



Terrestrial Horror or the Marriage between Horror Fiction and Cli-Fi: What the Language of Horror can Teach us about Climate Change

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the dystopian camp of climate fiction and its affinities with another fiction genre: horror. During cli-fi's rise, horror has enjoyed a resurgence of popular interest and sustained and reinvigorated scholarly interest in the past few years. While horror and dystopian cli-fi have different roots and conceptual underpinnings, there are points of contact between the genres, when the horrible in horror fiction spawns from environmental collapse or when the climatic in cli-fi drives what horrifies. My central claim is that these contact points, the overlap between cli-fi and horror fiction, become critical research nodes for developing the necessary societal, cultural, and intellectual framework for living in a destroyed world. I suggest a label for the crossover between cli-fi and horror fiction: terrestrial horror. Analyzing multiple texts within this subgenre renders visible the societal, cultural, and intellectual changes necessary for the kinds of posthumanism needed in a destroyed world.

1. INTRODUCTION

Climate fiction (cli-fi) has been, and is still, on a meteoric rise in production and popular and scholarly interest. While the term cli-fi has only been around for about 15 years, elements of climate fiction are well established in our popular culture and exist in two basic camps: the optimistic, post-Enlightenment version and the dystopian, post-apocalyptic version.¹ For an example of the first camp and its presence in our popular culture, look no further than the Star Trek franchise itself. Think back to the environmental disaster embedded in its ur-story. The United Federation of Planets exists *after* humans nearly destroyed Earth through greedy exploitation of natural resources and through World War III. In fact, the entire existence of humans who go on to meet Vulcans, Klingons, and Borg relies on a narrative wherein humanity faced and overcame the environmental disasters of the 20th and 21st centuries and, ironically, did so with their Enlightenment values and politics in tow. The other dominant species of climate fiction embedded in our popular culture is the dystopian or post-apocalyptic narrative of something like *Mad Max*. In this 1979 film, humanity did not overcome its environmental failures and oil has been almost entirely depleted, leading to war, famine, societal collapse etc.,

¹ Solarpunk or Ecopunk has begun to emerge in recent years as an alternative to these two camps although it is too early to know exactly what will be the lasting impact of this new genre. See *Solar Punk: Ecological and Fantastical Stories in a Sustainable World* (2016).

and the remaining humane humans (in this case, a very young Mel Gibson) must face the corrupt, feudal gangs that take over. As cli-fi has emerged as a genre in its own right, these two versions of humanity's engagement with environmental collapse remain intact, although the dystopian/post-apocalyptic is increasingly the larger and louder half.

This piece focuses on the dystopian camp of climate fiction and its affinities with another genre of fiction: horror. During cli-fi's rise, horror has enjoyed a resurgence of popular interest and sustained and reinvigorated scholarly interest in the past few years.² While horror and dystopian cli-fi have different roots and conceptual underpinnings, there are points of contact between the genres, when the horrible in horror fiction spawns from environmental collapse or when the climatic in cli-fi drives what horrifies. My central claim is that these contact points, the overlap between cli-fi and horror fiction, become critical research nodes for developing the necessary societal, cultural, and intellectual framework for living in a destroyed world. I even suggest a label for the crossover between cli-fi and horror fiction: terrestrial horror.³ Analyzing multiple texts within this subgenre renders visible the societal, cultural, and intellectual changes necessary for the kinds of posthumanism that will be needed in a destroyed world.

2. DISCUSSION

In 2007, Dan Bloom coined the term "cli-fi", referring to fiction that depicts human-driven climate change; having been picked up by academics and writers, the term gained momentum after NPR ran a short program about climate fiction in 2013 with Barbara Kingsolver and Nathaniel Rich. Within three years, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published a piece entitled "The Subfield that is Changing the Landscape of Literary Studies" that argues courses wherein cli-fi texts are increasingly taught have "put it all on a new footing, and there is a kind of urgency, of insight, of research, and new information coming out of it. It's transforming business as usual in literature studies" (2016). In his foundational *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*, Adam Trekker argues that human-driven changes to the Earth's climate have irrevocably changed how fiction works: "climate novels must change the parameters of storytelling, even to draw on the tropes of recognizable narratives. More often than not, the narrative difficulties of the Anthropocene threaten to rupture the defining features of the genre" (2015). Trexler's is the most comprehensive study of climate fiction to date and represents the emerging force that this subfield commands. Of course, climate change goes at least as far back in the public consciousness as the 1970s when "global warming" started appearing as a phrase, and the scientific community has been studying human-driven climate change since the end of the 19th

