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Hódosy Annamária



BIOMOZI  
Ökokritika és populáris film



ANNAMÁRIA HÓDOSY

# Biomovie

Ecocriticism and popular film



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# Introduction

## Hollywood goes green

The 1998 blockbuster *Armageddon*'s lead characters appear for the first time in a scene that presents environmental movements in a rather ridiculous light. The protagonist Harry (Bruce Willis) is introduced while playing golf in an extreme close up. From the camera angle it cannot be seen where he is playing exactly, so the viewers are certainly amused by the following images that widen out into a long shot to reveal that the setting is an oil drilling platform and the golf course is the ocean itself. The hole that Harry picks falls "accidentally" on the deck of a Greenpeace boat whose crew is protesting against oil drilling carried out by Harry's team. The green activists, screaming hysterically when hit lightly by the golf ball, are presented as twits; this disdain is justified rationally in the first dialogue when Harry fends off the environmentalists' accusations of pollution by a single question: "Didn't they realize how much diesel that clunker boat pumps out an hour?" It takes only one passing remark, and environmental activism becomes downgraded not only as comical, but also as foolish and self-controversial, so there is nothing that may stand in the way of the triumph of oil drilling. And indeed, there is no mistake: *Armageddon*'s narrative tells the story of this triumph, since Harry's rescue team saves the Earth from the fatal impact of an asteroid with the help of a special deep-sea oil drilling technology developed by Harry himself.

Although the film seems to reduce the relationship between nature and humankind to this momentary look at the activity of environmentalists, the plot and the motif-system of the movie cites more vigorously the problems that give grounds for Greenpeace's appearance in the first place. To begin with, according to the plot the Earth is threatened by extinction due to a rogue asteroid, so the sci-fi is based on the assumption of a *natural disaster*. At the time of the film's production, predictions of the "imminent" ecological

disaster were facts of common knowledge, but the well-known factors behind these disasters was not global warming but the hole in the ozone layer and environmental pollution. Under the heading of pollution the most massive damages and the most vehement protests were caused by oil spills from tanker ship accidents. The news coverage of the 1989 Exxon Valdez catastrophe shocked the whole world; images of birds and oysters drowning in oil are ever since the most frequent illustrations used in publications and websites reporting on environmental damages, not to mention the pollution caused by the oil spilled (or deliberately poured) into the ocean during the Gulf War (Joyner-Kirkhope 1992, 30).

*Armageddon* (dir. Michael Bay) was filmed after the Gulf War and before the Iraq War, thus — regarding the leitmotif of oil drilling — the film could be concerned as a war propaganda in a science fiction disguise, where the asteroid represents the Arab threat, and the rescue team stands for US military force placing itself in the role of the world's policeman due to its economic power and technological potentials (cf. Khatib 2006, 64). Viewed from this perspective, the “drilling” of the giant rock moving at full speed towards the Earth simultaneously demonstrates the US military engineering defence technology capable of destruction of the enemy (as drilling in this case aims at placing a bomb at the heart of the asteroid), and evokes the desire to extract oil under foreign control. The concurrence of these images in the explosion of the asteroid suggests that satisfying the latter can be achieved through the former, which will lead to universal peace and the continuous flourishing of capitalist (entrepreneurial) economy built on the abundance of fossil energy resources.

This already explains why it was worth to start the movie by attacking the environmental movement. Playing down the oil-industry-related ecological damages not only serves to exonerate the protagonist and his job, but it is also necessary to maintain the notions of peace and development that permeate the whole movie and are based on the norms of Western consumer society. In this sense, *Armageddon* is the perfect example for conservative Hollywood ideology.

The fact that large-budget American mainstream films generally represent and encourage the acquisition and internalization of the value-system that maintains the prevailing political order is a recurrent theme in film criticism. Nonetheless, the sharpness of the attack on environmental protection displayed in *Armageddon* is very rare in the film world. Since the recent expansion of green movements the opposite have seemed to be the case; in the last few years there were hardly any popular films that did not take seriously the problem of ecological crisis. *Inferno* (dir. Ron Howard, 2016), based on the novel by Dan Brown, begins with the following voice-over:

It took the Earth's population a hundred thousand years to reach a billion people. And then just a hundred more to reach two billion. And only fifty years to double again. Four billion people in 1970. We are nearly at eight billion now. We are destroying the very means by which life is sustained. Every single global ill that plagues the earth can be traced back to human overpopulation. Why do we demand inaction? We clear-cut. We dump. We consume. We destroy. Half the animal species on Earth have vanished in the last forty years. But still we keep attacking our own environment. Does it take a catastrophe to learn our lesson? To get our attention?

The monologue is repeated 30 minutes later, this time not only in a voice-over, but in the form of a longer performance and with a poignant ending: "There have been five major extinctions in the Earth's history. And unless we take bold, immediate action, the sixth extinction will be our own." The character raising his voice against environmental destruction is a negative hero here, since the "bold, immediate action" turns out to be an attempt at the deliberate decimation of humanity by a virus, similarly to the TV series *Utopia* (2013–14) or the series *Under the Dome* (2013–2015) that I will analyze later on. In *Kingsman* (2014) a "crazy genius" tries to reverse the climate change by setting people against each other, so the devil take the hindmost. In the dystopian world of *The Humanity Bureau* (2017), on the waste lands of the USA the farmers who have become useless and unable to make their living

from farming are forced into ghettos by the state where they are promised a new beginning; however, in reality these refugee camps are functioning as death camps in order to decrease population. Calling a halt to ecocide with the help of genocide is such a recurrent motive in recent filmmaking that it draws attention to the “timeliness” of the conflict, but it does not mean that this explicit, even didactic discussion of eco-problems is the novelty of the 2010s.

In the 1970s, during the realization of the economic crisis several cult films were made that directly or indirectly objected to environmental pollution and the exploitation of natural resources. The dystopian world of *Soylent Green* (1973) is characterized by overpopulation, mass poverty, extinction of wildlife, and the hegemony of a small and unscrupulous elite who are feeding the masses with soy products made from the flesh of the dead. In the visionary future of *Silent Running* (1972) the well-being of the masses is guaranteed by technological development and the total displacement of nature. The flora’s and fauna’s remaining specimens are kept in spaceships’ “reservation areas”, but the people lose their interest in the project with the exception of the protagonist, who sacrifices his life for the survival of the miniature ecosystem. *China Syndrome* (1979) discusses the possibility and consequences of a nuclear accident and pollution with the tools of political thriller and social drama, casting famous actors in the leading roles.

After the turn of the millennium, the notion of global ecological crisis and climate change has been adopted by several highly successful documentaries, which has made these issues credible and supportable for the general public, too. It is usually Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), a highly acclaimed documentary that is regarded as the threshold of the emergence of the global “ecological paradigm” (Rust 2013, 192; Minster 2010, 25). Although the theme of ecology does not seem to appear more frequently in feature films than before, some of these movies have become especially successful and/or acknowledged. *Erin Brockovich* (2000), *Avatar* (2009) or *Noah* (2014) has made



credible the ecological risks not only for the green-minded, but also for the average movie-goer, and these movies have also made pressing the imperative of the preservation of healthy habitats. Though *The East* (2013) has not become so popular, its message was much more direct. And thanks to the animated family films *Nemo* (2003), *Happy Feet* (2006) and *Wall-E* (2008), children have been also drawn into the orbit of green sympathizers.

