The Unimaginable: Climate Change and Commercial Cinema

Alexander Lane

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Sponsor: Dr. Nathan Holmes

Second Reader: Dr. Gregory Taylor

"It is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism."

(Frederic Jameson, 2003)[1]

So where then, is Climate Change in cinema?

It is a decidedly interesting moment to be speaking about Climate Change and commercial cinema.[2] Quite recently, wildfires of unprecedented scale engulfed much of the state of California, and the record-setting destruction those fires visited on the place were certainly exacerbated by the effects of Climate Change.[3] Amongst deaths, the loss of homes and communities, the loss of wildlife habitats, and other tragedies, one incident of lesser impact appeared on the pages of the Hollywood trade publication *Variety*: the burning of Paramount Ranch.[4] This studio-owned site of a wild-west era town, built as a film set, was largely destroyed. It had hosted television and movie productions from the classic *Gunsmoke* to the modern big-budget spectacle of *Westworld.* Climate Change, it seems, has very much arrived at Hollywood's door.

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[1] Qtd. in Erik Swyngedouw, "Apocalypse Forever? Post-Political Populism and the Spectre of Climate Change." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 27, no. 2-3, 2010, 213–232.

[2] Note that Climate Change will be capitalized throughout this essay. If we bother to capitalize World Wars, the Industrial Revolution, and so on, so we should capitalize in this case, as we do not capitalize every "ice age," but do capitalize *the* Ice Age, which refers to a particular geological period. Climate Change very clearly refers to something different and far more specific than a mere juxtaposition of the words 'climate' and 'change' can possibly connote. It should be clear that we are not referring to a past climate change, nor any climate-changing phenomena that is not definitively the present, anthropogenic, and potentially catastrophic Climate Change.

[3] Alejandra Borunda, "See How a Warmer World Primed California for Large Fires," 2018, *National Geographic*, 10 Jan. 2019, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/2018/11/climate-change-california-wildfire/

[4] Pat Saperstein, "'Westworld' Location at Paramount Ranch Burns Down," 2018, *Variety,* 10 Jan. 2018, https://variety.com/2018/film/news/westworld-paramount-ranch-western-town-woolsey-fire-1203024785/

This brings us to our question: if Climate Change is clearly becoming an unavoidable and pervasive feature of our everyday world, both in rhetorical and material spheres, is this fact reflected in popular commercial cinema, and if so, what can that representation tell us about Climate Change in the popular imagination (or what Jameson has called the political unconscious)?[5]

One might reasonably expect that it is not the job of commercial cinema to save the world from its most disastrous, present, and imminent crisis. Though Hollywood and productions from abroad have surely meaningfully and usefully interpolated major world crises in the past (Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* of 1940, even before Pearl Harbor, comes to mind), and commercial cinema has taken to addressing environmental concerns frequently (we recall *Soylent Green* 1973, and more recently in 2008, *WALL-E,* among many examples), and surely big-budget cinema is no stranger to visions of the apocalypse (from *Armageddon* in 1998, all the way back to early Hollywood SciFi films), Climate Change has been addressed by name in very few widely-distributed narrative features.[6] This is not to discount the efforts of emerging cinematic practices from the developing world, which perhaps show promise in meaningful confrontation of Climate Change.[7] It is also not to wholly discount the Climate Change or environmental documentary.[8] But here we are interested in mass culture, and fictional narratives exclusively. These are likely the best view into the political unconscious, as they are intended for and distributed to the largest possible audience globally. So it may not be commercial cinema's

[5] Colin McCabe, Preface, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* by Fredric Jameson, Indiana Univ. Press, 1992, x-xi.
[6] We will specify what is meant by 'addressed by name' in a later passage.
[7] Tommy Gustafsson and Pietari Kaapa, *Transnational Ecocinema*, Intellect, 2013.
[8] The pedantic approach is not our interest here. But there is evidence to suggest it is ineffective as a call to action in any case: Maria Sakellari, "Cinematic Climate Change, a Promising Perspective on Climate Change Communication." *Public Understanding of Science*, vol. 24, no. 7, Oct. 2015, 827–841.

job to address Climate Change as a crisis, or communicate anything in particular about the matter, but we expect to find out something about Climate Change as a phenomena rendered in culture, and therefore the collective imagination.

Even if it were the job of commercial cinema to confront Climate Change, it's hard to imagine a summer blockbuster as the the most persuasive or likely means of calling us all to action. Not only is it a complicated and inherently political subject matter, but on the whole, it's kind of a bummer - not the typical fodder of box-office gold. It is a difficult thing to figure in any media, full stop, but all the more difficult to figure in a way that provides the escapism or modes of desire and satisfaction that have always been commercial cinema's undertaking. But there have been a few attempts at such a project, or perhaps attempts to capitalize on the fact that Climate Change has at least entered the public consciousness at the most basic level of mere awareness. That basic awareness, whether one claims to 'believe' the scientific evidence and so on, has created a need for interpretation. In essence, our question is how has Climate Change entered the social totality, in Jameson's sense of the term?[9] Climate Change is ever-present. As Timothy Morton describes, it has interjected itself in our most mundane daily calcululations (should I bring my own bags to the grocery store, etc.?).[10] But our concern is not the microcosmic but the macrocosmic - where and how does Climate Change find its way into the political unconscious? And where does postmodern, late capitalist ideology want to place it exactly? What we wish to examine here is whether fictional cinematic endeavors have helped or

[9] Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*. Indiana Univ. Press, 1992., 2-3.
[10] Alex Blasdel, "'A Reckoning for our Species,' the Philosopher Prophet of the Anthropocene," 2017, *The Guardian,* 10 Jan. 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/15/timothy-morton-anthropocene-philosopher

hindered the process of bringing Climate Change into the collective consciousness in a way that might spur all of us into a useful level of consciousness, or indeed action as we might optimistically hope them to, and as some have claimed they have done - or do they do something else altogether?[11]

Today, of course we ascertain from a quick glance around us that the mere basic awareness of Climate Change has been more paralyzing than motivating on a collective or social scale. And in the United States, the facts are often met with pure denialism, especially by those in power.[12] Further, among the general public in the United States, the view that Climate Change is happening and requires immediate action, is nowhere near universal.[13] The US is the critical sphere here as the world's largest contributor of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere (per capita, and by a distance), and the world's most important peddler of commercial cinema.[14] So it goes without saying, that we all know well that little has been done at any level to mitigate the effects of Climate Change as well as its ultimate causes. To say nothing of action, it seems that at the level of the political unconscious in the first place, Climate Change is largely absent, and any sense of urgency is anathema. It's the proverbial elephant in the room, or to borrow a phrase

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[11] The phrase 'as some have claimed they have done' will be addressed later.
[12] Dana Nuccitelli, "Trump's Disbelief Won't Stop Dangerous Climate Change," 2018, *The Guardian,* 10 Jan. 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/dec/05/trumps-disbelief-wont-stop-dangerous-climate-change
[13] "Meet the Press December 30, 2018," NBC, WNBC, New York, 30 Dec. 2018, Television. (transcript available here: https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/meet-press-december-30-2018-n951406)
[14] "Each Country's Share of CO2 Emissions," 2018, Union of Concerned Scientists, 10 Jan. 2019, https://www.ucsusa.org/global-warming/science-and-impacts/science/each-countrys-share-of-co2.html#.XDepNFxKi00

from Naomi Klein, "climate change is the fight of our lives- yet we can hardly bear to look at it." [15] So what then, have cinematic representations of Climate Change done?

Philosopher and cinephile Slavoj Zizek, speaking in the documentary *Examined Life,* problematizes Climate Change beyond the current American phenomena of denialism: "We all know what danger we are in… But why don't we do anything about it? It is, I think, a nice example of what in psychoanalysis we call disavowal.[16] The logic is that of 'I know very well, but I act as if I don't know'." He continues, referring to the phenomena of engaging intellectually with the problems of ecology, then going outside and seeing nature in its splendor; "I simply do not believe that this can be destroyed. We are not wired to even imagine something like that. It's in a way, unimaginable."[17] So here we see that even those who accept the thoroughly vetted scientific consensus on the matter rationally still have much reckoning to do.

We all know, yet we act as though we do not, both as a large, organized society, and much of the time at the level of the individual. It is no surprise that commercial cinema should reproduce this disavowal. Because this cinema is so deeply bound to reproduce or reinforce capitalist ideology, it must also reproduce Climate Change disavowal. It must fail to imagine Climate Change in a way that defies what Jameson calls 'master narratives.'[18] Rather, we should expect this cinema not to be critical, but to supply our imaginations with a 'cognitive map' (a

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[15] Naomi Klein, "Climate Change is the Fight of Our Lives - Yet We Can Hardly Bear to Look at It," 2014, *The Guardian,* 10 Jan. 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/23/climate-change-fight-of-our-lives-naomi-klein

[16] Disavowal as a cinematic phenomenon is theorized in Christian Metz's *The Imaginary Signifier*, and based on Freud's original theorization of *Verleugnung.*

[17] *Examined Life,* Directed by Astra Taylor, Sphinx Productions, 20 November 2009 (Zizek's section is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRMUhZTz924*)*

[18] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Cornell University Press, 2014, 13.