² I am not alone in finding this resonance between cli-fi and horror fiction. See Jones's "Antagonistic Nature: The Loss of Anthropocentric Authority in Ecohorror on the 1970s and 1980s," Murphy's "'Why Wouldn't the Wilderness Fight Us?' American Eco-Horror and the Apocalypse" (2013), and Rust and Soles's "Ecohorror Special Cluster: 'Living in Fear, Living in Dread, Pretty Soon We'll All Be Dead'" (2014).

³ This term, "terrestrial horror," has been an evolving designator in my thinking and writing. "More than Simple Plagiarism: Ligotti, Pizzolatto, and *True Detective*'s Terrestrial Horror" contains the first published reference to this term (2017). Since writing that article, my understanding and use of "terrestrial horror" has changed considerably, so much so that I considered using a different label for the collection of texts I explore in this piece. However, there remains a continuation of thinking that I wanted to preserve, however ruptured it may be, that lead me to retain the term here.

Terrestrial Horror or the Marriage between Horror Fiction and Cli-Fi: What the Language of Horror can Teach us about Climate Change

Century, when Svante Arrhenius, a Swedish scientist, established a correlation between the widespread burning of coal and a warming world.⁴ Since then, scientists have increasingly studied the effect of human activity on the climate, and attention increased throughout the 20th century, rising to the current frenzy of studies and dire predictions that inundate the 21st century.

Fiction dealing with climate change follows a similar chronological arc. Robert Cromie's *The Crack of Doom* (1895) depicts weaponized nuclear power and gestures to the possible environmental impacts of such devices. Jules Verne's *The Purchase of the North Pole* (1889) frighteningly ties global capital into environmental destruction, H.G. Wells' *The World Set Free* (1913) goes further, rendering a world completely destroyed by atomic war. J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962) depicts a world in which the polar ice caps have melted and the Northern Hemisphere has flooded, and his *The Burning World* (1964) ties climate change to human activity wherein pollution of the oceans starts a chain of events stopping evaporation and thus largely ending rainfall. Arthur Herzog's *Heat*⁵ (1977) offers a grim picture of a world rapidly warmed by carbon emissions, and George Turner's *The Drowned Towers* (1987, published as *The Sea and the Summer* in the UK) illustrates the social, political, and environmental horrors of a world made increasingly uninhabitable by climate change. As the 20th century drew to a close and in the first two decades of the 21st Century, cli-fi texts have multiplied exponentially. In fact, Rio Fernandes reports that "According to data collected by Eco-fiction.com", cli-fi has seen "a four-fold increase in published books" since 2010 (2016). It is clear to the humanities scholars working on these and related texts that the explosion of cli-fi results directly from a cultural need for the intellectual work these texts are ideally positioned to do.

Trexler, quite correctly, sees literary studies as possessing "long experience" with the cultural, intellectual, psychological, and moral challenges of the Anthropocene (2015). This epoch presents humanity with questions here to fore unimagined in human history: questions such as, "how has the immense discourse of climate change shaped culture over the past forty years?" (2015). "What tropes are necessary to comprehend climate change or to articulate the possible futures faced by humanity?" (2015). "How can a global process spanning millennia be made comprehensible to human imagination, with its limited sense of place and time?" (2015). "What longer, historical forms aid this imagination, and what are the implications and limits of their use?" (2015). "What is impossible or tremendously difficult for us to understand about climate change?" (2015). "How does anthropogenic global warming challenge the political imagination or invite new organizations of human beings to emerge?" (2015). How

⁴ In 1895, Arrhenius addressed the Stockholm Physical Society under the title "On the Influence of Carbonic Acid in the Air upon the Temperature of the Ground" wherein he argued that the increase of carbon in the air due to human activity would increase global temperatures (1896).

