



Invited research article

## Popular culture and the “new human condition”: Catastrophe narratives and climate change



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### ABSTRACT

Striking popular culture images of burnt landscapes, tidal waves and ice-bound cities have the potential to dramatically and emotively convey the dangers of climate change. Given that a significant number of people derive a substantial proportion of their information on the threat of climate change, or the “new human condition”, from popular culture works such as catastrophe movies, it is important that an investigation into the nature of the representations produced be embedded in the attempt to address the issue. What climate change-related messages may be encoded in popular films, television and novels, how are they being received, and what effects may they have? This article adopts the cultural studies perspective that popular culture gives us an important means by which to access the “structures of feeling” that characterise a society at a particular historic juncture: the views held and emotional states experienced by significant amounts of people as evident in disparate forms of cultural production. It further adopts the related viewpoint that popular culture has an effect upon the society in which it is consumed, as well as reflecting that society's desires and concerns – although the nature of the effect may be difficult to quantify. From this position, the article puts forward a theory on the role of ecological catastrophe narratives in current popular culture, before going on to review existing critical work on ecologically-charged popular films and novels which attempts to assess their effects on their audiences. It also suggests areas for future research, such as the prevalent but little studied theme of natural and environmental disaster in late-Victorian science fiction writing. This latter area is of interest because it reveals the emergence of an ecological awareness or structure of feeling as early as the late-nineteenth century, and allows the relationship of this development to environmental policy making to be investigated because of the historical timeframe. Effectively communicating the threat of climate change and the need to address it, reframing the perspective from a detached and scientifically-articulated problem to one of a human condition – immediate and personal – is on one level a task of narrative, or story-telling, and cultural studies has an important role to play in this and in elucidating the challenges involved. In line with the remit of the special issue in which this article appears, it is written as a review article specifically addressing the question of what cultural studies can contribute to helping to articulate the ‘new human condition’ of existence under climate change. As such, it offers some initial preliminary readings of popular culture trends, outlines a potential methodology, briefly summarises some effective work already done in the area and suggests further potential avenues of enquiry.

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### 1. Introduction

In his 2007 address to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stated that the scenarios outlined in the 2007 IPCC report, “are as frightening as a science fiction movie. But they are even more terrifying, because they are real” (ctd in Weik von Mossner, 2012b, 97). In other words, Ban seems to be harnessing the power of popular culture to dramatically convey the dangers of climate change in order to reinforce his message. Given that a significant number of people derive a good deal of their information on and

understanding of the threat of climate change, or the “new human condition”, from popular culture works such as catastrophe films, it is important that an investigation into the nature of these popular representations is embedded in the attempt to address the issue of climate change. Good examples of influential recent films set in bleak post catastrophe landscapes include *The Road* (2009; see Fig. 1) and the visually stunning “new ice age” film *Snowpiercer* (2013).<sup>1</sup> Key questions to consider about popular works such as *The Road* and *Snowpiercer* include: what messages about climate change are encoded within them, how are

<sup>1</sup> See the *Snowpiercer* website for iconic images of the frozen Earth after a failed climate change mitigation experiment, <http://snowpiercer-film.com/tagged/front>.

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Fig. 1. Devastated landscape in *The Road* (dir. John Hillcoat, 2009). Reproduced with the permission of Dimension Films/Photofest.

these messages being received, and what effects may they have on public understanding of the issues? This article discusses how a cultural studies approach may be used to try to answer these questions, focusing particularly on fictional representations of catastrophe in popular fiction, film and television.<sup>2</sup> Effectively communicating the implications of the environmental decay associated with climate change and the need to address this threat, reframing the perspective from a detached and scientifically-articulated problem to one of a human condition – immediate and personal – is on one level a task of narrative, or story-telling. Cultural studies has an important role to play in this, in assessing current attitudes to the issues and elucidating the challenges involved in effecting mitigation behaviour. In line with the remit of the special issue in which this article appears, it is written as a review article specifically addressing the question of what cultural studies can contribute to helping to articulate the ‘new human condition’ of existence under climate change. As such, it provides a brief working definition of cultural studies, offers some initial preliminary readings of popular culture trends, outlines a potential methodology, briefly summarises some effective work already done in the area and suggests further potential avenues of enquiry.

## 2. Cultural studies and popular culture

Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary humanities and social sciences field which practices the close, critical, and contextual reading of cultural phenomena in a politically-aware manner to investigate the nature of their role in society. When applied to popular culture, it provides a methodology to address key questions concerning the relationship between social understandings and popular representations of climate change, to access the “attitudes, ideas, goals, motives and values” that so many of the contributors to this issue stress as vital to understand in order to bring about the necessary changes in human behaviour to mitigate climate change (Lawrence, this issue). The relationship between popularity and cultural relevance is complex, but this article briefly defines popular works as those aimed at and/or consumed by large numbers of people, and builds on the work of those who view popular culture as more than purely passive, as explained subsequently.<sup>3</sup> Aimed at large audiences, attune to popular sentiment and able to encode contentious topical

concerns within metaphors and genre conventions, “popular cultural documents provide unique insights into the concerns, anxieties and desires of their times” (Jones et al., 2011, 3). They offer an important means by which to access the “structures of feeling”, in Raymond Williams’s famous formulation, that characterise a society at a particular historic juncture: the views held and emotional states experienced by significant amounts of people, the experience through which a culture is lived (Williams, 1961, 63). The cultural studies approach holds that as well as reflecting a society’s desires and concerns, popular culture has an effect on the society in which it is consumed – that it is socially productive as well as socially produced (Montrose, 1989, 23); although the nature of its effect may be difficult to quantify. Accordingly, this article contends that popular culture is not only a passive indicator of a society’s preoccupations, but also a guiding force: in reflecting concerns, it also plays a reciprocal role in shaping them, in distorting them, in inflating them and, crucially, in transmitting them to large audiences. While there is clear evidence of the effect of popular science on shaping public opinion and a potential reciprocal effect of public acceptance on certain scientific theories (Autin and Holbrook, 2012), the ‘entertaining’, fictional popular culture works on which this article focuses have the potential to reach even larger audiences than those reached by popular science outputs (such as documentaries, articles, and news items). The cultural studies approach thus provides an appropriate lens through which to investigate the impact of ecologically-charged fictional popular culture representations upon the large audiences who consume them.

## 3. Trends in contemporary popular culture: The proliferating catastrophe

A popular culture trend of key relevance to investigating representations of climate change is the seemingly endless proliferation of catastrophe and post-catastrophe scenarios in contemporary popular fiction, film and television: to quote a weary film reviewer, “Planetary destruction and human extinction happen a half-dozen times every summer” (Scott, 2014). Catastrophes of all kinds abound, but representations of ecological disaster have become so common as to generate competing labels that refer to them as a distinct genre: “eco-disaster”, “eco-catastrophe”, “eco-apocalypse”, and “cli-fi”/“climate porn” (which last refer specifically to climate-change themed works), to cite but a few terms. Major cinematic examples from recent decades include *Waterworld* (1995), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *Snowpiercer* (2013). However, while *Waterworld* and *The Day After Tomorrow* were relatively rare in depicting

<sup>2</sup> Another key area for this kind of analysis is that of popular science, but it is beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>3</sup> For useful overviews of popular culture see McCracken (1998), Schneider-Mayerson (2010), and Storey (2009).

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