Jamesonian term again) that affirms our lack of action.[19] In other words, to make a commercial Climate Change film is to do something worse than nothing at all. Note that the structure does not take the form of 'Climate Change isn't real, isn't happening, or isn't caused by human activity.' Rather, the critical part of the disavowal is that we "act as if we don't know." We predict, in fact, that the more a film engages with Climate Change, or represents it directly, and posits 'we know this is happening presently or will happen in the future,' the more it *must* therefore disavow that we ought to do anything. It must, because anything else would be beyond our imagining, incomprehensible, terrifying, and unpleasurable, and ultimately therefore unmarketable.

This is not to say that the unimaginability of Climate Change is itself the heart of the matter. We are not suggesting here either that Hollywood has a distaste for environmentalism (quite the contrary in many ways), or that some director is embroiled in some Climate Change denial public relations conspiracy. Rather, we harken back to the Fredric Jameson quote "It is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.'[20] It is well understood that commercial cinema reproduces the 'logic of late capitalism' in myriad ways, a discourse well-trodden by Zizek, Jameson, and many others. So cinema is the emblem and the ready example of this lack of imagination. But what of the real economic sphere? Recent studies conducted by even the United Nations (not exactly the World's most radical entity) have acknowledged that to plan for societies that might stand a chance at coping with Climate Change is to embrace an overhaul of the world's economic systems.[21] And of course, we all know this

[19] McCabe, xiv-xv.
[20] Qtd. in Swyngedouw, 217.
[21] This is assertion is based on this report: *Global Sustainable Development Report 2019,* The Group of Independent Scientists, 14 Aug. 2018, https://bios.fi/bios-governance_of_economic_transition.pdf, 10 Jan.

intuitively - that capitalism is the defining feature of present day experience and it is incompatible with a world in which Climate Change (along with many other ecological problems and countless social injustices) is effectively confronted. So the failure to imagine Climate Change as a serious threat to all human existence is not about Climate Change per se, but rather a failure to imagine the end of capitalism. To put it more simply, if evading the end of the world entails that we end capitalism, we must pretend the world is not ending. The failure to imagine the end of capitalism is in this sense also the failure to properly and truly imagine the real and impending end of the world.

Jameson reminds us of Althusser's definition of ideology: "the Imaginary relationship of the subject to its Real conditions of existence." If cinema can tell us something about the Imaginary in relation to the Real, how does it tell us what we have discovered about the end of the world?

How to talk about the End of the World

We'll begin here with a brief discussion of existing strategies for engaging the problem of Climate Change's actual ubiquity, and its relative absence in cinema. The most thoroughly developed approach is undoubtedly ecocriticism, with its own branch of cinematic inquiry which has identified a cinematic practice centered around our relationship to nature, dubbed

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2019., which is largely based on: Charles Hall and Kent Klitgaard, *Energy and the Wealth of Nations: Understanding the Biophysical Economy*, 2014, Springer.

'ecocinema,' a topic which will be revisited.[22] In *Inhospitable World*, Jennifer Fay dismisses this approach swiftly, at least as far as it relates to cinema.

> Whereas ecocriticism often attends to our planetary emergency as a corruption of a presumed natural place or a crisis that demands sustainable models… the episodes in this book emphasize our always unnatural and unwelcoming environment as a matter of production, a willed and wanted milieu, however harmful, that is inseparable from but also made perceivable through film... Thus, not only is cinema like the Anthropocene in its uncanny aesthetic effects… cinema helps us to see the Anthropocene as aesthetic practice.[23]

With this reasoning, Fay is in clear agreement with that of Timothy Morton, in his piece *Hyperobjects.* The term 'hyperobjects' is not only the title, it refers to a class of 'things' "that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans," and thus difficult or impossible to comprehend - Climate Change being the foremost example. For Morton, this is the moment anticipated by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* the moment where our very devastation of the planet has given us an unprecedented awareness of our power within it, and that this is revisited upon us in that it permeates all we experience, and has made us aware that we were never separate from our environment at all.[24] In the cases of both Fay and Morton, speaking of cinema and of the real world respectively, the false human/nature dichotomy is defeated. Instead, we get a figuration along the lines of 'aesthetic practice is fundamental to the Anthropocene, and

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[22] Sean Cubitt, et al., editors. *Ecocinema Reader: Theory and Practice*. Routledge, 2012.
[23] Jennifer Fay, *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene*. Oxford University Press, 2018, 4.
[24] Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press, 2014. 1-30.

fundamentally human, and given that humans are not segregate from nature, neither is aesthetic practice.' The world is, then, how we want it to be, or how it wants itself to be, in a sense, and cinema cannot divorce itself from this. Here, we might conclude that there cannot be a 'nature' cinema, but also that all cinema is fundamentally 'Climate Change cinema,' but that near-tautology can't tell us anything new. So where to go?

Ecocriticism, where Climate Change is concerned, immediately falls into the trap about which Zizek warns, that of imagining a permanent nature that is seemingly indestructible, because its essence is seperate from all that is 'human,' and will outlast us. This notion is certainly attractive and powerful, but ultimately false and problematic. It it precisely the human/nature dichotomy around which ecocriticism is centered that spells its undoing as a Climate Change response. In *Examined Life,* Zizek puts it thusly, while standing in front of a waste-sorting facility with a yellow high-visibility vest:

> What we should do to confront properly the threat of ecological catastrophe is not all this new age stuff, to break out of this technological manipulative mold, and to find our roots in nature, but- on the contrary, to cut off even more these roots in nature. We need more alienation from our life-world. We should become more artificial.[25]

What is meant here is that nature's destruction is too traumatic to engage. We ought to keep to a rational distance, where trauma is not a factor. This is well exemplified in the pseudo-documentary *Age of Stupid*, where a man campaigning to build wind turbines in the UK

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[25] *Examined Life*

is met with NIMBY-ish resistors who nonetheless proclaim their environmentally friendly bona fides. "What it comes down to, is that people don't want to spoil the view."[26]

So given this prescription, we concern ourselves with what we mean precisely by Climate Change cinema, since at this juncture 'ecocinema' or a cinema concerned with nature is unsatisfactory as far as being a place to genuinely and precisely locate Climate Change in the political unconscious. Surely it is insufficient to say that we're theorizing cinema that expressly enunciates the terms 'Climate Change' or 'global warming.' Rather, we wish to theorize cinema that deploys, as a major part of its *telos,* or purpose, Climate Change as a signifier, and to determine what exactly is signified since, as Morton claims, Climate Change resists any traditional categorization.[27] What is signified is not always strictly 'the phenomena of greenhouse gases increasing the average global temperature,' or something along those lines. What is signified in the collective imagination is also largely 'the apocalypse,' or the end of the world, the end of human existence, or the end of civilization. Many have found that the real condition of Climate Change has taken many indirect or allegorical forms, claiming films like *The Road, Mad Max: Fury Road, Children of Men,* and many others therefore relate specifically to our anxieties concerning Climate Change, and other conditions particular to this late capitalist epoch.[28] This is no doubt true, but also not our specific interest either. So we are left simply with films that invoke the name 'Climate Change,' and some of its specificities (melting of ice caps, a

[26] *Age of Stupid,* Directed by Franny Armstrong, Spanner Films, 22 March 2009
[27]Morton, *Hyperobjects,* 1-6.
[28] Elizabeth Ann Kaplan. *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction*. Rutgers University Press, 2016. Also Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann. *Ecology and Popular Film: Cinema on the Edge*. State University of New York Press, 2009. And also Anil Narine, *Eco-Trauma Cinema*. Routledge, 2018.

possible new ice age, etc.), and that directly signify the real condition (or set of conditions) of the same name.

In the following passages, we will examine how the few films to date that have directly represented Climate Change, namely *Waterworld* (1995), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *Snowpiercer* (2013), and *Geostorm* (2017), have in various ways registered Climate Change in the collective unconscious, or perhaps merely reflected or reinforced that unconscious.[29] They will be addressed in the sequence they were produced and released, not arbitrarily, but because there is significance to the ways Climate Change representations have progressed over the few decades in which it has been part of public consciousness. And as we will see, it may be better characterized as a regression in the political sense, its latter stages a harbinger of an increasingly desperate state of affairs.