⁵ It is worth noting that in "Climate Change in Literature and Literary Criticism" Adam Trexler and Adeline Johns-Putra labels *Heat* as the first climate change novel. Later Johns-Putra clarified this assertion saying that it rests on the implicit assumption that the genre of cli-fi refers to "fiction concerned with anthropocentric climate change or global warming as we now understand it" (2016). While Johns-Putra and Trexler are probably correct when they identify the publication of *Heat* as the point at which "the history of climate change fiction begins in earnest," there are earlier fictional accounts of human driven climate change (2011).

does living in the Anthropocene reconfigure human economies and ecosystems?” (2015). “How does climate change alter the forms and potentialities of art and cultural narrative?” (2015). As Trexler explains, “these are not questions of bald fact. Addressing them requires investigating larger, fabricated systems of expression” (2015). Of course, central among these systems is fiction: “Cultural texts like novels, poems, and plays show complex networks of ideas: history, scientific ideas, political discourse, cultural rituals, imaginative leaps, and the matter of everyday life” (2015). These texts rhizomatically link the complexities of human existence to make intelligible what which was unintelligible, to make imaginable that which was unimaginable, and this is where I am stepping further than Trexler, to make possible that which was impossible, but more on new possibilities in a moment. What is important about Trexler’s description of the role climate fiction plays in human cognition is how closely it aligns with the recent descriptions of horror fiction in human thought.

Horror fiction, itself hundreds of years old, became reinvigorated due to the work of various philosophers, writers, and scholars. In the last few years, this scholarly interest has organized itself into a call for action. Philosophers from speculative realism, environmental philosophy, posthumanism, and pessimism have begun pointing to horror fiction as a privileged site wherein the pressing intellectual work of the 21st Century must be done. For example, Graham Harman proposes that “philosophy’s sole mission is *weird realism*. Philosophy must be realist because its mandate is to unlock the structure of the world itself; it must be weird because reality is weird. ‘Continental science fiction,’ and ‘continental horror’ must be transformed from insults into a research program” (2011). Similarly, Eugene Thacker argues that “[t]he world is increasingly unthinkable - a world of planetary disasters, emerging pandemics, tectonic shifts, strange weather, oil-drenched seascapes, and the furtive, always-looming threat of extinction. Despite our daily concerns, wants, and desires, it is increasingly difficult to comprehend the world in which we live and in which we take part. To confront this idea is to confront an absolute limit of our ability to adequately understand the world at all - an idea that has been a central motif of the horror genre for some time” (2011). He argues, “The genre of supernatural horror is a privileged site in which this paradoxical thought of the unthinkable takes place” (2011). Similar arguments come from David Peak’s *The Spectacle of the Void* (2014), Thomas Ligotti’s *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* (2010), and Maria Negróni’s *Dark Museum* (1999).

In sounding this collective call to action, philosophy is both catching up to literary studies and leading in new directions and with a new purpose. Certainly, there has long been scholarly interest in Gothic fiction, and some of that work touches on questions similar to those driving this call to action. Literary studies continue its long and fruitful study of canonical figures in Gothic horror like Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker, H.G. Wells, and Edgar Allan Poe, and some of this work addresses horror’s role in thinking through the unthinkable reality of human existence. There has been increasing interest in, and respect for, H.P. Lovecraft’s work, and Lovecraft’s own aesthetic sounds the recent philosophical call to action nearly a century ago in his manifesto of sorts, “Supernatural Horror and Literature” (1927). Certainly, the notion that Gothic horror fiction does important intellectual work is nothing new, but the recent call to action organizes that work into a coherent project of responding to the increasingly unthinkable world of the 21st Century. Hence, we see the conceptual overlap

Terrestrial Horror or the Marriage between Horror Fiction and Cli-Fi: What the Language of Horror can Teach us about Climate Change

between cli-fi and horror fiction as each seeks to render intelligible an increasingly unintelligible world.

