, the devil may care attitude about the future.

I realize that claiming that there is no method in the eco-studies madness seems like a horrid gesture, undermining decades of intense publishing, thousands of collective volumes and ecocritical monographs, hundreds of conferences and workshops, innumerable doctoral dissertations, all performing within the generous ecocritical agenda. I am not questioning the justification of any literature departments in global academia to hire at least one ecocritical onboard, like the lawnkeepers on cruise ships. My key issue is whether ecocriticism can indeed be a new form of criticism. Since my interest is cinema and their role in society, I will use cinematic examples in order to explore this line of questioning. At this point, the problems raised by the relationship between literature and environment are valid in terms of the relationship between cinema and eco-awareness. The fact that environmental crises show up in books and movies, that eco-friendly films, the “films verts”, or the “green movies” in the conceptualization proposed by Ingram (2000), are representing the issues of our endangered planet, exploring the problems of pollution or the negative effect of greenhouse emissions is not transformed immediately into an “ecological imagination”, in the terms used by Lawrence Buell (1995). Buell extensively demonstrates in *The Environmental Imagination* that the fascination with nature and the environmental concerns are as old as the Industrial revolution. The novelty of “earth-centered” approaches to humanities, together with their cinematic component, the apparition of eco-conscious films, do not seem to be sufficient to reverse this paradoxical conscience.

There are several perspectives that define the relationship between movies and ecological discourses. The first can be described as the *eco-friendly* cinema, illustrated by productions like *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), directed by Roland Emmerich. It is often claimed that the movie was one of the first to practice a so-called “environmental consciousness”, in the sense that the producers respected the rules of a “carbon neutral” footprint. The output of this blockbuster with global sales of over 552 million USD appears to be only profit and no damage on the planet. As I will try to prove later, the environmentally sustainable film operations cannot cover for the damage it provokes on our collective minds.

An even bolder vision is articulated by authors like Daniel White (2018), who explore these topics in greater depth, extensively illustrating the “parameters of cinema in the Anthropocene” (8). To claim that films can offer solutions to our current problems, that cinema is generating a “planetary awareness”, that somehow movies are bringing together

our ambivalent posthuman identities, provides an overly optimistic outlook. An alternative to this view is represented by the Anthropocene Feminism (Colebrook 2017) advancing the idea that a post-anthropocene movement is necessary, putting forward the proposition of a “counter-Anthropocene” as a new form of *indifference* (in the Deleuzian sense). If Guattari and Deleuze (50) are right and “thinking provokes indifference”, then eco-thinking is characteristic for this group of researchers.

A more down to earth perspective (pun intended) in the field of cinema studies would be to follow the formation of an anthropocenic aesthetics. As several film critics already observed, cinema is part of a larger form of appreciating nature, a tendency pre-existing in many artistic representations before the birth of the seventh art, yet fully developed with the ascent of a global cinema industry and cinema-making practices having a planetary reach. Visual extravaganzas like the 3D blockbuster *Avatar* are incontestably impressive and have the capacity to present an emotionally charged representation of environmentally friendly universes.

Overviewing the environmental rhetoric growing constantly in cinema representations it might appear that these movies are acting like a “global consciousness”, a planetary conscience that began, as noted by Morin, when humanity took a first glimpse of the Big Blue Marble, broadcasted as a tele-cinematic picture. In fact this is why I am arguing that the Year Zero of the Anthropocene is July 20, 1969, when the Apollo 11 moon-landing was broadcasted to the entire planet and an estimated 600 million people watched the same images at the same time. This led to an explosion of science fiction movies and a wide range of cinema productions were increasingly preoccupied with the issues of the Earth as a whole.

### The dawn of the eco-conscious cinema

On one hand, the idea that an environmentally conscious cinema can exist is based on the unmistakable fact that many movies are replete with references to the earth-related problems. Many interpret these representations as an expression of the accountability cinema has towards the environment. Some courageous ecocritical authors argue that movies were always in the vanguard of the planetary ecological conscience, several films indicate an underlying impact of humanity on the planet. One of the earliest examples is *Soylent Green* (1973), directed by Richard Fleischer, an adaptation of a dystopian novel dealing with the issues of overpopulation, resources scarcity, rich-poor distribution of wealth. For cinema ecocriticism, these examples are wondrous opportunities to prove a direct connection between cinema contents and global conscience.