As to Zizek's prescription of artificiality and spatio-temporal distance that are called for to confront Climate Change, SciFi is perhaps where we might expect this confrontation to emerge. This should be intuitive enough, as firstly, we tend to consider the worst outcomes of Climate Change as located in the future. And secondly, because it is difficult to imagine true engagement with Climate Change under our current socio-economic conditions, it is the spatio-temporal displacement figured by SciFi that is then doubly needed to imagine any engagement with Climate Change. That SciFi is unique in that it seemingly could provide such a possibility, is the starting point of Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fiction.* Ultimately, Jameson concludes that much of SciFi, and

[29] It could be argued that other films would qualify under our terms, but at time of writing, these seemed the best fits.

particularly the sub-genre of Utopian SciFi, often does more to reinforce the boundaries of the imagination, but he nonetheless sees the utopian impulse as a meaningful and utilitarian project.[30] But it is in his earlier *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* that he develops the kernel of the utopian impulse, which he dubs "inverted Millenarianism."[31] Millenarianism, originally a branch of doctrine of Christianity, and also a vital concept in Maria Manuel Lisboa's work (to be discussed below), formulates the relationship between apocalypse and utopia, namely that a cataclysm will manifest a far better world in the place of the known one. In Jameson's inversion, postmodernity creates the condition of wanting to return to a mythical, earlier, and somehow 'better' time.[32] Susan Sontag, in "The Imagination of Disaster," a seminal piece on SciFi, proposes a similar understanding of the genre to Jameson, "...one can participate in the fantasy of living through one's own death and more, the death of cities, the destruction of humanity itself. Science fiction films are not about science, they are about disaster…."[33] So surely, contemporary SciFi must be *the* place for Climate Change to be mapped. And from Jameson's and Sontag's formulations of SciFi, we come to our core determination about Climate Change cinema. Commercial Climate Change cinema is not just about dread, anxiety, or fear of Climate Change and its effects, and it's certainly not about political mobilization; its project is to let us revel in Climate Change, to fantasize about it, to enjoy it.

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[30] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. Verso, 2005, 1-71.
[31] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Verso, 1991. pp1-54.
[32] Jameson *Postmodernism,* 1-54.
[33] Susan Sontag, "Imagination of Disaster." *Liquid Metal The Science Fiction Film Reader*, edited by Sean Redmond, Wallflower Press, 2004, 42.

***Waterworld,* and the general features of the Climate Change narrative film**

In *Dark Ecology*, Morton inverts Jameson's inversion again, and achieves the distance prescribed by Zizek, modeling Climate Change as a catastrophe that has already occurred, as opposed to a future one, thus side-stepping anticipatory anxieties altogether, and leaving only a set of outcomes to be adapted to or redressed- an intriguing strategy.[34] This brings us to 1995's *Waterworld,* famously the most expensive production in history at its time of release, and a famously reviled flop. Looking at this film will give us the most straightforward understanding of disavowal, and introduce a few general features common to commercial Climate Change cinema.

Waterworld starts with a reasonable-enough premise along Zizek and Morton's prescriptions. It is set in an indeterminably distant future, where Climate Change's worst effects have already occurred (the opening titles indicate this expressly), melting the polar ice caps and (supposedly) covering the entire face of the planet in water (a notably implausible scenario).[35] In the opening, we immediately identify two factions. The first is embodied by our protagonist, known as 'the Mariner' (played by Kevin Costner): he drinks recycled urine, grows plants upon his trimaran, and utilizes wind power to suit his needs. The second, which we later find are called 'the Smokers,' deploy copious firearms and gas-powered vehicles like jet skis to raid and take resources from others. On the one hand we have an ecologically responsible, self-sustaining individual, on the other, a collective that evokes all the excesses of late capitalist American life.

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[34] Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. Columbia University Press, 2018. 11-20.
[35] ASAPScience. "What if All the Ice Melted on Earth ft. Bill Nye." *YouTube,* commentary by Bill Nye, 7 Sep. 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6CPsGanO_U

The rugged individual (and as we will see - coded as 'natural') man lives in balance with the world, a utopian, upon which the mob and its base desires encroach. Much later, the irony of this individual versus collective dynamic will be drawn as it contrasts greatly with the figuration of the collective in *Snowpiercer.* In *Waterworld,* this allegory indicates that the contemporary collective is a self-destructive failure, and individualism is the bastion of hope.

Maria Manuel Lisboa's *The End of the World: Apocalypse and its Aftermath in Western Culture* readily gives us a reading of this setting. A world covered in water, with civilization long forgotten beneath is not only an atavistic utopia, but a global return to the womb of Mother Nature, that entirely fluid environment also evoking the biblical flood, the destruction of all that is sinful, and a reunion with nature.[36] Further, Lisboa critically sees the apocalypse in Western narrative traditions in this light generally- not as an end of things, but as a new beginning, with greater space for new possibilities (the Millenarian figuration).[37] Sontag identifies a similar mode of experience (though she is referring to different post-apocalyptic film): "...the whole movie can be devoted to the fantasy of occupying the deserted metropolis and starting all over again, a world Robinson Crusoe."[38]

Here we begin to frame the apocalypse as wrought by Climate Change not as a tragedy, but as a fantasy - this is the main structure of Climate Change disavowal in commercial narrative cinema. *Waterworld* indulges this fantasy more than our other films in a number of significant ways. The most crucial is the fact that Climate Change has taken place in the distant past from

[36] Maria Manuel Lisboa, *The End of the World: Apocalypse and Its Aftermath in Western Culture*. Open Book Publishers, 2011, 50-51.
[37] Lisboa, 53.
[38] Sontag, 42.

the characters' perspectives. They are living in a manifest inverted Millenarian utopia, devoid of organization, technology, and (to a degree) frivolous material objects. The Mariner's relationship to material objects, however, is most telling. We draw on Vivian Sobchak's *Screening Space*: "The 'clutter' experienced by a thoroughly commodified culture, the 'new' turned into instant junk, the 'pastiche' constructed by unrelatable material accumulations… these physical manifestations of the logic of late capitalism find their figuration in contemporary SF." She continues, "'Inverted Millenarianism in consistently figured in… the visual 'trashing' and yet operative functioning of what used to be shiny 'futurist' technology."[39] For us, this understanding has additional implications in the case of Climate Change. In SciFi, grand and spectacular technology is typically where meaning is located, but our actual ecological dilemmas are caused by the mundane and vulgar - e.g. plastic bags and drinking straws made from petroleum-derived plastics. This same aesthetic figures prominently throughout *Waterworld,* the Mariner and his contemporaries barely able to scratch together material possessions from corroding flotsam, and in the Mariner's case, also detritus salvaged from the hidden civilization of the past (ours). From this, he fashions his Robinson Crusoe-esque ship and its myriad defenses and contraptions, which he guards jealously, even from allies. The specific fantasy here is that all our junk will become scarce, and therefore useful and worthwhile in a new way, no longer our figurative and literal anchors to the postmodern condition. Instead, we get the pleasure of watching its slow decay, or of re-inventing its purpose.

But the greatest fantasy of *Waterworld,* to say nothing of its action and adventure generalities, is that the characters that inhabit the narrative know nothing of Climate Change, or

[39] Vivian Sobchak, *Screening Space: the American Science Fiction Film*. Rutgers University Press, 2004, 246.

of the late capitalist centuries that brought it about. This features heavily in the plot, which centers around the search for ostensibly mythical dry land, a most literal inverted Millenarian mission, to exist in a time after civilization, and yet return to pre-civilization. When Helen (Jeanne Triplehorn) confronts the Mariner about dry land, he takes her below the waves in a diving bell, where the ruins of our modern civilization are revealed, including towering buildings, a long-sunken submarine, and a remarkably well-preserved Pepsi can. Upon surfacing she remarks "I didn't know," to which the Mariner replies "No one does." They carry no burden of guilt for anything lost, no understanding that their ancestors destroyed the planet. Our future has become the past, a pre-technological natural utopia, everywhere obscured by water, by nature. Even the newly acquired knowledge of the lost civilization does not eradicate the dry land fantasy in the story. But the audience of *Waterworld* is not so blissfully unaware, nor innocent. It is precisely the thoroughly fantastic nature of the film that allows it, unlike those to be discussed later, to point its finger at us - to an extent.

The Mariner's adversaries, the Smokers, inhabit the corpse of the infamous Exxon Valdez, and offer prayers to an image of "Saint" Joe Hazelwood, its captain. In contrast to sail power, the ship runs on its massive store of "black stuff." They smoke, drink, subsist on canned meat, and even take to frivolously driving cars around the ship. They are self-destructive, intensively consuming their dwindling resources. But this ham-fisted allegory contains a grain of a theme to which we will return - the spectre of late capitalism. In a speech with distinctly Millenarian religiosity, the Deacon (Dennis Hopper) proclaims "Dry land is not only our destination, but it is our Destiny." Along with the religious overtones, he also invokes the rhetoric of neoliberalism: "I'm talkin' progress, I'm talkin' development." Key to the search for

dry land is a young girl named Enola (Tina Majorino), who has a difficult-to-decipher map to dry land tattooed on her back. Since she is the ward of Helen (the Mariner's love interest), and has been kidnapped by the Smokers, the Mariner arrives to attempt a rescue, the manner of which we shall return to shortly.