The nowadays mass-produced post-apocalyptic films frequently base their narratives on either an indirectly or directly defined green problem. Although the emphasis of *Matrix* (1999) lies elsewhere, still, the natural cataclysm displayed in the movie is brought about by technological developments resulting in the creation of AI. The processes of sudden cooling down and the second ice age imagined by the film *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) do not intend to appear as fictitious versions of the predictions regarding the climate change and neither do they intend to represent a prophecy of a real future, yet the movie's rhetoric reinforces the discourse of the ecological catastrophe. In Shyamalan's science fiction *After the Earth* (2013) and in the horror movie of *World War Z* (2013) the narratives are based on a situation that, according to the movie's opening images, can be attributed to environmental pollution, excessive exploitation of natural resources, conspicuous consumption and anti-natural lifestyles. Also from 2013, the mise-en-scene of *The Colony* and the fantasy movie entitled *Snowpiercer* is also based on the occurrence of the second ice age, which is the consequence of manipulating the weather and intervening into the order of nature, as it happens in *The Day After Tomorrow*.

The series *Zoo* (2015–2016) that lasted for two seasons makes the viewers to imagine what it would be like if animals suddenly became self-conscious and took revenge on humans. As the introductory voice-over explains: "For centuries mankind has been the dominant species. We domesticated animals, locked them up, killed them for sport. But a series of recent events seem to suggest all across the globe that animals decided: no more!" Earlier films such as *On Deadly Ground* (1994) deploy the well-known recipe to

cast the blame upon some large, corrupt companies for the environmental degradation, in this way strengthening the belief that harmful agents can be localized, isolated, and easily eliminated. More recent movies are rather preoccupied with self-accusation, not sparing themselves from facing the fact that we are all accomplices in maintaining the malicious system, as it is also pointed out by scientific literature (cf. Jamieson 2010, 83). The ecological witch-hunt is thus gradually replaced by the demonstration of a collective guilty conscience and atonement (cf. Dodds 2011 37–49) that is especially striking in some works.

In Shyamalan's 2008 movie *The Event*, plants restricted to ever tighter territories start a biological defense killing every human being nearby indiscriminately. As opposed to the usual scheme, the revolt of the plants appears to be the necessary result of human activities, a logical reaction to the expansion of the human world, the inevitable process of evolution, the order of nature, if not the (morally) legitimate (re)action of plant life. There is no trace of the mechanical process of constituting the enemy that has been so self-evident and automatic in invasion movies. We the humans seem to deserve extinction — and accepting this may be the only way for us to survive.

In the less widely known horror film *The Last Winter* (2006) a new scientist arrives to the Northern Arctic colony in search for new oil drilling sites, while he resolutely opposes the industrial utilization of the polar preserve. While collecting soil samples to provide evidence for the deleterious effects of human activity, more and more members of the colony show the symptoms of some kind of delirium or neurosis. Those with the symptoms of “sickness” believe to see prehistoric creatures attacking and driving them to death. The film graciously veils in obscurity whether the prehistoric creatures are imaginary (meaning that the neurotic symptoms are caused by methane gas released from the melting ice), or they are indeed the liberated spirits of prehistoric living beings whose flesh and blood is the source of oil, as the legend has it. In this sense, besides the ecological reservations concerning oil drilling, the economic utilization of the treasures of the land is also seen as a

sin, similarly to the excavation of the sacred Native American cemetery for construction purposes in Spielberg's *Poltergeist* (1984). Thus, madness in *The Last Winter* — similarly to the suicides committed in a state of unconsciousness in Shyamalan's movie mentioned above — is the hyperbolic representation of remorse felt over the disruption of the “sacred” order of nature, which is a “proof” in itself of the righteousness of the punishment. It seems that within the film world we witness the headway of the slogan used in the environmentalist movement: “We have met the enemy and he is us” (Sagoff 1982).

From the point of view of the evolution of the eco-paradigm, the comparison of the *Kong: Skull Island* from 2016 and the previous *King Kong* films is specifically revelatory, even if our comparison is limited to Peter Jackson's version coming out in the movies in 2005. In the series of the *King Kong* remakes there has been a definite move away from the celebration of Western culture towards its repudiation (cf. Combe & Boyle 2013, 27–30), and in the relationship with the giant gorilla there has been a shift away from repulsion towards sympathy, a shift away from the somewhat contemptuous pity towards respect (Creed 2007, 73–74). The change is especially apparent in the relationship between the female protagonist and the ape that works as the metaphoric expression of animal lust aroused by female sensuality; the monst(e)rous sexualization of this relationship was the main reason behind the success of the *King Kong* movies and all the previous films featuring a gorilla (Mitman 1999, 51; Creed 2007, 65–70). According to Creed, in Jackson's version the relationship between the woman and the gorilla turns into a friendship, and even if there lurks the hidden possibility of prohibited, abject sexual desires, these desires are subordinated to the mutual respect between the woman and the animal (2007, 73–74). And since the woman belongs to “culture” and the animal represents non-human “nature” in the movie, their relationship also embodies the eco-centric, utopian ethic based on the equality of different species.

However, *Kong: Skull Island* goes far beyond this. In this version Kong is not a “pagan” god who demands his yearly sacrifices. As

opposed to pervious adaptations, the much liked scene of the woman's abduction is missing from this version. Until the 2016 remake one of the most important motifs of the *King Kong* movies was the monster terrorizing the people living on the island; since *Kong: Skull Island* it is the too much nature-dependent primitive people who are terrorizing the strangers strayed to their territory. And this in turn excuses, or even justifies the triumph of civilization through crushing this "natural terror" with the help of technology. Even in Jackson's film back in 2005 it was only the unreasonable flirtation with terror, the sensation-hungry and business-interested usage of horror that was in fact reproachable. In *Skull Island*, nevertheless, the monster-being of Kong and the notion of "hostile nature" represented by the figure of the ape all prove to be an utterly false fiction.

In *Skull Island*, instead of terrorizing the islanders, Kong protects them from something "even worse", a walrus-like dinosaur of prehistoric origin according to the story. On the basis of the narrative, however, (Western) civilization is also well-included in this idea of the *worst*. The film spells out more than once that the furious, helicopter-smashing, murderous Kong is only protecting his home from the intruders who have no qualms about throwing bombs, devastating the land and killing masses of harmless animals with the purpose of mapping the territory. In this story the bestial and sadistic side of (male) sexuality is embodied not by Kong but the US soldiers and pseudoscientists who are trying to compensate their frustration caused by the (still denied) Vietnam defeat with the ostentatious bombings, and their efforts to conquest the jungle-covered island, allegorically alluding to the Vietnam war.

Kong and the "yellow" aborigines of the Skull Island represent a new fantasy of sustainable living similar to the life-style of the blue-skinned humanoids of *Avatar*, which is rather surprising in the light of the earlier adaptations, but highly predictable considering the recent headway of the ecological paradigm. However, instead of imagining nature as the innocent and peaceful Eden, this time we are presented a renewed, "darker" ecological model according to which "the image of nature as a balanced circuit is nothing but a

retroactive projection of man. Herein lies the lesson of recent theories of chaos: »nature« is already, in itself, turbulent, imbalanced” (Žižek 1991, 38). The brutality associated with American civilization is not the consequence of deliberate malevolence, it originates in ignorance, the restricted comprehension of the surrounding circumstances and ecological complexity. This model is based on the concept of “risk society” theorized by Ulrich Beck:

Through the unrestrained production of modernization risks, a policy of making the Earth uninhabitable is being conducted in continuing leaps and bounds, and sometimes in catastrophic intensifications. What is being opposed as a ‘communist menace’ is occurring as the sum of our own actions via the detour through a contaminated nature. On the battlefield of market opportunities, beyond the doctrinal wars of ideology, everyone is pursuing a ‘scorched Earth’ policy against everyone else — with resounding but seldom lasting success. (Beck 2005, 38)

The positive protagonists of the story, similarly to the leading characters of *Avatar*, range themselves on the “good” — or rather the least “bad” — side. And when they finally manage to get out of the island, ready to fly back to the US, they embody our “ecological conscience” not only through their right decisions, but also through the fact that they — like we, the audience — return to a world in which their nearly-apocalyptic experience is remembered only as a nightmare or a (film)script we can easily leave behind in a dark movie theater. Since, after all, in our present welfare economy there are too few signs of real dangers, be it a prehistoric monster or climate change. Thus, the film also formulates a fine critique of the indifference towards the dangers threatening the viewers’ world, a strategy that will be expanded in the following chapter.