I am cautious about this possibility and believe we must be less optimistic when it comes to this presumed ecological awareness of cinema, especially since the movies used as examples

are more likely to be a result of other global phenomena. One simplistic example is the Mad Max series, directed by George Miller, commonly used by ecocritical film theorists to demonstrate the potential of moviemaking as a problem-solving institution. It is more likely that Miller reacted to the energy crisis of the 70s rather than disclosing a clear eco-awareness. Another aspect is that often cinema uses a distorted form of representing reality, one that diverts our attention towards seemingly important situations and finally a false construction of reality. As Jennifer Fay (2018) pointed out, the more compelling argument is that cinema promotes a certain ecological inhospitality, generating a negative image about the future of our world, predetermined by a negative view, because cinema has an inherent tendency to un-familiarize us with reality, it constantly makes “the world strange to us”. Fay (4) properly describes cinema as a “technology of the Anthropocene” and the predominant “aesthetic practice of the Anthropocene” participating in the changes of nature, not generating a consciousness that would improve our life on Earth.

The other leg of the stool also reacts, even though it is an artificial limb. Eco-conscious cinema-making practices, and eco-aware moviemakers are joining together. One example is the initiative created in 2009 by six major European companies, who created the Ecoprod initiative ([www.ecoprod.com/en/](http://www.ecoprod.com/en/)), designed as a conscientious effort of the industry to reduce its environmental footprint. This led to the development of the first carbon footprint calculator, named Carbon’Clap, helping audiovisual production companies all over the world to calculate their impact. Trying to counteract the motion picture industry contribution to the global transformation of our world, with the excess of greenhouse gas emissions related to film productions and consumerism, even Hollywood producers began acting to solve the global climate crisis (Donnelly 2019).

Installing solar power panels or eliminating plastic utensils might help, but the planet, as we all know by now, has reacted quicker than expected. The global pandemic created a generalized closure of the world’s biggest movie productions. Hundreds of thousands of movie theaters were shut down, and many new releases were postponed, with others moved to the on-demand distribution systems. The terrible estimates (Roxborough, Brzesk and McClintock 2020) are that the global film industry has lost \$5 billion due to the COVID-19 related pandemic. The environmental impact of Hollywood filmmakers has reduced and the natural forces of the planet are now capable of affecting cinema and not only the other way around. This paradoxical state of the Anthropocene, in which the entire planet re-enacts a movie like *Contagion* (2011) makes our ecological heavy-handedness even more uncanny. The *cinematic eco-mind* might have the power to anticipate reality.

### A first critique of cinema eco-critiques

As mentioned before, in its most basic form ecocriticism is fundamentally (and wrongfully) an optimistic attitude. This is clearly indicated by some of the answers provided early on the authors and academics meeting at the 1994 Western Literature Association Meeting who, when asking “What is Ecocriticism?”, most of them answered with buoyant acclamations of the positive potential of this method. Some pretended it to be “a new, distinct set of critical practices” (Harry Crocket) or a need for “humanistic understanding of our relationships with the natural world in an age of environmental destruction” (Thomas K. Dean) and even “an earth-centered approach” (Cheryll Glotfelty). This posture extends in cinema studies, where many authors are practicing an “ecocritical reading” of movies (Murray and Heumann 11) by performing a thematic analysis, based on the identification of environmental references and subtexts, which is supposed to lead to a better understanding of the problems we are confronted with. The presupposition that, by watching movies, we are stimulated to grow an ecological sensibility, that cinema-making has the intrinsic capacity to bring about an ecological conscience, leading to “an ecologically inspired ethic of cinema” (Ivakhiv 22) is charmingly inconsequential. Authors like Ivakhiv (2013) who aspire to create an *ecophilosophy* based on cinema and other visual media, identify the ecological “implications” and can discover eco-meanings in any movie. This leads for example to the transformation of Tarkovsky into an eco-warrior, reading *Stalker* (1979) or *Solaris* (1972) as “ecologically minded” productions.