In *Waterworld,* as with *The Day After Tomorrow, Snowpiercer,* and *Geostorm,* the roles of child and parent are illuminating. In each, we have a male protagonist, with a relationship to a child whom is his son or daughter, or whom he treats as one (in the case of the Mariner and Enola, his initial hostility towards the child becomes full custodianship through a quick montage where Helen watches him teaching her how to swim). Even in cases of genetic parentage, the men are divorced from their child's mother. So each man is reduced to a guardian or steward of his children, removed from a nuclear family scenario, and therefore chaste, sexless in relation to the children, and outside of the Freudian Oedipal configuration. He is therefore rendered as paternalism itself, the father figure but not actual father, pure moral authority or superego. But why? This is where ideology enters our frame. The protagonists are not just avatars for our gaze or pleasure (as is typical of Hollywood cinema), but also agents of what we are meant to consider 'our' (see footnote) social responsibility, as vehicles for us to cognitively map Climate Change.[40] It is by this gesture that we unconsciously understand our individual wants and needs must be sublimated. This is perhaps the crucial manner in which the films - at least partially- collectivize

[40] It is important to note that when I use the term 'our' I am reminded that Hollywood cinema, or mass-distributed commercial cinema is intended for a gaze that is overtly white, male, and heterosexual. This is a thoroughly theorized concept, owing much to the work of Laura Mulvey, bell hooks, Manthia Diawara, and many others.

the matter of Climate Change and attempt to manifest their narrative in our totality, or in the social totality under the guise of 'the children are our future.'

So what do the films tell us is 'socially responsible?' We return to the manner of Enola's rescue, and the matter of the Mariner being coded as 'natural.' We can identify two distinct modes of father figure in these films - the 'natural' man and the technocrat (the latter to be elaborated on later). The Mariner is clearly the former, not only in the sense that he lives sustainably, in harmony with nature, and so forth, but in his identity as a 'mutant' or 'ichthyosapiens,' complete with gills, part 'animal,' subjected to and therefore less-than, but part of, nature. We therefore, as far as he embodies a response to Climate Change, associate him with what Zizek referred to as "new age" ideas, with the ecocritical school and its roots in Romanticism, the nature-niks and tree-huggers. So when he is charged with rescuing Enola, he threatens to destroy the Valdez and its inhabitants by dropping a flare into its reserve of oil unless the girl is given to him. After the Deacon utters that he believes this to be bluff, the Mariner drops the flare, and explosions and fire engulf the ship.

Then there is an exceptional moment in the film that inscribes the audience's position both as participants in late capitalism, and as its unconscious adversaries. As the flare drops into the ship's massive store of petroleum, we see an elderly man, to whom we were earlier introduced as the tender of the "black stuff" from atop a rowboat deep inside the hull. As we see the ball of flame ignited by the flare reflected in his goggles, rushing towards him, he exclaims "Oh, Thank God." We are thus, through this man, contemplating that death is perhaps preferable to a position of subjugation under a late capitalist society hell-bent on suicidal overkill.

And so the Mariner manages to rescue Enola and escape unscathed, but the all-out destruction was his diversion, or his trump card. They find dry land and live happily ever after, we presume. We are led to believe that he was willing to destroy everything, himself and Enola included, rather than capitulate. To the extent that the Smokers were signifiers of late capitalist excess of consumption, their destruction was his true aim all along. *Waterworld* then ultimately preaches a truly terrific neo-Millenarian fantasy- the victors after Climate Change will be the tree-huggers and the pure, where those who indulge ecologically harmful vices and consume excessively will perish. But if anyone is to survive the effects of Climate Change, the opposite would likely be true. Survival, or the survivalist ambition, is in fact a present-day commodity, with former government strongholds from the Cold War remodeled and available for the wealthy as safety valves.[41]

It it this implausible hope of surviving the apocalypse that we now examine.

> "The broad spectrum of fiction and nonfiction on the subject of planetary destruction ultimately only rarely envisages total annihilation. God almost invariably opts not to play and instead, almost without exception, from ancient Norse myth and Biblical renditions to modern sci-fi, what structures these narratives is the logic of the close escape: near-universal annihilation but with just enough life left intact to guarantee a reasonable likelihood of a new beginning."[42]

[41] VICENews. "The Apocalypse Escape Plan of the 1%." *YouTube,* commentary by Thomas Morton, 8 Dec. 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUJtxn1V7N4.
[42] Lisboa, 53.

Here, if we can draw any conclusions about Western culture, we see that fantasies about the end are not about the end at all. *Waterworld* both begins and ends with this premise, dramatizing that only those chosen for their virtue will inherit the last remaining dry land. All will not be lost. This trope of "Life finds a way," (to borrow a line from Spielberg's *Jurassic Park*) is the most critical common plot feature of the Climate Change narrative film, and typically punctuates these stories. We return to Jameson,

> "...closure or the narrative ending is the mark of the boundary or limit beyond which thought cannot go. The merit of SF [Science Fiction] is to dramatize this contradiction on the level of plot itself, since the vision of future history cannot know any punctual ending of this kind, at the same time that its novelistic expression demands some such ending. …-as in an atomic explosion that destroys the universe, or the static image of some future totalitarian world state- are also clearly the places in which our own ideological limits are the most surely inscribed."[43]

We will see in the subsequent discussions that 'life finds a way' is *the* final and most important form of Climate Change disavowal.

Clearly the elephant is in the room, but will our detective find it in time?

So we have discussed multiple types of disavowal as they feature in commercial Climate Change cinema. Firstly, at the aesthetic level, we have the enjoyment of the destruction of

[43] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future,* 283.

civilization and all its trappings (we are here disavowing that our actual destruction will be total or nearly total, or will effect us specifically, since we imagine ourselves spectating). Secondly, at the level of our psychic inscription in the film, we have the protagonist as father figure who shows us what we ought to do (by this, we are disavowing the obvious solution, the end of capitalism). And thirdly and most importantly, at the level of plot, we have Climate Change rendered as ushering in an inverted Millenarian utopia, fulfilling our wish to return to a pre-postmodern era (here we disavow that the end is truly the end, which we will elaborate on).

We continue with 2004's *The Day After Tomorrow,* with some minor refiguration of these basic themes. The film opens in Antarctica, where paleo-climatologist Jack Hall (Dennis Quaid) is drilling to extract sample cores from an ice shelf (these are well known to be the primary physical evidence for anthropogenic Climate Change). After an incident in which an ice shelf "the size of Rhode Island" departs the continent, Hall attends an international climate summit, where he lectures dignitaries, including the Vice President of the United States on his theory that global warming could forestall ocean currents, paradoxically causing a new ice age in the distant future (a notably plausible scenario, at least at the time of the film's release, though over a far different timescale than depicted in the film).[44] He is met with incredulousness and mutterings from the VP about 'the economy.' However, he soon finds that evidence is mounting that his prophesied ice age will come to pass sooner than theorized, and in a shockingly rapid sequence of events.

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[44]McGuire, Bill. "Will Global Warming Trigger a New Ice Age?" *The Guardian,* 2003, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2003/nov/13/comment.research, 10 Jan. 2019. Though this has notably been a source of confusion and controversy: Nuccitelli, Dana. "The 'Imminent Mini Ice Age' Myth is Back and it's Still Wrong," *The Guardian,* 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/climate-consensus-97-per-cent/2018/jan/09/the-imminent-mini-ice-age-myth-is-back-and-its-still-wrong, 10 Jan 2019.

It is at this juncture that we liken him to a detective. In *The Geopolitical Aesthetic,* Jameson articulates the conspiracy film as the foremost cinematic exemplar of postmodern aesthetics, and the detective investigating that conspiracy as the locus of collectivizing or socializing the problem of epistemology in the postmodern era.[45] This particular idiom, claims Jameson, portrays totality as a mystery, which is to say it is unknowable on the whole. The detective nonetheless embarks on the task of fact-finding, and may find a little, but is ultimately bewildered by the impenetrability and complexity of the inner-workings of whatever is really afoot in our present time. He is further undermined and discredited by the audience's knowledge of what is really afoot, diegetically.[46] In *Day After,* this plays out as the viewer is privy to the evidence of impending disaster by way of an omniscient camera view before the same information reaches Hall (specifically we see buoys in the North Atlantic register temperatures well below normal, a hail storm in Tokyo, etc.). In this way, the conspiratorial plot forces us into a common world with the detective.[47] We at once are ahead of the detective, taking the position of conspirator, and following him as he unravels the plot, just behind us. His position as discoverer of new knowledge mimics ours, and he is thus given, in Jameson's words "collective resonance."[48] This structure takes on an even greater resonance in the case that Climate Change is the conspiracy at large.