## **Poststructuralist ecocriticism**

Many of the films mentioned above are compulsory material of volumes of essays and studies that approach these movies from an eco-critical perspective, thus representing an *ecologically conscious*



*standpoint*; similarly to the films with ecological themes or interests, the number of such volumes is also increasing. According to the bibliographies, the “first contact” with the discipline was the 1996 ecocriticism reader edited by Cheryll Glotfelty considered to be a landmark in ecocriticism (Willoquet-Maricondi 2010, 2). Although this reader primarily contributes to the eco-critical exploration of literary texts, questions of cinematic ecocriticism — or eco-cinema-criticism — can also be found in the essays, if Glotfelty’s methodological examples are translated to the language of visual media, e.g. how does nature appear in this film; what role does the physical environment play in the act; are the narrative values consistent with the ecological principles; how do the cultural metaphors of the earth influence the film’s representation of nature (Glotfelty 1996, xviii–xix).

The eco-cinema-critical books published after Glotfelty’s reader, however, tend to raise questions that create coherence among the seemingly contingent interpretations. For example, in his important book *The Ecologies of the Moving Image* Adrian Ivakhiv (2013) frequently returns to the question whether how the technology of the film has affected our relationship to the natural world and its representation. Similarly to David Ingram’s *Green Screen* (2000), Ivakhiv considers these representations to answer the question whether how has the notion of non-human world changed across the history of film. Both critics show great interest in the question whether Hollywood movies contribute to or obstruct the expansion of environmental consciousness, and to what extent does the demand for consumer culture compromise popular film’s image of nature.

Pat Brereton, a pioneer in the eco-critical approach to popular films, believes that movies’ aspiration for popularity is not necessarily the enemy to eco-consciousness. Brereton selects films from Hollywood’s repertoire that — while not necessarily focusing on ecocriticism — do contain details, suggestions, scenes or images directing the viewers’ attention to the harmony, peace or fearful powers of the non-human world, and in this way these films manage to inspire respect towards nature and create a demand for a

modest, more natural way of living. Such a “utopian” potential is demonstrated by the closing screen of *Thelma and Louise* (1991), where the sublime sight of the Grand Canyon makes up for everything that was missing from the lives of the two protagonists (Brereton 2005, 233).

Nevertheless, it is more common for the eco-critical analysis to aim at revealing the consumer mentality behind the seemingly environmentally friendly approach and expose its ultimately anti-environmental nature. Thus, it seems to be proper to use the “bio-movie” label. On the one hand, I believe that the film type analyzed in this book, similarly to other bio-products, has become so popular because we, the audience see in them the possibility of a better, healthier world, and the honor for the vanishing nature. However, this honor has its own drawbacks that might be more harmful than mere disinterest. Now we buy palm oil for our trendy homemade toothpaste because we have read ourselves into the poisonous effects of the chemicals in expensive toothpaste brands, or the cruelty of animal experiments carried out to test these products. Is it possible that we are promoting a trend that creates crop land for oil-palm plantations by clearing rainforests, which leads to the ruining of the habitat not just of gorillas but millions of other ‘less sweet’ animals living in that particular ecosystem? We buy plastic Christmas trees because we don’t want to “kill” healthy young trees. Is it possible that with this we only feed Chinese plastic-industry, which is more harmful both to environment and users than the pine tree nurseries that grow our Christmas trees, trees that absorb carbon dioxide before chopped down and that are suitable for compost-making after the holidays? Similarly to these examples, the “bio-movies” examined in this book are the products of such a production scheme that typically does not qualify as green technology (Bozak 2011, 4–8); the “message” of the films I analyze is not faultless from ecological perspective, in some cases it even supports harmful attitudes (e.g. *The Wicker Man* from 2006 or *Interstellar* from 2014), and in most cases it certainly does not lead to an environmentally sound way of living, at least not more than the washing powder Biopon.

For example, Randy Malamud shows in a rather entertaining way that after the debut of *Finding Nemo* (2003) there has been a noticeable increase in the number of clown fishes (the species as Nemo) sold on the market, despite the film's clear standpoint against keeping animals in captivity (2009, 90). For many viewers, the environmentally friendly message of the film has been muted by the generic effect of visual representations that — through fetishizing the objects — turn them into property that can be bought and possessed. Further contradictions are pointed out by Lynn Dickson Bruckner: despite the fact that the film condemns the capturing of wild animals and keeping them as pets, some websites present the vivarium that holds Nemo in prison as the embodiment of aquarists' ultimate wishes. But in case the animal-friendly message got through, the activism aroused this way often lost track. To imitate the method of freeing the prisoner fish as seen in the film, many people — mainly children — also “freed” their pets “who” were no longer able to thrive in the wild, and even if they went on living they found themselves in an environment not suitable for the needs of their species. After seeing the film, so many children flushed their fish down the toilet that in a number of US states public statements were announced to inform people that although the fish released this way do eventually get to the sea, but never alive: they must pass through a mechanism that actually chops them into small pieces (Bruckner 2010, 199–201).

The above implications of *Finding Nemo* demonstrate the self-contradictory nature and, finally, the futility of popular “environmental” film. Inasmuch as the ultimate purpose of these works is profit that can only be achieved through fulfilling the already existing needs of both the audience and the sponsors, the environmentalist message cannot be as radical as it should be in order to induce real change. .

Sustainable life can only be put into practice by downscaling economic growth and reducing the exploitation of natural resources, which would be incompatible with the basic operating mechanisms of the film industry. Thus, high-budget films are simply not credible as representatives of environmental protection

(Bozak 2011, 2–6). The visual image creates different reaction in the viewer as compared to the story, and the narrative's subordination to the action-sequence does not provide sufficient space to communicate and explain the ecological information.

According to Beth Berila (2010), no matter how hard Rober Redford's films try to draw attention to the beauties of earth-bound, rustic lifestyle of farmers living on the prairies of the Wild West, the visual representation of these beauties employ the power of the "imperialist" gaze well-know from postcolonialism. The camera often captures the landscape in total images, or shows the environs through the earth-sweeping eyes of the characters who live in harmony with the land, in his way "capturing" or "colonizing" the space. The "cowboy mentality" embodied by the protagonists is "wild" only when compared to the modern urban viewer, whereas within the film world it demonstrates the capacity to dominate over nature's forces. An indeed, throughout the history of the Wild West this was the ultimate aim of cowboys: to (forcefully) seize the land and exploit it for economic purposes. Thus, the prevailing nostalgia for this cowboy mentality also embraces the legitimization of this exploiting past. In the narrative this is frequently displayed through the taming or civilizing of some natural entity beyond control, such as water in *A River Runs Through It* (1992), or the horse in *The Horse Whisperer* (1998). And the fact that among the entities tamed, disciplined and domesticated we find mostly women, children and native people demonstrates the close relationship of this "nature-friendliness" with the patriarchal and colonialist tradition (Berila 2010, 1–22).

In this book I will differentiate three types of approaches to the environment that have approved of or targeted by ecocriticism, combining the terminology of Carolyn Sigler and Donald Worster among others. These approaches are referred to as (1) the "domination model" or the "imperialist" view of nature; (2) the "pastoral model" or "environmentalist" approach; and (3) the "eco-centric model" or the "systemic" view of nature (cf. Martin 2004, 217–218). The domination model regards the primacy of humanity as axiomatic in relation to nature, and the overpowering and

controlling of nature is seen as the ultimate value of civilization. Until the last century, this model was dominating the cultural imagination of the Western world until the last century, and although its prestige has been radically severed by the emergence of the Romantic cult of nature, it still has a great weight in the Western political and industrial sector (and gaining more weight in the Third World). As Ingram shows, the domination model is represented by Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) in many ways (2000, 89–91).