Some would claim that the eco-Marxist approaches to cinema are truly practicing a form of criticism that is inevitably within a framework of an unwavering and harsh critique of society. Many suffer from the same defective reasoning as illustrated by one of the founders of the approach, John Bellamy Foster, who forcibly hybridized ecological thinking and Marxism. This has induced a retroactive projection that has nothing to do with Marx. Foster (2000), in his original study about *Marx's ecology* reads into texts that were created during the 19th century the markings of an environmental philosopher exposed to realities that did not exist two hundred years ago. Once again, the optimistic view is that, by denouncing capitalist exploitation and the ecological destruction, an eco-friendly new society will be created. By combining the criticism of capitalism as the main ecologically destructive power and denouncing its ecological effects, we are actually far from reducing the antagonistic relationship we have with the planet. A negative example is provided by Communist China, today the biggest polluter of the Earth. As indicated by the studies on the ecological footprint of all the nations of the world (available at <http://data.footprintnetwork.org/>), the Communist country constantly increased its carbon footprint, having the second largest ecological footprint after the USA. To be a good Marxist it does not mean that you are automatically transformed into a great ecologist.

Another mollified version of criticism is promoted by authors like David Ingram (2018) who, while defending the Marxist approach against the cognitivist attacks, who are provincial denunciations of the “culturalist” paradigm, propose instead a “mixture of methods”. Thus, a new “ecological film theory” might maintain its political and economic components, but is also coupled with the understanding of the effects on the spectators as involved participants in the processes of social awareness. My point of contention with this obsolete form of eco-Marxist film criticism, which properly identifies movies as ideological tools, is that cinema cannot be understood only as an innocent form of cultural production, controlled by capitalism while keeping intact its awareness raising capacities. In fact, cinema is *a machine of the capitalocene*, perhaps a better name for Anthropocene – yet it would be terrible to advance new concepts in a volume dedicated to the Anthropocene! It is not the “Anthropos” who are destroying the planet, but the machines that mankind has created with the help of an economic and social system driven by expansion, profit and exploitation. We must understand any form of ecological crisis as a direct result of the logic of capitalism, which is motivated only by its negative drive for exploitation. The fallacy to the presupposition that there can be an “environmentally conscious” cinema, it would entail that cinema can be an expression of a dialectical negation of its own resources. Ultimately cinema production is more than conditioned by a false consciousness, movies are obviously making false claims and present the spectators with simplified versions of the terrible reality humanity is confronted with. Cinema transformed ecological issues into a form of *eco-tainment*, generating tremendous revenues and affecting profoundly the ecological stability of our world. Last but not least, moviemakers are maintaining a sense of false-hearted optimism about capitalism. An example for this kind of false promise is represented in *Armageddon* (1998), directed by Jerry Bruckheimer. The story constructs the illusion that all the problems of humanity can be resolved by the means of capitalist individualism, together with the deliberately deceptive assurance that technology will provide solutions to any danger we are confronted with.

I must denounce some of the ideas advanced by Murray and Heumann (8-10), who interpret a film like *The Day After Tomorrow* as a positive model, presenting the viewers with a “true eco-hero”, together with the hypothesis advanced by Ingram who claims that a new category of “green movies” can promote blatantly environmental messages, that are “greening” Hollywood (and Marxism) with a single blow (Ingram 2000).

In my opinion, these are only recent examples for a historical connection between cinema (specially the Warner Bros studios) and political progressivism. Without going back to aged examples from the long tradition of the “social-problem” films, we have a more recent illustration with *Elysium* (2013) where the South-African director Neill Blomkamp presents an apparently critical view about a degraded Earth in which the poor live on the ground while the rich elites are thriving on a space station above the Earth. Like other movies dealing

with eco-degradation, climate changes, dangers of waste, bioterrorism or population growth, which accumulate into the “eco-cinema genre” (Rust *et al.* 2013), *Elysium* is transforming the eco-revolution into an integration, a triumphant promise that there is a good version of capitalism, which can solve our problems. Like many other productions of contemporary cli-fi genre, mixing climate anxieties and science fiction narration techniques, *Elysium* only reinforces the existing order of things.