At the outset of Jameson's figuration of the classic detective story, the detective is the individual intellectual, the epistemologist, where the collective is either a set of conspirators or the murderer and victim (because both in a sense were a party to the narrative the detective is

[45] Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic,* 33-34.
[46] Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic,* 36.
[47] Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic,* 33.
[48] Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic,* 39.

unveiling).[49] Where Climate Change is concerned, all parties are condensed into the detective. It is noteworthy that Morton is very fond of this metaphor in relation to Climate Change. "Morton likens this… to detective stories in which the hunter realises he is hunting himself (his favourite examples are *Blade Runner* and *Oedipus Rex*)."[50] And indeed in the case of Climate Change, we are clearly murderer and victim at once. In *Day After*, we identify with a detective of sorts who is hunting us. *Day After* even goes so far as to have us adopt the actual point of view of Climate Change. As a vast and powerful storm rolls into New York City for instance, the camera stalks Jack Hall's son Sam (who has been trapped in the New York Public Library), glazing all that it passes with frost as he slams doors behind him, as if evading a pursuing monster.

For Jameson, another critical 'collectivizing' feature of the detective is his position as an intellectual of sorts. Because the intellectual is "suspended between the classes," and has no real skin in the game, his primary ideological function is the epistemological one (as opposed to being primarily representational), as he seeks the knowledge that we wish to gain or confirm, and scribes the limitations of that knowledge.[51] This is all the more true in the case that our 'detective' is a scientist, a pure functionary. As theorized by Steve Neale, the scientist holds a privileged position in cinema, and particularly SciFi. In his view, as incredulous as we might be concerning what we see on screen, we are forced to believe whatever scientists utter and accept it as true within the diegetic world. They are the final epistemological authority.[52] So the discrediting of the detective claimed by Jameson is somewhat negated in the case of the scientist,

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[49] Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic,* 33.
[50] Alex Blasdel. "A Reckoning for Our Species: The Philosopher Prophet of the Anthropocene," *The Guardian,* 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/15/timothy-morton-anthropocene-philosopher, 10 Jan. 2019.
[51] Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic,* 39.
[52] Steve Neale, "'You've Got To Be Fucking Kinnding!' Knowledge, Belief, and Judgement in Science Fiction." *Alien Zone*, Verso, 1990, 160–168.

and this may be all the more true where Climate Change is at issue (because, as we know better than in most cases, Climate Change bears well-publicized scientific 'authority').[53] The conspiracy, therefore, is all the more real (we will elaborate in later passages). The collectivizing features of the detective are also negated in the second half of the film, where the plot turns away from the collective problem of Climate Change to the individual problem of Hall rescuing his son, as more of an adventurer than scientist (we also follow his estranged wife Dr. Lucy Hall in parallel). Again, he remains the locus of moral authority as father figure (we probably don't need to draw too many specifics about his particular moral characterizations, suffice to say he is a climate scientist, and owner of a compact, hybrid, low-emission car). Further, it is in the apparatus of computers, phones, computer modeling and so on that the sense of conspiracy is manifested aesthetically, a device Jameson also points to as a conspiratorial hallmark.[54] So what *Day After* ultimately maps for us is that Climate Change is beyond our ability to comprehend or totalize (a conspiracy in a sense), but most certainly real. We are reminded here of the first part of Zizek's disavowal structure, 'of course we know very well, but….' But there is another aspect he examines in *Examined Life,* which is more relevant: "Ideology addresses very real problems - but it mystifies them."[55]

So whence cometh the second part of disavowal (we act as if we don't know) in *Day After*? The film, after all, has been praised by some in the ecocritical school.[56] The production

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[53] John Cook et al, "Quantifying the Consensus on Anthropogenic Global Warming in the Scientific Literature, *Environmental Research Letters.* 2013, http://iopscience.iop.org/article/10.1088/1748-9326/8/2/024024/pdf, 10 Jan. 2019.
[54] Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic,* 15-16.
[55] *Examined Life*
[56] Robin L. Murray, and Joseph K. Heumann. *Ecology and Popular Film: Cinema on the Edge*. State University of New York Press, 2009, 4.

itself even went to the rare length of ensuring that it was carbon neutral.[57] The very ending gives us a clear answer. In the final shots, astronauts aboard the International Space Station observe that the polar storms have cleared, leaving much of the northern hemisphere of the planet covered in ice. One astronaut remarks "I've never seen the air so clear," as we zoom out to reveal a frame of the entire planet in its newfound tranquil, white state before fading to black. Jameson identifies this sort of mass geographical aesthetic as the key 'totalizing gesture' common to the conspiracy film.[58] But instead of totalizing a destroyed planet, here we are left again with 'life finds a way,' or 'everything will be fine,' as indeed all the main characters survive the apocalyptic event, as we are told many did worldwide. What is conspicuously absent of course, are millions upon millions of dead, which are consistently implied but hardly seen. Early in the film, we may have revelled in the sight of massive waves crashing over the capitalist monuments of New York City (the 'trashing' aesthetic appears again, in an eerie premonition of Hurricane Sandy's effects), but we dare not look at the drowned in the end.

It is in the film's penultimate scenes where we see a major twist to the 'don't worry, everything will be okay' disavowal. In a montage showing us that the main characters have survived, they each watch televisions from their various locations, viewing a speech given by the formerly obstinate VP (now President, as the barely-featured President has died). In the speech, he is finally contrite, proclaiming that he was wrong, that we must accept our changed reality, and that we (Americans and Europeans) are now happy guests of the 3rd World. This harkens back to an early montage in the film, a minor side -plot, in which the omniscient camera looks over thousands of Americans storming Mexico's northern border, in a reversal of the typically

[57] Murray and Heumann, 2.
[58] Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic,* 14.

sensationalized political scenario. An almost forgettable newscast, seen on a TV in an empty hospital during a transition shot several scenes later, proclaims that the border was opened in exchange for the forgiveness, by the US, of all Latin American national debts. This minor digression hints at a sublimated desire concerning Climate Change. "...For it is only at that deeper level of our collective fantasy that we think about the social system all the time, a deeper level that also allows us to slip our political thoughts past a liberal and anti-political censorship."[59] This is Jameson's reckoning of the political unconscious, revealed in *Day After* through sequences that seem largely like afterthoughts in the text. What is revealed is the desire that the world-altering effects of Climate Change should bring about new socio-political possibilities. In this case, they are modest; the conservative politician reverses his obstinacy, some international cooperation is thrust upon the global North, and debts forgiven. Here, we see a more clearly rendered political Millenarianism, within the strict bounds of merely wishing to modestly reform global capitalism and statism, and undoing some of their worst global effects. We return to Zizek in *Examined Life,* "The way we approach ecological problematic is maybe the crucial field of ideology today."[60] And as we earlier established, the US is the critical battlefield where Climate Change is concerned. This is not to claim that all others are left out of the matter entirely. In an interview concerning *Day After,* the film's director, Roland Emmerich (a German) makes a startling admission about the nature of American film: "The whole world hates Americans, but watches American movies." Here, it is revealed, cinema is the vehicle by which our ideological constructs are not only globalized, and Climate Change ideology particularly fits a liberal globalism in ways Thomas Friedman or Francis Fukuyama could hardly have dreamt.

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[59] Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic,* 9.
[60] *Examined Life*

The train accelerates towards the cliff.

Selmin Kara identifies a current of accelerationism in the films *Gravity* and *Snowpiercer* (2013). "...In these two films is a contemporary aesthetic reminiscent of accelerationism, which as a critical strategy in the realm of art refers to the attempted intensification and creative destruction of the conditions of global neoliberal capitalism by stretching it to (and ideally beyond) its limits."[61] Though in the films, she sees the accelerationist tendency as non-critical, continuing "The depictions of acceleration in *Gravity* and *Snowpiercer*... are pleasurable precisely in this non-cathartic manner." She is referring to the fact that they avoid the logical end of the accelerationist strategy, the relief of "hitting bottom." She continues, "They stretch environmental threats to their limits, yet their final acts offer no closure or definite salvation for the characters or for humanity."[62]

What we will argue here is not only that Kara has correctly identified in *Snowpiercer* a thread of accelerationism, but that the film is accelerationism par excellence. And while the deployment of that aesthetic is indeed ultimately insufficiently critical from our perspective, there is nonetheless a catharsis. That catharsis, rather than being the salvation of humanity as we know it, is found in destruction. It is worth noting that Kara's project is ultimately not about accelerationism, but rather to sculpt a conception of 'Anthropocenema,' not unlike Fay, and very much along the lines of Morton's *Hyperobjects*, which she directly invokes. Her thesis is

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[61] Selmin Kara, "Anthropocenema: Cinema in the Age of Mass Extinctions." *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st Century Film*, edited by Shane Denson and Julia Leyda, Reframe Books, 2016, 2-3.
[62] Kara, 2.

basically to articulate a cinema that embodies non-human agencies through an emerging aesthetic that evokes a hyperobject-like perspective, an understanding of expanding spatio-temporal limits (among other things) that creates a sense of the post-human, but remains somehow humanist, since such a cinema is meant to forewarn us of our own extinction.[63] Our ultimate disagreement is with the last part. *Snowpiercer,* for us then, is about salvation *through* humanity's extinction (or very nearly).