The pastoral model is based on the conviction that man has been destined to be the guardian of Earth and thus he should foster the reproductive activity of nature as a “good shepherd”, which service is repaid with bounteous harvest and progeny for the “master” to live on (Merchant 2005, 73). This model can be exemplified by the environmental classic *Silent Running*, or *Fly away home* (1996) in which an eccentric family helps orphaned young wild geese to learn to fly home. The pastoral or environmentalist attitude is sharply contrasted with the domination model, and is also differentiated from the eco-centric (or systemic) model by assigning importance to the actions, feelings and aspects of *human* agents, which leads Merchant to classify it as “homocentric ethics” (cf. Kheel 1993, 264). In principle, the eco-centric model does not distinguish man from its environment: according to this perspective every living being is of equal importance in the all-encompassing, complex and dynamically changing system of nature; humanity is part of this system in so far as people's actions do not lead to the system's premature collapse (Merchant 2005, 75–78). *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) tries to make such a perspective conceivable with a story in which an alien representing the wide universe arrives at the Earth with the mission to exterminate humanity before humans could destroy all the other forms of life.

For the eco-centric perspective *Avatar* may be an ever better and perhaps more intriguing example, since it raises the possibility that the eco-centric perspective is (going to be) able to gain dominance in modern consumer society because literacy in



information technology facilitates the acceptance of the system- or network-principle underlying this kind of social order.

The anthropocentric idea behind the domination model, according to which man's ability to self-reflection and the faculty of reasoning places him in a superior position as compared with others, has recently been questioned:

Is there historical evidence that our ability to reason has been at least helpful to the Earth's inhabitants or Earth herself? What we call our greatest achievements — such as architecture, harnessing nuclear energy, e-communication — have been phenomenal, but they are not evidence that we are dignified vis-à-vis other animals. Human technology has lowered infant mortality, increased longevity, conquered pandemic disease and simultaneously bettered our ability to use more natural resources per person. While this may be great for humans in the short term, by and large human reason appears to have contributed mostly in a negative way to ecosystem integrity. (Ash 2005, 211–212)

But is it not naïve to think that we are able to put into effect a completely different approach and practice? As Willoquet-Maricondi argues, to talk about eco-centrism as the alternative for anthropocentrism may sound paradoxical, for how could people talk in the name of nature without this act of speech being always already anthropocentric and anthropomorphic? However, this paradox can easily be resolved considering that “ecocentrism denotes a shift in values that takes into consideration the well-being of the whole ecosphere, which includes humanity” (Willoquet-Maricondi 2010, 46–47). To be anthropocentric on behalf of humanity means, in fact, to be irrational, since “human and nonhuman nature share certain qualities and interests, and [...] our survival interests are not in opposition to those of nonhuman nature, but are interconnected and interdependent with it” (Willoquet-Maricondi 2010, 46–47). According to Peter Chatalos, not asserting the ecocentric perspective qualifies as “ecological autism”, a mental illness, since “the people who perceive themselves as separate from the more-than-human world, *not* realizing their self-in-relationship or as

interconnected, present psychological barriers against these relationships” (2012, 40).

Following the insights of cultural studies, I think that even if the ecocentric view is morally correct and seems to be the most appropriate scientific approach, from the standpoint of sociology choosing and defending a certain perspective is always the result of a number of cultural factors that shapes the interpretations of scholars, audiences and creators alike (Heyward & Rayner 2013, 6–8; Simmons 1993, 41). In the light of Kuhn’s and Foucault’s explorations of the theory and history of science, it is not possible any longer to regard scientific claims as the “ultimate truth”, which applies not only to contemporary ecological thinking, but also to theories before the 1970s. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there is no ground left for critique concerning theories and models that proved to be harmful. When the “relativist” poststructuralist philosophy “decentered the human subject from the commanding position it imagined it occupied in the operation of the world” (Conley 2006, 4).

Dominant critical schools, especially new historicism, feminist criticism and postcolonial criticism have exerted an influence on ecocriticism at the initial phase of its appearance as a new cultural discipline; since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century these critical schools have all been determined in their political intentions to unmask and expose the mechanisms of power and exploitation, point out the rhetoric strategies of oppression as well as to map the possibilities of resistance, with regards to every segment of human existence, including race, class, gender, and so forth. In this light, the main objective of eco-cinema-criticism is to expose the mechanisms of power and exploitation behind the relationship of humanity and nature through examining the medial feature of film. Other social forms of exploitation have also been subsumed under the umbrella of ecological problems, so much so that the existence and homogeneity of “humanity” itself have been brought into question (cf. Cudworth 2005, 16; 24–25). As Bookchin complains, it happens less and less frequently even in popular films that for the destruction of nature the whole of the “vague species called

humanity” get accursed “as though people of color were equatable with whites, women with men, the Third World with the First, the poor with the rich, and the exploited with their exploiters” (1987, 4).

Facts show that men and women did not take their share equally from the environmentally harmful processes of production and consumption: that is, regarding their relationship to the environment, people are differentiated by gender (Salleh 1992, 208–209). Due to their reproductive features women in every known civilization have been considered to be closer to nature; thus, their social treatment and the “services” they are socially expected to provide show similar traits with the treatment of and the “services” expected from non-human nature. Throughout the analysis of ecological problems eco-feminism intends to demonstrate that the notion of possession of women is akin to the idea of possession of natural resources, these two processes are considered to be simultaneous. The demand for the subordination of women to men shows a clear connection with the demand for conquering the environment by technological (or spiritual) methods. Traditionally, the “female housework” is considered to be of no value as compared with activities producing surplus beyond self-subsistence that is traditionally permitted to and carried out by men; the “work” done by nature is also considered to be worthless in Western economy, which counts as an expenditure that needs no remuneration — and this is exactly why it can produce profit for its users (Plumwood 2002, 27).

Considering the representation of ecology-related gender division in popular films, most probably its discussion is more frequent than a viewer not so sensitive to ecological and/or feminist problems would anticipate. As I will demonstrate in the chapter entitled *The Monstrous Femininity of Earth*, female protagonists in popular films are often associated with natural forces, which seems to be as much of an unconscious decision on the part of the creators as unintentionally it happens in everyday cultural practices. However, besides pointing out the rhetorical/ideological tradition behind the connection between women and nature, such a criticism

is also suitable for pointing out that the (mostly silent and dark “background”) images of nature in the film are presented indirectly through the female protagonist’s positioning, and the desires or intentions characterizing her or directed towards her figure by other characters. Thus, criticism of these female figures can be understood as criticism of the relationship towards environment, while the utopias/dystopias concerning the changes in the gender regime can be seen as a special ecological utopia — one that clearly signals that the worries and hopes in relation with sustainable society are the projections or sublimations of fears and desires towards changes in gender roles.

David Ingram is the only one among the eco-cinema-critics mentioned so far who is dealing with the gender perspective of the films with environmental themes; as he points out, we can find this interconnection in *The River Wild* (dir. Curtis Hanson, 1994) in the form of the parallel between the thriller-like plot and the nature-problematic appearing only as a background hint. The female protagonist, Gail (Meryl Streep) goes rafting with his teenage son, but they soon are taken hostages by a gang of bank robbers. The criminals want the woman to row downstream with them through a very risky reach of the river in order to escape the police.