### **More on the practices of eco-Marxism (and the importance of a little self-criticism)**

My own approach (pace Tinker!) and an important part of my self-styled “Mickey-Marxist” method represents a variation of the negation of negation dialectical principle (Pop 2018: 55-56). While natural evolution and the formation of any form of thinking is dialectical, the notion of the critique of critical critique is key in Marxist methods and methodologies. Having at its core a double negation, the critical practice of that Marx and Engels used as “kritik der kritischen kritik” was considered by Lenin

As indicated by Jean-Yves Calvez (1956), Marxist thinking is fundamentally a form of critical thinking. From the early text criticising religion, to the more complex critiques of philosophical systems and ideas, the author of *Das Kapital* was constantly in a polemical relationship with the dominant ideas of his time. Without going too deep into these issues, the double turn produced by the Marxist method can be illustrated by its relationship with the Hegelian philosophy. While influenced heavily by Hegel’s dialectics, and the extremely important “labour of the negative”, Marx takes a critical attitude towards the ideas of his philosophical mentor, thus practicing a critique of a critical perspective from the very beginning. This is fundamental for my own version of thinking about cinema (and many other things), a variation on the same principle, that of the negation of negation, part and parcel of the polemical instruments and the satirical predisposition of the dialectical method.

Considering that any form of film interpretation must be first and foremost critical, before being able to understand the meanings of any cinematic production we must profess a form of self-criticism and self-irony. The underlying argument is that cinema representations have a powerful grip on our culture, and one needs to be not only critical, to evaluate contents and techniques, but also self-critical. This is a mode of thought, sometimes goose-stepping amusedly behind Žižek (2010), who admitted that he did not watch the grandiose eco-conscious blockbuster *Avatar*, in turn mockingly referring to Althusser’s “auto-critique”. This propensity for criticizing any form of criticism is an intellectual pact, which I am not practicing against ecological values per se. Instead it must be understood as a necessary (and intellectually healthy) reaction denouncing all forms of erroneous thought. By returning

to the basics of Marxist thinking, where the internal dialectics between criticism and self-criticism is central, I understand self-criticism as an intellectual duty, its main principle is defined more coherently by Roy Bhaskar (2008) a pathway to freedom, a liberation made possible only by the realization of dialectical contradictions. Marxism for me is not a political doctrine or a weapon for social revolutionary actions. As Marx acknowledged in an 1843 letter to Arnold Ruge (published in *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher*, 1844), his own method was a form of “ruthless criticism”, if necessary going against his own thinking. Marx was not only a critical philosopher (discussing in contradiction with Kant and Hegel), more importantly he was a critical thinker, never afraid of his own contradictions, denouncing dogmatism wherever he found it, even in the communist philosophy when understood as a “dogmatic abstraction”.

Thus, taking on the first “dialectical horn”, I must begin by self-denouncing my own pleasure of watching the movies I criticize. I give a formal recognition of my guilt created by enjoyment. It is this passion of a cinephile that has conducted me to a heretical view of “orthodox” Marxism. Like Althusser (1974), who admitted to his “ambiguous flirtations” with structuralism, I must admit a compromising attitude while analyzing contemporary cinema. It is important to denounce my own over-evaluations of the importance of movies, since only after this kind of denunciation of my own errors can I proceed to identifying the errors in other cinematic examples. And this is the basis for any practices of the critique of critical cinema criticism. By accepting my deviations and, while not repenting, I am constantly returning to the classical texts. One of the most important remains “Die heilige Familie, oder Kritik der kritischen Kritik” (translated as *The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Criticism. Against Bruno Bauer and Company*) published by Marx and Engels in 1845, during a short period when the two friends stayed in Paris. Here, Marx and Engels were discussing the problem of the bourgeois family, but subtitled their work “The critique of critical criticism”, because the issues went deep into the process described as the long road to self-clarification.