Snowpiercer has the most indirect representation of Climate Change of all the films we will discuss. Climate Change is primarily a backdrop. In the film's world, we are told over the opening titles, a coalition of states dispersed a chemical called CW-7 into the Earth's atmosphere in order to mitigate the warming effects of carbon dioxide (a plausible idea).[64] The solution to Climate Change however, was far too effective, and the Earth froze over completely (we are told that all species outside the train on which the film is set, have been extinguished). All that remains is a train, which circles the globe, and contains the last life on Earth in a self-sustaining microcosm. This microcosm, we soon find, is controlled by a visionary industrialist named Wilford (Ed Harris), who built the train as an ark. The resultant society is totalitarian, divided into classes, with the least inhabiting the rear. This is where we find our protagonist Curtis (Chris Evans), who leads his lower-class cohorts in a revolt aimed at reaching the front of the train, and Wilford.

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[63] Kara, 4.
[64] James Temple, "Harvard Scientists Moving Ahead on Plans for Atmospheric Geoengineering Experiments," *MIT Technology Review,* 24 Mar. 2017, https://www.technologyreview.com/s/603974/harvard-scientists-moving-ahead-on-plans-for-atmospheric-geoengineering-experiments/, 10 Jan. 2019.

The path to the front of the train has a few interesting elements. Firstly, there is the presence of Kronol, an industrial waste product that is recycled throughout the train as a hallucinogen (we later find that it is also combustible). This is the locus of the 'waste' aesthetic.[65] Two of the film's characters, Namgoong (Kang-ho Song) and his daughter Yona (Ko Asung), are addicted to it. Literally, their only source of pleasure is the only wasted element in the train's ecosystem. Here, rather than the audience deriving pleasure from the trashing of postmodern material clutter, the characters partake literally. Everything else on the train follows the logic of 'sustainability.' The lower classes are fed protein blocks made from insects (a real prescription from contemporary ecology).[66] For the upper classes even, sushi farmed from the train's aquarium is eaten only rarely, when sustainability allows it. In conjunction with rhetoric constantly given mid-revolt by Mason (Tilda Swinton plays an authoritative figure in the administration of the train) about keeping everything in its place in the interest of survival, we end up with the formulation that sustainability, or ecology, is part and parcel to totalitarianism. We recall, at this point, that it was the 'solution' to Climate Change that destroyed the planet and left everyone in their present, unfortunate circumstance.

The religious fervor of Mason's several speeches is also informative. Part of the ideological framework of the train's society is that Wilford is "divine," the train's perpetual engine "eternal" and "sacred," and the front-of-the-train-types are "chosen." In congruence with the "everything in its place" sustainability and balance rhetoric, we get ecology as religion.

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[65] Kara, 2.
[66] Jessica Brown, "Would You Eat Insects to Save the Planet from Global Warming?" *The Guardian,* 15 Oct. 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/oct/15/edible-insect-save-planet-global-warming-tasty-trendy, 10 Jan. 2019.

Quoth Zizek: “Ecology is the new opiate of the masses.” For Zizek, this is a dire consequence of the fallacious man/nature dichotomy (“Don’t mess with nature, and so on…”), where he conveys a growing sense of ecology as a conservative value that portrays “...a balanced world disturbed through human hubris.”[67] This is perhaps an opportune moment to bring attention to how Jameson begins his investigation on utopias in *Archaeologies*, namely to recount the history of anti-utopianism from the perspective of right-leaning critics during the Cold War, contrasted with capitalist realism. “Utopia had become a synonym for Stalinism and had come to designate a program which neglected human frailty and original sin, and betrayed a will to uniformity and the ideal purity of a perfect system that always had to be imposed by force on its imperfect and reluctant subjects.”[68] If utopia, by many estimations, is equated with godless communism, and liberal capitalist ecology has begun to morph into the Christian story of the fall (sinful man and woman destroying Eden), a surprising theme of opposition emerges between utopian and ecological ideologies. In *Snowpiercer,* it is our revolutionary leader Curtis who takes up the utopian mantle.

Curtis’s form as father figure and therefore moral authority personified diverges from our other paternal examples. There is a moment in the film which is stretched out over several seconds via slow motion, where Curtis must choose between capturing Mason and rescuing his friend Edgar (Jamie Bell) from a melee with an axe-wielding mercenary. He chooses to capture Mason, resulting in Edgar’s death. What is of interest is that we later find out that Edgar was a surrogate son of sorts. Curtis tells Namgoong of the earliest days in the back of the train, where no food was available, and people resorted to cannibalism. He killed Edgar’s mother with the

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[67] *Examined Life*
[68] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future,* 1.

intent of eating the infant Edgar, before he was stopped by a man named Gilliam (John Hurt), who cut off his own arm and offered it as a meal. This was the turning point for Curtis, who became a protege, and eventual successor to Gilliam, de facto leader of the back-of-the-train resistance. And thus Curtis is coded as moral authority, and another (albeit far darker) 'natural' man, in touch with his base (or sinful) nature. This will inform us a great deal in deciphering the film's ending.

Nearing the end of the film, Curtis finally confronts Wilford. To his surprise and dismay, Wilford is not rattled, but gleefully expected Curtis's arrival. He informs Curtis that all the train's previous revolutions were engineered, by he and Gilliam, to cull the population and maintain 'balance' in the ecosystem (again we see the ecology as totalitarianism theme, as well as a specific repudiation of the common environmentalist slogan that the world is overpopulated). Curtis is asked to take Wilford's place as the totalitarian leader, and it is made clear that he has been expressly chosen because of his awareness of his base (or sinful) nature, of humanity's need for leadership, order, and control. Curtis also finds that some small children (particularly a boy named Timmy played by Marcanthonee Jon Reis) that were taken from their parents at the film's outset, are being used to monotonously and constantly maintain the train's 'eternal engine' (the engine is sort of a perpetual motion machine, an irony given that an infinite source of power would be a better 'solution' to Climate Change than a dispersed coolant). The children remind one immediately of the thought experiment in Ursula K. Leguin's *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,* where a utopian city's prosperity is dependent on the constant torture of a lone child. Curtis chooses to save the child at the expense of his own arm, as

Namgoong lights a wad of Kronol. The two men surround Timmy and Yona as the engine explodes, the train derails, and all is destroyed save the two children.

Wilford's offer of succession of leadership reminds of us the rhetoric of "the End of History," a phrase used by Thomas More (coiner of the term 'utopia'), as well as Hegel, Marx, and more recently Francis Fukuyama in defense of liberal democracy and capitalism. The phrase implies the argument that a given idea or system cannot be bested, and marks the pinnacle of human achievement, the thing towards which all other events were leading. Wilford's implication is the same, that revolutions are pointless, and even the most revolutionary person (Curtis) would not run things differently if given the chance. Things must be as they are, everything in its place. Curtis's and Namgoong's resolution, of course, repudiates this, as they choose to destroy everything rather than be further subjugated by Wilford's system.

It would be easy enough to read the ending of the film as strictly anti-totalitarian or anti-capitalist. But this reading would ignore the ecology-as-totalitarianism theme, and miss the *telos* of the film's premise altogether. The film could just as easily been set against any generic apocalyptic scenario, with no specifics given, as is often the case in apocalyptic cinema landscapes. The specific setting of *Snowpiercer* is a world where the 'solution' to Climate Change brought about mass extinctions and the uninhabitability of the planet. So here we claim that the film is absolutely a renunciation of environmentalism or ecological politics without social justice (since the two are deeply interrelated, the film's message rehearses a neoliberal fallacy that these interests somehow compete - where in truth, social and ecological transformation are together the likely consequences of radical economic reform). The clearest political allegory in the social structure of the train is that it contains clear demarcated classes, in

the tradition of Marxist analysis, and in the actual traditions of railway travel. The meaning of the text is therefore: if we cannot have a political reality where class structures are abandoned, then we would prefer to destroy everything (a stance towards which we might reasonably be sympathetic). We are forced to accept that Wilford's "end of history" reasoning is correct, or at a minimum, that Curtis, and thus us, simply cannot imagine an alternative but to burn it all down. Again, in the real understanding of even UN reports, the radical restructuring of the world's economies is a necessity to confront Climate Change. If we don't do it, we're doomed. And if we cannot imagine this radical restructuring (the end of capitalism, that is), then Climate Change will not be abated, and capitalism will therefore destroy itself, or at least much of the world it has wrought, and us with it. We thus claim that this is the design of our unconscious utopian desire, that we would prefer capitalism to destroy itself, and everything with it, rather than save ourselves from Climate Change.