As Ingram genuinely shows, the film’s rhetoric is largely based on the parallel drawn between wild water rafting and the control over women: it turns out soon that it is as hard to overcome the woman as it is hard to master the river — water finds its own unexpected ways to flow through, and Gail also finds her own solutions to get rid of the criminals. In the meantime, the pollution and ruining of the intact river also gets mentioned several times, hence it is quite logical to conclude that the criminals’ failure to control the woman allegorizes the modern, exploiting civilization’s demand for

domination over nature and its arrogant self-confidence, as well as the rightful consequences this attitude has led to.

However, it is also part of the movie's rhetoric that Gail successfully manages the river, and this rhetorically induced "community" between woman and river could easily point towards an ecocentric approach, if it wasn't the woman's husband who finally saves the family — that is, if it wasn't for the man's heroism and his cunning idea, the woman's strength and persistence would be worthless. This means that, instead of the ecocentric model, the film advocates the pastoral model: the good shepherd is represented by the husband, who is indispensable in preventing the woman/nature from running into their own destruction. As a matter of course, the film emphasizes the family problematic — according to the dialogues and the plot, the source of the instability of the family's happiness is that the man feels he can't get on in life because his wife is too self-confident and too active. Thus, the ecological message functions as the critique of emancipation: the adherence to traditional patriarchal gender roles does not allow for a more radical ecological model than that of the good shepherd.

However, within the category of "human" it is not only the woman who may represent nature as opposed to the "human" qualities represented by men. A minor character sticks out of the mainly Anglo-Saxon characters of the movie: he is a Native American ranger who wants to help Gail and her "friends". This guy is just as well-meaning and his resistance as ineffective and doomed to failure as his ancestors' resistance was defeated by the white colonizers of America. Although from a postcolonial perspective this would be an interesting point to examine, the question here is whether how does it contribute to the movie's ecocritical aspect?

According to Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, if we want to reconsider and reconfigure humanity's place in nature, we cannot forget to reveal the extent to which the biased construct of the category of „human" is complicit in racial repression from the age of colonialism to our present days, which raises the necessity of interdisciplinary discussion of postcolonial and ecological problems Ecological problems do not affect those countries the



most that are responsible for the destruction; the most vulnerable countries are ex-colonies in the developing world, mainly sub-Saharan Africa. “Impacts are distributed inequitably” (Dryzek, Norgaard & Schlosberg 2013, 78). As Judit Horgas puts it,

It is more probable that, as always throughout human history, only the rich and privileged circles of society manage to avoid the consequences, like me and you, dear reader. For since you are reading this book, certainly you are not illiterate, you went to school, you are drinking clean water, eat more than once a day, you have clothes, medications, maybe a job, a flat and a car, too — thus, considering the entire population of the Earth, you belong to the caste of the privileged. (Horgas 2005, 200)

According to the facts, developed countries are responsible for 70 percent of annual fossil energy consumption, while developing countries, accounting for 75 percent of the world’s population, use only 30 percent. More than a billion people on Earth get less water per day than the amount consumed by a single flush of toilet (Mosey 2009, 67, 69). As Carolyn Merchant writes in her *Radical Ecology*, “[i]n Indonesia, 500.000 acres of rainforest have been converted to eucalyptus plantations to produce toilet paper for North America. Much of the rainforest being slashed in Malaysia is used by Japan to construct throwaway construction forms, boxes for shipping, and disposable chopsticks” (2005, 22).

However, these are not “dull” economic concerns. As Val Plumood demonstrates, the self-definition of Western civilization has always been based on the presence of what is “non-human”, uncivilized, animalistic or beastlike. Indeed, one of the essential features of European invasion and colonization is that foreign lands and their population have been regarded and treated as representatives of the non-human. Alfred Crosby and Richard Grove interpret the environmental impacts of this cultural practice as “environmental imperialism”: this notion conceptualizes the connections between ecological problems and European colonialist efforts, including the expropriation of indigenous lands, as well as the hasty introduction of invasive European animal and plant speci-

es and agricultural techniques leading to catastrophic outcomes. *Avatar* (2009), often compared to *Pocahontas* (1995) and treated as a reinterpretation of *Dancing with Wolves* (1990) and *The Last Samurai* (2003), clearly confronts the ecocentric and anthropocentric community through a colonial/invasionist narrative.

Nevertheless, in films less concerned with colonial history it is also common to combine racial and environmental issues. The situation and the problems of non-human characters and hybrid creatures in monster films and science fiction frequently show the self-justifying rhetoric of human supremacy and the phenomenon of “species-ism” in a distorted mirror. For example, the radical and indefinable racial otherness of the female protagonists in *Alien 4* (1997) or *Solaris* (1972) seems to be closely related to the criticism of science expressed in the movies. The internal motivation of the *Alien 4*’s narrative is the domination, cloning and genetic transformation of dangerous alien creatures, which necessitates the kidnapping and sacrifice of other human beings in order to create an invincible “army” with no human rights to protect privileged human groups. All this perfectly sums up what Huggan and Tiffin call “biocolonisation”, the manifestations of which range from

biopiracy — e.g. the corporate raiding of indigenous natural-cultural property and embodied knowledge — to western-patented genetic modification (the ‘Green Revolution’) and other recent instances of biotechnological suprematism and ‘planetary management’ (Ross 1991) in which the allegedly worldsaving potential of science is seconded for self-serving western needs and political ends. (Huggan & Tiffin 2010, 4)

The plot of the films I will analyze in the last chapters is almost always based on some concrete manifestations of post-industrial “environmental imperialism”. The James Bond-film from 2008, *Quantum Solace* raises the problem of the commodification and political/economic expropriation of drinking water; in *Jurassic World* (2015) the project of genetic modification reaches a worldwide scale both literally and figuratively (as compared with

the previous *Jurassic Parks*); and finally, the series *Stargate: Atlantis* (2004–2009) considers the consequences of the (bio)colonization of an utterly alien galaxy. These films do negotiate the question of “environmental racism” only metaphorically or indirectly — or rather they manage to problematize this issue because they do it metaphorically and indirectly —, shifting the blame of environmental degradation on to other people (Huggan & Tiffin 2010, 4). An appropriate example for this is to accuse poor Third World people for overpopulation and the depletion of natural resources (Schrader-Frechette 2005, 137).

To give a more concrete filmic example, we can think of the mode in which *Gorillas in the Fog* (1988) blames the disgusting hunting habits of the “cruel” black people instead of blaming bio-colonization of Africa for the dying off of primates. In *Stargate: Atlantis*, the cannibalistic alien race called the Wraith seems to be exactly a construction suitable for scapegoating. According to sci-fi traditions, representatives of the Wraiths at first appear to be dangerous and evil entities, therefore deserving extermination. However, as the story progresses, they appear to be predators necessary for the normal functioning of the galaxy’s “ecosystem” that has been in a relative balance for millennia until the appearance of Western space travelers. In the end, the problems originally caused by the Wraith turn out to be of minor importance in comparison to the troubles generated by the (mainly) American newcomers with their attempts to eliminate the Wraiths. Thus, the actions’ of the protagonists are suitable for facing Western audience with a moral dilemma similar to the dilemmas of their own world, since “the responsibility for historical and current emissions lies predominantly with the richer, more powerful nations, [...] the limited evidence on regional impacts suggests that it is poorer nations that are most vulnerable to the worst impacts of climate change” (Gardiner 2010, 90).

Since in some respects both women and people earlier self-evidently labeled as „primitives” are associated with nature in the cultural imaginary, the metaphorical relationship between their

exploitation and that of the natural resources seems palpable. A Marxist or a Foucauldian analysis of power relations *within* our Western societies may be considered less compatible with the goals of ecocriticism — yet this is not the case. Such problems frequently get into the scope of the relatively new discipline of environmental law, especially when an environmental scandal makes it clear that much of the health-damaging effects of environmental pollution have an impact on lower or marginalized classes instead of elite members of power. Although the collection of films examined in this book does not take in social dramas related to environmental law like *Erin Brockovich* or *Silkwood* (1983), traces of Western class relations and class tensions appear in the narrative of several films, and they are always connected to racial oppression and the exploitation of nature simultaneously.