### The critique of the (so-called) critical cinema-making

While traditionally the critical method in film analysis is linked either to “cynical” criticizing (Brooks 2019), or the critique of Hollywood productions (Nelmes 2003), the “method” itself does not have a unified methodology.

I propose my own version of a critique of cinematic critical critique, obviously as a re-reading of the more consistent “Kritik der kritischen Kritik”. In the following, and for the use of this particular contribution to this volume, I am reducing the complex line of arguments provided by the founders of Communism, to four major entry points. These are expanded into my criticism of movie-made ecocriticism. Like any critical critique,

eco-critical perspectives are these systematic anomalies of thinking: vulgarization and devaluation; irrelevancy of observations; false solutions and the fabrication of stupidities. We can cherry-pick several cinematic examples, only to illustrate the validity of these forms of criticism of critical criticism.

For the first instance (*vulgarization*), a negative example is *Waterworld* (dir. Reynolds, 1995). Some authors use this movie as an example for its apparent criticism of contemporary society. Hailed as an early eco-critical movie, thus emblematic for cinematic critical critique, the story shows the consequences of a presumed meltdown of polar ice caps. This leads to the total transformation of our planet into a watery world, where humanity is debased to its lowest levels and the owners of the last oil tanker (ridiculously named Exxon Valdez) are illustrations of a society devalued by commodities and individualism (the antagonists are, conveniently, heavy smokers and drinkers). As noted by Vaughan (2019), the ecological disaster produced by such movies exceeds their eco-conscious efforts. Just like *Titanic* (dir. Cameron, 1997), only the water consumption of such productions is catastrophic.

This “water-centric” ecodisaster film, often considered as representative for the environmentalism of the 90s, was not only one of the biggest flops in recent cinema, it is also scientifically ludicrous (Vaughan 69-70). When we take a closer look at the presumed critical evaluations, as they appear in this narrative, the eco-awareness of *Waterworld* is only a *form of vulgarization*, making substantial issues to be *devalued* to such a degree that they are transformed into a risible caricature. This trait is shared by many other similar movies. Here the protagonist, called The Mariner (Kevin Costner’s version of Mad Max), is a post-human creature, evolving gills to breathe underwater, and is confronted with an army controlled by the Deacon. Here is the worst part of this eco-treatment, as it turns into a grotesque mockery the real ecological catastrophe caused by the oil tanker crashing off the coast of Alaska in 1989, spilling 10.8 million gallons of crude oil in the Ocean and contaminating 1,990 kilometers of shoreline. While some eco-critics lauded the movie for denouncing the negative effects of fossil fuels use or for raising important issues about how we can make possible an eco-friendly future, *Waterworld* opened the path to a larger genre, which can be distinctly identified as *eco-tainment*. These excessively dramatized and melodramatic versions of climate challenges are often scientifically ignorant.

In my view, *Waterworld* illustrates how the critical criticism works in cinema. The first movement is the *critical* component. The movie presents a global rise in sea levels, which is indeed a huge problem, as the glaciers are melting due to the impact of human activities. The second move is more malicious and stealthily deceitful, manifesting as a *critical critique*. We have to observe the fact that, even though these dramatic changes are affecting the coastlines of the planet, with many cities of the world literally drowning, even if the entire Greenland ice sheet would be completely melted and spilled into the oceans, the global sea level would rise only about seven meters. It is scientifically impossible for the water levels of the Earth to

reach the summit of Mount Everest and the movie presents a fake reality enlarged beyond truth and even reasonableness.