But in this formulation, there is a secret, or unacknowledged hubris that we will somehow survive as a species, which is revealed through *Snowpiercer's* denouement. As the two surviving children exit the train, it becomes clear that they are unlikely to freeze to death (this had been the constant warning from the train's authorities, but Namgoong suspected it was a myth). As they reach a clearing, they spot a polar bear on a distant hill (and as we know, the polar bear is very much the Climate Change spokesperson). They hold hands as they observe it, and again, life has somehow found a way. The possibilities for a future utopia (which Lisboa shows are endemic to to all Millenarian fantasies) remain intact.

So how does this unconscious utopian desire for the end of capitalism function with regards to Climate Change? We rationally would prefer Climate Change not happen. We may

even recycle, own a bicycle or a Prius, or protest oil companies or denialist politicians. Even if we are forced to acknowledge the incompatibility of Climate Change and the capitalist world system that brings us a high standard of living, we are surely willing to sacrifice a little, no? We are reminded here of capitalism's supposed indestructibility. In a discussion on the film *2012*, another Roland Emmerich apocalyptic offering, remarking on the concept in the story of an ark which will deliver the wealthy from armageddon, Zizek gives the now familiar comment, echoing Jameson "So the paradox is, that it's much easier to imagine the end of all life on Earth than a much more modest radical change in capitalism."[69] We might ask at this juncture, if we truly have an unconscious desire to see capitalism annihilated, then why does it persist?

In a an interview staged at the New York Public Libray, actor Wallace Shawn (of *The Princess Bride* fame, among others) speaks to Noam Chomsky:

> Wallace, recalling something Chomsky had said or written "which gets to this question of democracy, ...teenage girls, if they have a free Saturday afternoon, they like to walk around in the shopping mall rather than going to the library... I found that very thought provoking because many people, and I think I would have to include myself, believe that deep, deep down what we all really want is material comfort for ourselves, that this is what we all want more than anything else. We may make an effort and go to the library, we may make an effort and vote, we may even visit a sick friend or say a friendly word to someone who is in trouble, but what we really would like to do is sit on a big, comfortable

[69] Qtd. in *The Apocalypse in Film: Dystopias, Disasters, and Other Visions about the End of the World*, by Karen A. Ritzenhoff and Angela Krewani, Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, 127.

sofa, and watch an entertaining program on a big, beautiful television set, and maybe have somebody bring us some hot fudge sundaes... and that that is what i'm really like, what everyone is really like... and that is human nature. And I think a lot of our political attitudes come from the fact that we think we can never get away from that... Now, do you share that view?"

Chomsky: "Not in the least. And I think that there's plenty of evidence against it. There has been a massive effort for over a hundred years to try to convince people that that's what we are. It's called advertising. ...So is that human nature? I don't think so... Take a look at these Trump voters again, say these working-class people in say, rural towns... manufacturing towns... and take a listen to what they're saying. These are people, men, who want to work in coal mines rather than to take a government handout. They don't want to sit on the couch... that undermines their sense of dignity, of self-worth, of doing something significant, and I think that's what people are. ...You wanna do something significant, that's worthwhile, even if it's an ugly horrible job like working in a coal mine... people want a sense of creating and doing something important... a huge part of the economy is trying to drive these things out of people's heads, to make you think all you want is more commodities…. [Speaking of labor writers in the 19th century] ...they regarded wage labor as not very different from slavery.

> It was a popular idea, it was the slogan of the Republican party, literally... because you're selling yourself if you're a wage laborer…."[70]

This is a telling exchange, between a Hollywood actor (amongst other vocations) and famed leftist intellectual Chomsky. One can immediately see the merit in either position. On the one hand, capitalism creates and (if we're lucky) satisfies the material desires mentioned by Wallace. On the other, it deprives us of an independent, self-determined existence but still manages to sell even the dangerous and difficult labor of coal mining as giving one greater meaning and dignity than "government handouts," or some other kind of socialist welfare. In both understandings, capitalism is the impetus for our desires or lack thereof. This correlates seamlessly with a dual nature of capitalism identified by Jameson, quoted in Sobchak's *Screening Space,* where he says:

> In a well known passage Marx powerfully urges us to do the impossible, namely, to think this development positively *and* negatively all at once; to achieve, in other words, a type of thinking that would be capable of grasping the baleful features of capitalism along with its extraordinary and liberating dynamism simultaneously, with a single thought, and without attenuating any of the force of either judgement. We are, somehow, to lift our minds to a point at which it is possible to understand that capitalism is at one and the same time the best thing that has ever happened and the worst. The lapse from this austere dialectical imperative into the more comfortable stance of the taking of moral positions is

[70] *Noam Chomsky- What We Really Want.* Originally produced by NYPL, posted by Malik Shabazz, Commentary by Wallace Shawn and Noam Chomsky, 17 April 2017. *Youtube,* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TIF4FFrYw8.

> inveterate and all too human: still, the urgency of the subject demands that we make at least some effort to think the cultural evolution of late capitalism dialectically, as catastrophe and progress all together.[71]

By this dialectic, we understand our true reaction to Climate Change (and when I say 'we,' I'm reminded again that the cinema under discussion is made for a particular gaze, mine included). At once, we wish to continue living as we as we have in the postmodern era, material comforts abound, but at some deeper level, the political unconscious, we harbor the utopian Millenarian wish, to find new possibilities in the end of the world we know. Jameson sums this up thusly, on utopian imagining, especially referring to fiction:

> But such creation must be motivated: it must respond to specific dilemmas and offer to solve fundamental social problems to which the Utopian believes himself to hold the key. The Utopian vocation can be identified by this certainty, and by the persistent and obsessive search for simple, a single-shot solution to all our ills. And this must be a solution so obvious and self-explanatory that every reasonable person will grasp it.[72]

The ideology constructed in commercial Climate Change cinema proclaims that simple solution to be capitalism's self-destruction, which is to say Climate Change itself.

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[71] Sobchak, 300-301.
[72] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future,* 11.

Climate Change as conspiracy.

Our last destination is a forgettable B-movie of 2017, *Geostorm,* where at long last, Climate Change is rendered as conspiracy, and ecological salvation as totalitarianism. That some so-called conservatives or right-wing adherents in the US believe that the scientific evidence that demonstrates Climate Change to be a present, man-made reality is merely a hoax, should come as no surprise, and this view is readily evident from the most cursory internet search.[73] Integral to this belief is that there must be some reason or another behind the conspiracy, namely that the proposed solutions will somehow benefit some particular group or entity. Enter *Geostorm.* The premise is that in order to mitigate Climate Change's disastrous effects on the world's population, a massive network of satellites has been constructed by an international, US-led coalition, its function to engineer weather and climate on a global scale. The chief designer of the network, Jake Lawson (Gerard Butler) and his brother, Max (Jim Sturgess), a US State Department underling, unravel a conspiracy whereby someone in the US government is manipulating the network remotely, in the interest of weaponizing it, and keeping it under US control (it's scheduled to be handed over for international oversight). The brothers initially suspect that the President (Andy Garcia) himself is behind the plot, before discovering that the real perpetrator is the Secretary of State (Ed Harris). They attempt to foil his plan with the aid of Max's Secret Servicewoman girlfriend, Sarah (Abbie Cornish). The unconscious anxiety at play here is fairly obvious and not far from many actual conspiracy theories, that in addressing Climate Change, or allowing elites to do so, we risk total hegemony over the planet (either by the

[73] George Monbiot. "The Denial Industry," *The Guardian,* 2006, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2006/sep/19/ethicalliving.g2. 10 Jan 2019.

US alone, or by some international coalition - the specific fear likely correlates with one's politics).

Jameson's conspiracy aesthetics are here in full force. Nearly the entire plot occurs via dialogue over telecommunications, of the pedestrian variety, as well as on 'holo-frames' (smartphone-like high tech devices) and orbit-to-surface video conferences. But it is even taken a step further, as the opposing sides employ hacking techniques to thwart one another. Further still, the technological apparatus of the satellite network is hacked into so that it becomes a weapon itself, removing meddlers that may disrupt the conspiracy through geothermal disruptions and freeze-rays. This is anticipated by Jameson perhaps, where he discusses the relationship between bureaucratic telecommunications and death, but with the miracle of modern computers, we skip the middleman.[74] And this is of course, from the satellite network that literally covers the globe. In an inversion of Jameson's chapter title "Totality as Conspiracy," the conspiracy totalizes itself by its very structure.[75]

In the end, disaster is averted, the brothers save the world (and notably, Lawson's daughter, with her mother, his estranged wife), and avert the 'geostorm' that would have triggered if the conspiracy had played out. This event would have killed millions or billions around the world, the motivation for which is uttered by the Secretary of State when his villainy is revealed: "I would have turned the clock back to 1945 when America was a shining city on a hill, not a bank disguised as a country." In the imaginary realm of cinema, it seems, there is room even in the hearts of right-wing supervillains to detest late capitalism.