In the vampire society of the highly dystopian *Daybreakers* (2009) the scarcity of food — i.e. the insufficiency of human blood — as well as the ensuing starvation and economic crisis can easily be related to the imminent ecological crisis, while this scenery also recalls the historical circumstances prior to World War II. Although the film focuses primarily on the conflict between vampires and the hunted human beings, it is also highlighted that this “crisis” does not affect every vampire *equally*. Mainly it is the “working class” of vampire society that is afflicted with starvation, and since in the fictitious world the starving vampires display more and more animalistic features, they are proclaimed to be enemies of society and executed by the leaders — so that the remaining elite could continue to live on the waning resources. The sensitive presentation of this “social” problem prompts the viewer to sympathize with humans not only *because of* the anthropocentric bias, but paradoxically *despite of* this anthropocentric bias, since the lethal “vampire-centric” ideology of the vampires works as the distorted mirror of anthropocentrism that exposes the grave repercussions of the double oppression imposed on the environment and the “lower” classes of vampire society endangering the survival of both.

In the film, the species of the *homo sapiens* is represented by vampires, while the category of “nature” is represented by human

beings — this contraposition itself is highly suggestive of the difficulties in defining these very categories. As a matter of fact, ecocriticism does not really intend to bridge this difficulty, rather, it is concerned with enlarging and emphasizing the problem, since it is the juxtaposition of nature and culture that is identified as the real source of all the ills (Burchett 2014, 127). In addition to the fact that the category of the “humane as such” does not entirely fit women, Third World people and members of the working class, what has also been proved recently is that non-human nature cannot be as easily separated from the “human” sphere as it had been thought for centuries. As Linda Lear writes in the preface to Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, “[a]ll forms of life are more alike than different” (Lear 2002, xvi). Thus, the genetic divergence is smaller not only in the case of humans and apes than between apes and other types of monkeys but:

We have long known that we exist in close alliance with some other species, such as the intestinal bacteria that assist our digestive efforts. But it now appears that some of the organelles in our cells are quite as independent as the chloroplasts in plants. [...] We cannot exist without them, and yet they may not strictly be ‘us.’ Does this mean that we must regard ourselves as colonies? [...] Where do we draw the line between one creature and another? Where does one stop and the other begin? Is there even a boundary between you and the non-living world, or will the atoms of this page be part of you tomorrow? In short, how can you make any sense of the concept of man as a discrete entity? How can the proper study for man be man if it is impossible for man to exist out of context? In light of this, the desire of some, particularly within the social sciences and humanities, to deal exclusively with the fragment of reality they term ‘human’ is nonsense. (Evernden 1993, 39–40)

The ecocentric or systemic view of nature rejects the notion of the human subject who takes pride in free will, detaches him/herself from the environment and places him/herself above nature, which notion is sustainable neither theoretically, nor ecologically or morally.



The continuous headway of this idea can be detected in films as well: as Murray and Heumann demonstrate, the place of the lone, individualistic heroes of earlier action movies is taken over by the “eco-hero” who is part of a community and/or fighting for the well-being of a local purpose or collective instead of championing abstract ideas or the “whole world.” The new human ideal is not “the lord of the beasts”, but the human actor who is “one of them”, exemplified by the reinterpreted story of the “white monkey” narrated in the latest Tarzan movie, *The Legend of Tarzan* (2016). According to the Cartesian concept of the “subject”, the individuality of the self-reflexive human being existing in itself must be expressed *as separate from* his/her environment; this “subject” is ecologically as much guilty and harmful as the one depicted by poststructuralist studies participating in sustaining and legitimizing the oppressive dualistic structures of society.

This idea also points out that poststructuralism, an influential trend in Hungarian literary theory during the 1990s and a discipline that also informed my way of thinking, may not be radically distant from the present orientation of my interest. Poststructuralism detects a *modus operandi* in *language* that is similar to the functioning attributed to *nature* by ecology. For example, deconstruction considers logocentrism originating from Plato as the main feature of “Western” thinking along the idea of the human subject’s being cast into language and his/her rejection of being controlled by language, as well as the illusion of the Cartesian ego based on these beliefs. Significant representatives of eco-philosophy such as Ruether and Val Plummer also regard the dualistic tradition as being accomplice in constructing the perception of nature as an objectified materiality separated from the intellect, which makes the Man of Mind turn a blind eye to the interconnections of the vital processes of nature which s/he is nevertheless part of. While the different schools of poststructuralism expressing ideological criticism have revealed the logic of oppression and power abuses working in the (phal)logocentric systems of binary oppositions, deep ecology and eco-feminism (in particular Karen Warren and Greta Gaard)

disclose the same structure in the functioning of modern concepts of culture/science. It is precisely the objectification of nature and the reductive approach to its functioning that has created forms of economic and political activity leading to profound changes in the system's functioning so much that in the future it can cease to be a life-sustaining structure.

Environmentalism criticism, while opposing itself to poststructuralism, frequently refers to the fact that the constructionist principle of 'creating' reality, which undoubtedly permeates almost every school of poststructuralism, ignores the stubborn facts of nature and biology. If we think that „knowledge of the world exists only through mediated structures, particularly those of the media itself, reflecting postmodern theorists' assertion that the world possesses no intrinsic, unmediated essence [...] then this belief will ultimately lull us into a state of numbness by distracting us from the material and social conditions” (Rust 2014, 552). In fact, however, (post)modern theory does not consider the facts of natural sciences nor the conditions of mediatized structures to be external, objectively measurable entities existing in themselves *outside* the structure. According to András Lányi, a Hungarian representative of ecological philosophy and politics, it is misleading to talk about “environment” at all. In line with his phenomenological approach, “the environment of man is the realm of language” (Lányi 2010, 35), as far as it is language where human beings are “living within the world” in the Heideggerian sense, which means that they constantly reconstitute themselves in a way where they “get out of themselves” during their communicating with others. Lányi thinks that this notion, which has led to the much condemned “linguistic turn” and the preference for textual analyses in cultural theories (seemingly at the expense of “reality”), could (and should) become the basis for the responsibility and commitment to nature. The “social constructedness” and “fictitious being” of nature in this sense does not mean that nature as such does not exist; what it means is that “how we act towards the non-human is a consequence of our beliefs both about ourselves and what it is we are acting upon (Simmons 1993, 1). As Erazim

Kohák puts it, this is not a matter of dealing with nature “as we interpret it” in contrast with nature “as it really is.” Nature as experience is how nature really is. Experience is not an external afterthought, an ethereal observer or a passive waxen tablet. [...] It is the putative “nature in itself” that is a theoretical abstraction from the sole experiential given, nature as experience. (Kohák 1998, 258.)

However, the current understanding of nature as a network is highly consistent with the poststructuralist concept of language as the system or network of differences. What is more, the dominance-principled imperialist view of nature inducing the “ecological crisis” can also be perceived as the economic version of “Western” and (post)capitalistic mentality as it has been described by poststructuralism. Of course, the idea of the “net of life” is not the result of poststructuralism — this understanding was widespread in the 18<sup>th</sup> century already, springing from the antique notion of the chain of life (Worster 1977, 47). However, it is worth meditating on the fact that the “decentralized” being of this network has become emphasized only recently — precisely at the moment when poststructuralism has also begun articulating its linguistic philosophies. As William Ophuls points out in the footsteps of Fritjof Capra, this “systemic approach”, the overshadowing of mechanic cause and effect relations postulated in nature by the incalculable, chaotically self-regulating organic constructedness can be detected in all fields of science in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: in the “hard” sciences of physics, astronomy and biology as well as in the “not so hard” psychology. Ophuls calls this the new “system paradigm” (Capra 1983, 265–267; Ophuls 2011, 108); this paradigm change, however, has been completed by a third factor defining this era, namely, the *new media*’s rise into power, which has resulted in the coming into the limelight of the “network” model (Castells 1996, 121–122).