The second criticism of ecocriticism is based on the disclosure that many ecological themes used in movies are historically inaccurate and often refer to events that are already irrelevant. A negative illustration is provided by *Interstellar* (2014), where the dramatic effect of anthropocentric activities which result with the departure from Earth is a massive crop blight, a drought covering the entire planet. Besides the fact that humankind manages to leave the Solar system by means of a scientifically risible *deus ex machina* wormhole, the problem-solving presented by Christopher Nolan that humans from the future create their past is placed in a simplistic revision of the present. The background of the story uses the Great Dust bowl imagery as an eco-scary tactic. At the basis, this is a reference to the past, to an event that is no longer up to date. This fits with Ann Kaplan's (2018) interpretation of the movies dealing with dystopian and disastrous events using pre-traumatic. In order to describe the "anticipatory anxiety about the future" (Kaplan xix), the genre links futuristic situations with traumatic experiences of the present. More importantly, they are transforming ecology into a performance, a spectacle of suffering which is just a simplification of the really complex processes we are confronted with. The current problems of the planet are bigger than what happened in the drought-stricken Southern Plains of the United States. As Marx and Engels observed in their work, the worst form of fake criticism is to present as "truths" deformations of scientific concepts and irrelevant situations as if having a major impact.

Following the methodical analysis of the "kritik der kritischen kritik", we must also observe that eco-aware films often offer false solutions while providing falsified versions of reality. *Snowpiercer* (2013), the movie directed by South-Korean filmmaker Joon-ho Bong, tells the story of a train that relentlessly goes round and round on an icy Earth, destroyed once more by a failed attempt to solve our environmental problems with the help of climate engineering. By negating our possibility to influence the planet with the help of science, this graphic novel adaptation constructs an absurd, albeit exhilarating, film-world. Without wasting too much time with the reasonableness of a device that can transform an entire planet, we are transported to the *Snowpiercer* world, a mega-train conducted by an elusive Mr. Wilford. This is an allegorical representation of capitalist society, since the "tail passengers" are clearly the lumpenproletariat, while the front cars populated by the social elites are allowing the machine to exist. The story presents class segregation as normal and inevitable. In a universe in which revolution is futile, everybody must remain in its place, trapped in the societal machine since the ultimate message is that class warfare does not change anything. The reversal of settings, where the planetary destruction is not caused by water (like in *Waterworld*) instead it is induced by ice, does not bring anything new, besides a scientifically incongruous result. The train, operating like a retrofitted Noah's ark,

is circumnavigating the world for 20 years without needing any maintenance. Any railroad worker could have told them that tracks must be maintained regularly. And we are not spared from the finishing cliché, a polar bear survives the human made and fictional geocataclysm, while in reality the terrible and negative evidence is that humanity is slowly but surely driving the polar bears towards extinction.

The real issue is that the movie reinforces the oldest promise of capitalism, that the rich will survive any challenges, with the help of the military and industrial complex. As pointed out by Robert Marzec (2015), who expands on the hypothesis advanced by Alfred Cosby (1989), the techno-capitalist takeover of environmentalism must be critically evaluated. The militaristic survivalism is recurrent in contemporary cinema and, relevantly enough, not only present in American films. One of the highest-grossing films of Chinese film industry, the production entitled *The Wandering Earth* (2019), illustrates how the fake promises and absurd solutions populate all global cinematic narratives. The story, directed by Frant Gwo, a filmmaker specialized in big-budgeted, is based on the impossible displacement of the Earth from its orbit with the help of huge engines. All the problems ensuing from this pessimistic premise are resolved by the Chinese military, and the mind-boggling solution to ignite... Jupiter!

This brings us to the last but not the least of all the fallacies in ecocritical cinema. Most of these apparently critical films are only fabrications of stupidities, advancing pretentious nonsense that need to be refuted unreservedly. Here the examples are plentiful, we have so many copious anecdotal evidence from hundreds of productions. From *The Colony* (2013), where the survivors of yet another ice age are menaced by cannibals, to Aronfsky's cli-fi amalgamation, *Noah* (2014), where the pre-Flood patriarch is presented as the first environmentalist, confronting more cannibals from past, these narrations are strange mixtures of insanity and absurd events and explanations. They are based on a central premise noted by literary theorist Adam Trexler (2015), who identified similar traits in many novels dealing with climate change. Literary fictions or dystopian novels about the environment accumulate into a large variety of genres, characterized by the fact that they are challenging our expectations – both about nature and about literature. In the same way, we should be cautious about the cinematic fictions dealing with the impact of humans on planet Earth. While at a first view they might appear to provide a deep cultural understanding, they often offer ground for deformed meanings and twisted narrations. The true critique is replaced with cultural ballast, and the proliferation of series of stories re-telling the same eco-scary narratives over and over again is very similar to the movement of the *Snowpiercer* train in the icy world of the future.