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[74] Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic,* 13.
[75] Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic,* 9 and 14.

This brings us back to our hero, Lawson, the scientist. In the film, Lawson is portrayed as something of a celebrity, along the lines of an Albert Einstein, Carl Sagan, or Stephen Hawking. And again, he is the locus of moral authority in the text, in this case the enunciator of a technocratic ideology. This ideology is at the center of the actual problem unconsciously dramatized in *Geostorm.* Today, the rational person rejects the idea that Climate Change is somehow a conspiracy of thousands of scientists and experts (rightly), and mocks the conspiracy theorist. But in the conspiracy theory, there may be a small grain of truth. When a politician, say, the current President (Donald Trump at time of writing) utters Climate Change denialism, no one really believes him. Of course, this isn't just to say that we don't believe the things he is saying (we don't, but there is a more important factor). We don't believe that *he* truly believes what he is saying. The President, and surely any given American politician, has access to untold troves of information that we do not. They know, far better than we do, that no conspiracy is afoot, and that science is legitimate. They trust the science on Climate Change just as they trust the scientists at the NSA to spy undetected on whomever they like, just as they trust the scientists at Boeing or Lockheed Martin to build new weapons to specification, and just as they trust scientists from ExxonMobil to estimate for them how much new petroleum will become accessible when Arctic ice melts. It is we that must trust scientists not by some didacticism or complete understanding, but by virtue of their expertise and authority. This is not to say that we should be more skeptical - we should trust the science, of course. The troubling situation is that we *must* trust it. Science may not be ideological in content, but form is another matter. What *Geostorm* in a sense understands about the Climate-Change-is-a-conspiracy adherent, is that to

many, the refrains 'you aren't a scientist,' 'you don't understand the science,' and 'trust the science,' *feel* totalitarian in structure.

Writing in "Apocalypse Forever?," Erik Swyngedouw deconstructs Climate Change politics from the post-political perspective, claiming that the elite "are moving rapidly to convince the world that, indeed, capitalism can not only solve the climate riddle but also that capitalism can make a new climate by unmaking the old one it has co-produced over the past few hundred years through a series of extraordinary techno-natural and eco-managerial fixes."[76] Swyngedouw is not discussing SciFi, but real conditions. "...We maintain that current hegemonic climate change policies ultimately reinforce processes of de-politicization and the socio-political status quo rather than, as some suggest and hope, offering a wedge that might contribute to achieving socio-ecologically more egalitarian transformations."[77] From both left and right, the conundrum is apparent: to give consent or license to present power structures, as they now operate, to have them confront Climate Change, is to expand and fortify their hegemony. Not only do we prefer destruction to the perpetuation of late capitalism, but our salvation would be its triumph.

We return briefly to *The Day After Tomorrow,* which presented the most direct and thorough representations of Climate Change in our discussion. In "Eco-Apocalypse: Environmentalism, Political Alienation, and Therapeutic Agency," Philip Hammond and Hugh Ortega Breton frequently cite Swyngedouw, largely agreeing with the post-political outlook,

[76] Erik Swyngedouw, "Apocalypse Forever? Post-Political Populism and the Spectre of Climate Change." *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 27, no. 2-3, 2010, 224.
[77] Swyngedouw, 214.

spotting it in their readings of *Day After* and *Age of Stupid.* What they argue is that films like *Day After* provide "therapeutic agency" to their audience, which is to say that vicariously through individual characters like Jack Hall (who spends the film's second half rescuing his son), we each get to experience an individuated heroism, in stark contrast to our actual lack of collective political activity. The precondition for this is the post-political, the loss of "modernist subjectivity" in an era "...in which the urgency of impending climate catastrophe closes down democratic debate about possible futures."[78] For Hammond and Breton, this is the completion of disavowal - the thrill of cinematic action supplants any trace of desire for political action that might have manifested. Worse still, "Alienated from a political agency characterized as wholly negative, subjectivity is projected into nature so that climate… rather than collective humanity, becomes the active agent of change."[79] Out of ideas, we've thrown up our hands in disgust, and in a transfiguration of the false human/nature dichotomy, we forfeit our will over to 'nature' and hope it somehow intercedes on our behalf.

When taken altogether- the authoritarian nature of scientific knowledge, the potential hegemonic nature of Climate Change 'solutions,' and the post-political lack of agency- it would seem there is little, if any, hope. But the recent protests in France of the Yellow Vests (or Mouvement des Gilets Jaunes), were instructive. Zizek's claim is that the movement was important precisely because the populists' demands were impossible to meet. Initially, the movement began as a reaction to increased fuel prices, and was labeled by some as therefore anti-green. But more demands (or a more accurate picture of them) emerged, and 'ecological justice' was among them. For Zizek, this is the crucial point, that this represents an impasse or

[78] Hammond and Breton, 112.
[79] Hammond and Breton, 111.

deadlock, an undeniable demonstration that capitalism and ecological justice cannot coexist, and that modest reforms are wholly insufficient - again, that the impossibility of the demands is the very point.[80] The fact that Emmanuel Macron backed down in the face of the protestors' resilience (after spells of brutal police violence, of course), is no defeat for the environment. Rather, asking for the impossible is the point at which we are forced to contemplate the transition between utopian desire, and political reality, as we will see momentarily.

Like the second half of *Day After,* the finale of *Snowpiercer* too sees a shift towards individual experience late in the game. Having began his revolution with many people at his side, Curtis alone confronts his tormentor, most of his allies having sacrificed themselves to the cause. At this point, it is almost as though *Snowpiercer* has conceded this point from *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*: "...traditional narrative have never been much good at conveying the collective (save in the explosive punctual moments of war or revolution)...."[81] Curtis's revolution, through attrition, was therefore over before he reached its destination, as he is now isolated, reduced to a complainant. The anti-totalitarian principles were not the essence of revolution, the collective was. Alone, his ambition of overtaking the train alongside his comrades shattered, he dwells momentarily in Jameson's "utopian break," like Zizek's Yellow Vests:

> ...Utopia also serves a vital political function today which goes well beyond mere ideological expression or replication. The formal flaw - how to articulate the Utopian break in such a way that it is transformed into a practical-political transition - now becomes a rhetorical and political strength - in

[80] *Slavoj Zizek on the Yellow Vests.* Produced by Russia Today, Commentary by Slavoj Zizek, 29 Dec. 2018. *Youtube,* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrdPchnAR60&t=198s.
[81] Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic,* 9.

> that it forces us precisely to concentrate on the break itself: a meditation on the impossible, on the unrealizable in its own right. This [meditation on the impossible, i.e. utopia] is very far from liberal capitulation to the necessity of capitalism, however; it is quite the opposite, a rattling of the bars and an intense spiritual concentration and preparation for another stage which has not yet arrived.[82]

Toward the end of Lisboa's chronicling of apocalyptic narratives through history, she elucidates the etymology of utopia. "More's term puns on the Greek *outopos* (no place) and *eutopos* (good place). ...More's implied caveat: the perfect place may be nowhere... either because it does not exist or because… the new beginning ultimately may lead back to whatever it was that preceded the apocalypse, with no significant change." Indeed, Lisboa frequently mentions the fear of repetition in her tome. Here, in a comparison with the potentially cyclical nature of utopia, *Snowpiercer* offers us a potentially redemptive metaphor. The train in the film repeats the same journey annually, circumnavigating its track, and the planet, in precisely a year (time is in fact measured in landmarks by the train's inhabitants). In the narrative, Curtis chooses to derail the train from its circuit as the well-off forward passengers descend on him, seeking vengeance for his disturbing of their leisurely existence. He takes a grave risk, as we would be taking in allowing Climate Change to usurp our collective agency and undertake the unimaginable task of capitalism's end. Like Curtis, we may unconsciously want the train to derail, hoping that in breaking the cycle, we at least avoid the certainty of stagnation. However,

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[82] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future,* 232-233.

> ...In modern depictions of reconstructed post-apocalypse, it is the act of voluntarily exiting utopia (the rupture with whatever is defined as orthodoxy, even if it happens to be eternal life and endless bliss) that signals the resurrection of the right to (and risk of) being different. Which, under the requirements and principles of evolution, is the right to continuity and to being.[83]

Here, Lisboa points out that the right to abandon utopia is evident in contemporary narratives, as they are, quite significantly, located in the *post*-apocalypse, marking a difference from previous modes of utopian thought. She invokes evolution, after referring to Darwin in the previous paragraph. Surely nothing connotes 'human *as* nature,' as forcefully as this invocation. It should remind us too, that it is us and nature, rather than a deity or design, which decide fate; which is to say there is no certain fate, excepting that our fate cannot be one beyond our imagining. It is evolution which bestows on us not only the right and the ability to continue being, but the *obligation* to change.

[83] Lisboa, 169.

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