As George Landow put it around the turn of the millennium, “hypertext, an information technology consisting of individual blocks of text, or lexias, and the electronic links that join them, has much in common with recent literary and critical theory” which is

more than mere contingency, as poststructuralist theories “appear to find their instantiation in this new information technology” (Landow 2006, 1). The trendiest concepts of literary theories throughout the ‘90s, such as the reference (link), the net (web), and the texture (text) are perceived by Landow as forerunners of the idea of the hypertext, or to say the least, they are concepts that have become fashionable due to the novel and ever-spreading mechanism of the textual stream presented by computer technology. The rise of the idea of a “networked” environment also owes much to digital technology, from the complexity and acceleration of mathematical calculations, through matrices and simulations translating them into visual connections, to DNA-mapping viewed as the “program of life” (Castells 1996, 72–75). At the same time, for today’s people the everyday routine has become unthinkable without the global information network and exchange that has come to be the central trope within the most diverse disciplines in recent years (Heise 2008, 54; 65). Is it possible that it is the *new media* that mediates between poststructuralism and ecocriticism?

Although I will discuss the relationship between new media and ecocriticism in connection with *Avatar*, perhaps it is worth mentioning here that *Matrix* (dir. Lana Wachowski & Lilly Wachowski, 1999) may be seen as an example for the overlap and mutual influence between the disciplines in question. In *Matrix*, the protagonist guerrilla team is fighting in a virtual space with intelligent programs that are breeding and exploiting the enslaved and anaesthetized humans whose minds imagine they are living their “everyday” lives in the virtual reality of the “Matrix”. People who have escaped from the slavery of machines or who awakened from their artificial coma try to survive in the desolate post-apocalyptic material world. The “Matrix” program run by machines represents the algorithmic mode of operation and network structure of the *new media* — which is (seemingly) a purely technical construction and radically different from the organic functioning principles of reality.

In the film it often happens that a programmer explains to another person — and also to the viewer — what the so called “reality” looks like when it is translated into the “Matrix” program language. For example, such is the figure of the “lady in red” designed and uploaded by a programmer of the guerrilla squad hacking the “Matrix”. We can follow the virtual woman’s appearance in the graphic images simulating reality (for those who live in the “Matrix”) and simultaneously we see how her appearance looks like in the form of the program language (seen by the programmer outside the “Matrix”). While in the simulated world we understand ourselves and others as apparently distinct entities, the images of the program reveal that these are alphanumeric signs moving in waves: for the audience there is no radical difference between the signs that stand for the “woman” and the signs standing for the rest of the “Matrix”. The figure “in fact” is not so radically separated from the “environment” as we imagine it within the Matrix. What is more, we see the configuration of the signs as a *woman* only there, although her figure obtains the definitive marks required for projection from the program. Since the lady in red is interesting precisely because of her sensuality (that can only be experienced within the “Matrix”), her appearance — alongside the concept of the “self” — easily recalls the constructionist concept of “gender”, which tries to describe the relationship between “gender” interpreted as a culturally variable spectacle, role and behavior, and its embodiment in biological (sexual) organs (cf Mathews 1991, 75.)

There is a similar scene in *Matrix: Reloaded* (2003), too, where the program of virtual reality camouflaged as a Mafioso demonstrates what happens when a woman in the Matrix — or on the screen — seems to be sexually aroused. In this “realistic” simulation we see that the woman eats a drug-soaked piece of cake and she gets overrun by heated passion. The structural model of the same scene, however, reveals how all this looks from the inside, how the particles that make up the woman interact, how can the chemical reaction — the biological basis for sexual excitement — be conceived as the manipulation of a network structure. The

unveiling of the “physical reality” behind the figure of the woman as a sheer algorithm emphasizes, on the one hand, the illusory nature of the woman as reality, while, on the other hand, it also demonstrates the new concept of the programmed and systemic nature of biological reality. In both cases, the “Matrix”, in creating a true-to-nature effect, stresses the difference between social experience and the underlying reality, and with this it simultaneously recalls poststructuralist theories about the network-like structure of language and the illusory nature of textually constructed reality, as well as the latest ecological principles. The woman’s representation through the programming language is very similar to what Harold Fromm describes the image of the individual inseparable from environment “as we know today”. What is more, Fromm uses the latest *digital* film-making techniques to capture this image, comparing it to the “time-lapse video” for a better understanding:

The ‘environment,’ as we now apprehend it, runs right through us in endless waves, and if we were to watch ourselves via some ideal microscopic time-lapse video, we would see water, air, food, microbes, toxins entering our bodies as we shed, excrete, and exhale our processed materials back out. (Fromm 2009, 95; in Alaimo 2010, 11)

Virtual reality may be just an illusion, but at times it may represent the biological reality more vividly and more faithfully than everyday life experience itself. Or, at least it presents everyday experience in such a way that may lead to a more environmentally sustainable environmental policy than the self-driven individualistic consumer ideology based on the notion of autonomous bodies and minds. In any case, as Mark Buchanan wrote in 2002, “over the past five years, sociologists, physicists, biologists, and other scientists have turned up numerous unexpected connections between the workings of the human world and the functioning of other seemingly unrelated things: from the living cell and the global ecosystem to the Internet and the human brain”(1). Poststructuralism has added to the list of such distant things the notion of the text, and based on the “small world”

principle of networks (Buchanan 2002, 2–3) it is almost necessary that from the ontology of the text we get to ecology “in a few steps”.

According to the poststructuralist theory of language, the basis of the network-like texture of the text as well as of the linguistic nature of the world is the fact that signifiers refer to signifiers, and not to the “things” of the world. As a result, the only possible way for us to talk (and think) about reality is in metaphorical terms. Some see it as the postmodern chance for “endless interpretability” without any stakes, and it is also possible that some readers will consider the interpretations of this book as the manifestations of this kind (since the majority of the films interpreted here thematize ecology only in metaphorical terms). Nevertheless, some ecologists thought already in the 1990s that all this can be considered as the mental equivalent of the system of interconnections found in the environment; as Fritjof Capra explains, the metaphor is the “language of nature”, since it happens exactly through metaphors that our ideas build up a system of interconnections that is similar to the “network” of nature, and “[m]etaphors are therefore a vital way of understanding nature, developing empathy and engendering environmental behavior” (Chatalos 2012, 439).

Perhaps this has also contributed to the fact that the ecological paradigm has not left the great minds of poststructural philosophy untouched. In 1997, Derrida gave a lecture entitled *The Animal That I Am* in which he deconstructs the binary opposition of animal and man on the pretext of a cat gazing at the naked body of the philosopher (Derrida) in the bathroom, which leads the philosopher to meditate not only on the implications of the shame he felt, but also on the nature of self-consciousness, the self-contradictory definition of “animal”, as well as the difference between cats evoked by philosophy and the irreducible otherness of “real” cats. Derrida’s text has become a reference point to ecocritics responsive to the philosophy of language, yet Donna Haraway is not very much taken by the essay in her highly influential book *When Species Meet*. In her view, Derrida makes his routine circles in order to proclaim the animal an instance of the Other and to raise the related

question of philosophy. Nevertheless, “he knew nothing more from, about, and with the cat at the end of the morning than he knew at the beginning, no matter how much better he understood the root scandal as well as the enduring achievements of his textual legacy” (Haraway 2008, 22).