## Stand by for another green movie of the Capitalocene

While Donna Harraway (2015) and others see the Anthropocene as a border, a moment after which a Capitalocene era would be created, the possibility that a “healthy” form of post-industrial society can be ushered is a highly doubtful notion. Jason Moore (2016), perhaps the most optimistic supporter of the Capitalocene, the age of capitalist world-ecology, suggests that humans should work with other species to “co-produce” a more habitable planet (80). These fake promises are already put on screen by eco-comedies such as *Evan Almighty* (2007), where the environmentally conscious US Senator fights the “bad” capitalists (generating pollution and exploitation) with the help of all the animals of the planet (and, of course, God as Morgan Freeman). As Žižek (2010) indicated amusedly, we might be the victims of another capitalism delusion, this time a “greened” phantasmagoria which creates another false consciousness. Like the ridiculous hero played by Steven Seagal in the eco-themed adventure *On Deadly Ground* (1994), who kills his way in saving the indigenous population from a rapacious oil company, eco-awareness is transformed by the critical critique of movies into a form of knowledge tranquility.

Two mega-blockbuster movies illustrate how recent eco-narratives lead the process of false criticism of present-day dangers. By using a form of popularized *eco-thinking*, these films prove that the environment related topics can be a pathway to making immense profits. *Avatar* (2009) was for a long time the most profitable movie in history, with almost \$2,8 billion revenues. This performance was recently surmounted, by a small margin, when another spectacular eco-tainment production hit the theaters. *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) managed to take eco-scare to an unprecedented level. While both movies disclose the fact that the melodramatic effect of appeasing our conscience, one of the oldest tools of ideological manipulation, is still cashing in for the capitalist production system, *Avengers: Endgame* transforms the real subject of Anthropocene into its negative reverse. Thanos, the evil God wants to solve the problem of overpopulation and resource depletion in the Galaxy with the help of a magic gauntlet. By halving the entire population of the universe, he is in fact performing an eco-conscious action, albeit in a monstrous way, thus transforming the ecological agenda into a genocidal and maniacal proposition. Once again, *Avengers: Endgame* summarizes the mechanism of the critical critique. The first movement is the positive premise - the movie critically exposes a negative effect of capitalism. With the second turn the story is transforming the initial premise into a baseless and unsubstantiated new manifestation.

The final example and brief (but necessary) case study represented by *Avatar*, the fantastic story directed by James Cameron. The moviemaker manages to combine (and thus to illustrate the dialectical contradictions) capitalism and environmentalism. Although some might view the production as a positive reflection of the Anthropocene, as is for

instance Daniel White (2018) who considers *Avatar* as an expression of the “ecological mind”, the fraudulent critique of the critical issues in this multi-billion dollars movie remains a glorification of Western civilization. The first move is, once more, critical. The Earth is already doomed, the only eco-friendly solution is extra-planetary travel. This allows Cameron to revive the myth of the good savage. With a post-human solution – the avatars are counterfeit bodies, grown from mixing human DNA with the DNA of the Pandora natives – it appears that exploitation and mechanic capitalism are opposed by Jake Sully, a disabled soldier (his impotent body working as a transparent symbol of a crippled humanity). This critical critique is in fact blocking out our understanding of the genocidal role played by Western civilization in history. More relevantly, *Avatar* projects the interests of patriarchy and the cultural bias about social structures. By having a white man save the planet of the dis-organized natives, it confirms the hierarchy of our own destructive society. The ending is even more scientifically crippled than the hero who saves the indigenous people. In a magical-mystical turn, which is just another revival of the Gaia theory, showing a society driven by obscure forces of a “planet soul”, the environment is saved by a mindless megafauna, not by reasonable actions. While some critics still believe that *Avatar* can be interpreted as an example for environmental responsibility, and even for “radical environmental propaganda” (Burkart 2010), the plot is based on the same negative idea: some humans implacably destroy Nature, however there is always a good white man to save us all.

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