The eco-philosophical contemplations of Deleuze and Guattari in their *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) also meant a provocation for Haraway. Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “becoming” — a neologism that aims to change the Western perception of nature as being a set of objectively classifiable, static and inanimate object by the associating nature with the dynamic verbal conjunction of becoming, a constant transformation of entities in the living system of nature — has become an even more fundamental reading in ecocriticism. For Ivakhiv, Dodds, or Lippit the notion of “becoming” is a downright revolutionary idea. According to their followers, the ecology imagined by Deleuze and Guattari “helps break free of the postmodernist trap by rethinking sense and reference” (Dodds 2012, 127). According to Haraway, however, no matter how credible their theory might be, their book reduces the notion of “becoming-animal” to the opposition of wild versus domesticated. Statements like “[a]nyone who likes cats or dogs is a fool” are especially irritating Haraway, who deems the book highly controversial since “no reading strategies can mute the scorn for the homely and the ordinary” in it. (2008, 29). And indeed, Deleuze and Guattari’s view might be rather difficult to reconcile with Haraway’s conception that considers dog agility, a playful obstacle riding done together with one’s dog (and Haraway’s favorite sport) to be the *sine qua non* of cross-species communication and mutual interdependence.

### **What to expect as a reader?**

In this book, my analysis of the selected films will not concentrate exclusively on theoretical and philosophical aspects, but neither do I want to stop short at pointing out the obvious in these movies, nor to put them into a historical context, as superficially I have already done so. I intend to provide ecocritical readings of the chosen films,



however, the “ecocritical” does not necessarily mean that I will be highlighting the representation of the exploitation of environment or its critique. I am going to analyze those preliminary ideas, conventions, narratives, and rhetorical strategies that determine the filmic representation of the environment as well as the changes occurring in these representations. The question I am trying to answer here is why our future-related hopes and fears do concentrate around the visual representation of our relationship to environment. In order to do this, my approach will not be restricted to film theory or aesthetics; I will rely on the field of the so-called environmental humanities that connects diverse ecological aspects from the discipline of humanities (Rose, van Dooren, Chrulew, Kearnes & O’Gorman 2012, 1–5; Sörlin 2012, 788–789) in order to widen the horizon of interpretations from environmental history to ecopsychology.

The analytical method I prefer the most is akin to Murray and Heumann’s strategy of interpretation they apply in their *Ecology and Popular Film* (2009); besides the examination of films that are based on obvious natural themes or direct ecological questions — as it has been recommended to be the proper object of study by Lawrence Buell, and also preferred by Ingram and Ivakhiv —, Murray and Heumann draw into their analysis popular films, too. These films are similar to the objects of Brereton’s analysis, since they engage with environmental problems only in small details, in the background, as a secondary thread of the analysis (see Willoquet-Maricondi 2010, 3). However, in contrast to Brereton, Murray and Heumann do not separate the environmental issues from the film’s theme or narrative; on the contrary, they attempt to prove that the apparently schematic action sequences and the conventional narrative patterns gain additional meanings in the context of the environmental details. The deliberate involvement of issues related to environmental attitudes therefore entails the discovery of a hidden structure in the films; while the working of this hidden structure does not necessitate the raising of questions related to environment, they are necessary in order to awaken the audience’s consciousness.

The analyses found in this book will borrow ideas from all of the prominent critics mentioned so far. I label these critics *ecocritical* in the sense that they examine long-established patterns of man's relation to nature, as well as in the sense that they are working for the "evolution" of an ecocentric viewpoint and seeking critical attitudes towards the exploitation of nature in these films. In addition to the strategy employed by Murray and Heumann's analysis, I interrogate popular feature films where it is primarily the film-language, the rhetoric, the visual connotations and the intertextual allusions that invoke and represent contemporary ecological and environmental discourses. As for the method I would be willing to identify with the description of Bordwell's "symtomatic interpretation" (43-46), applying structuralist, feminist, postcolonial, psychoanalytic or biopolitical approaches depending on the films examined. The "syndromes" behind the "symptoms" of the films analyzed are to be searched for not in the mind of the creator or the viewer but in an intermediate space, the cultural imagery (Yar 2-3) or cultural (un)conscious we all share (although in a different extent)

In the next chapter, which is rather the second, more problem- and analysis-oriented part of this introduction, I will illustrate my views about the popular movie representation of ecological problems through the examination of several new films, as well as through reviewing some older ones that have already been approached from an ecocritical point of view. These films demonstrate the indirect and viewer-dependent representation of environmental problems, which can also be reinterpreted with the help of ecopsychology. The question is whether is it possible that the rhetorical specificities of these representations are motivated by the psychological difficulties of facing such challenges? Is it possible that these films support our psychic defense against man-induced environmental threats of our future? Are they the manifestations of the much disapproved and parodied phenomena of climate-denial, or they may induce active commitment towards a sustainable world? As I will try to demonstrate, certain rhetorical tools, for example obscure allusions to the ecological paradigm, the

retorical trope of personification, and the application of the redemption narrative — this time without discussing whether these are intentional or not — can be very suitable to incorporate ecological problems in a film without causing the viewers to realize that they had been confronted with such questions. It is not yet proved whether such a strategy has positive effects. Nonetheless, I will attempt to show that this tactic is more frequently used than we would think, and it is used in rather unexpected cases. Besides the classic and much debated films like *The Omega Man* (1971) and *The Day of Animals* (1977), it is two films from 2016, *The 5<sup>th</sup> Wave* and *Moana* that will serve to prove my point.

In the following chapter I will discuss the apocalyptic narrative in Aronofsky's *Noah* (2014) and Jarmusch's *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013) where I will examine the “newly acclaimed” ecocritical tone in contemporary interpretations of the Fall. Jarmusch's film, rather surprisingly, features vampires as its lead characters, which makes it reasonable in this chapter to take a closer look at the figure of the vampire in relation to environmental discourses. As I intend to demonstrate, this shift is closely connected to the revival of guilt felt because of our pernicious battenning on nature. The next part turns to the cinematic representation of the well-known cultural relation drawn between womanhood and nature. The chapter entitled *The Monstrous Femininity of Earth* continues the discussion of *Armageddon* with the analysis of its feminized disaster, and goes on to examine the representation of nature in the “background” of the visions of women's power and vice versa, as well as the kinds of gender casting that is supposed to correlate with an ecocentric approach — the range of the films examined includes the latest adaptation of *The Wicker Man* (2006), the TV series *Under the Dome* (2013–2015), and *Avatar* (2009). The chapter *Gynecology* continues with comparing the different parts of the *Alien* franchise from an ecofeminist perspective, also touching upon one of the earliest achievements of this critical view found in Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972). Then I will turn to three less “popular” though still big budget films: Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011), Jeff Nichols' *Shelter* (2011), and Todd Haynes's *Safe* (1995),

which all display the relationship between psychological and physical illnesses in a degrading natural environment.

The chapter titled *The Raptor Whisperer* examines the megaproduction *Jurassic World* (2015), focusing in particular on the latest animal training methods featured in the film, which reflects the recent change in Western man's relationship to animals. However, in the light of Foucault's theory, this does not necessarily lead to the creation of a more ecocentric society, since the "more humane" treatment of animals seems to be modelled on the apparently more moderate, but actually more effective and manipulative power technologies that aim to control the human members of society.

Finally, the last chapter, *Energy to the Shields!* deals with contemporary science fiction and adventure films such as the series *Stargate: Atlantis* (2004–2009), the movie *Interstellar* (2014), or *Transcendence* (2014), which all enter into a dialogue with current sustainability debates even when they are not "cli-fis", that is, fashionable climate change dystopias. The genre is already indicative of the creative power of the new "ecological paradigm", the effect of which is to be explored here through examples of the 21<sup>st</sup> century cinema.

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