Focusing on the overlap between cli-fi and horror reveals a different set of priorities in the various calls to action that emerge from this collection of texts, which I call terrestrial horror. Rather than the calls for environmental action that could stave off or even save the environmental collapse that looms in cli-fi texts.⁶ For example, Kim Stanley Robinson's *Science in the Capital Trilogy* (2004, 2005, 2007) wherein drastic measures are proposed and carried out, such as a massive resalination program to jump-start the stalled gulf stream, flooding desert basins with seawater to lower rising sea levels, or populating the global conifer forest with a carbon-absorbing lichen. A more subtle example is Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behavior* (2012), in which the final solution to global climate change is implied to be education. These narratives rest on the often explicitly stated assumption that the world can be saved much as it exists with changes (often profound) in energy and environmental policies and practices.

Terrestrial horror, the subset of cli-fi that overlaps with horror fiction, rests on the opposite assumption: the world cannot be saved. We have passed the point of no return, and whatever changes could have been made in the past are long since obsolete. Often dystopian and post-apocalyptic, these texts are uninterested in what could have been done to save the world and are rather focused on what it will take to survive in a destroyed world. These narratives tend to depict a shattered Earth wherein massive population loss, and societal collapse have led to a corrupt, largely lawless, violent, predatory, and horrifying existence for the remaining humans all of which is complicated by the difficulties of limited water, food, and shelter in a radically altered environment.

This is not to say that all terrestrial horror texts are completely pessimistic. In fact, they share some of the optimism that is characteristic of much of cli-fi. Cli-fi almost always serves as a warning with solutions embedded throughout the narratives. For cli-fi these solutions often take the form of policy, energy, political, and lifestyle changes that could avert environmental collapse. For example, Kim Stanley Robinson's *Work* or a more subtle example, something like the "Historical Notes" that end *The Handmaid's Tale* wherein "*the partial proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies*" illustrates that human society has, in the interim between the end of Offred's narrative and the 2195 Symposium, survived the radical and repressive regime brought about by environmental driven sterility (Atwood 1985). I am not dismissing these narratives wherein humanity saves itself in the 11th hour. In fact if there is a set of solutions for our environmental troubles, I remain thoroughly convinced that those solutions will exist in fiction first. In fact, I remain convinced that cli-fi in general is a privileged site for theorizing solutions for the current state of the climate on planet Earth.

⁶ Others have marked distinctions within cli-fi as a genre. In her quite comprehensive extended review, "Climate Change in Literary Studies: From Cli-fi, Climate Change Theater and Eco-poetry to Ecocriticism and Climate Change Criticism," (2016) Adeline Johns-Putra makes a substantial distinction between cli-fi texts set in the present and a much larger group set in the future. The texts with settings of the future, often near future, tend toward the dystopian or post-apocalyptic much more so than those with a more present setting, according to Johns-Putra.

Terrestrial Horror's optimism is more understated than that of cli-fi, but it is no less instructive. Terrestrial horror's optimism rather rests on the dogged conviction that there is a way forward. In fact, the way forward that remains ever present in such fiction also presents the most instructive elements of these texts. Terrestrial horror refers to cli-fi texts that make the following assumptions: (1) Environmental collapse is a foregone conclusion; (2) And with it human life will discontinue as it has been within a generation or two; (3) The resulting world will be largely lawless, violent, predatory, and horrifying. Hence attempts at saving the environment are a failed task, rather preparing for the new world is the task at hand.

This preparation is not first and foremost a physical operation. Terrestrial horror, in fact, demonstrates that stockpiling supplies, building arsenals, digging bunkers, and even genetic engineering are not the activities that will permit human life to persist. All of these operations recur throughout terrestrial horror fiction, but they are found insufficient to sustain human life and often prove to be part of the problem. Instead, what terrestrial horror demonstrates is that the changes required for human life to persist are ontological changes to what it means to be human in the first place. Repeatedly, these texts offer a performative critique of the post-Enlightenment, individualized, capitalist subject that so clearly destroyed the world in the first place. These fictions show that in a destroyed world this figure, the patriarchal, anthropocentric champion of individual accomplishment achieved through acquisition and competition, is ill-equipped to persist. Ultimately these texts offer an argument that human nature itself must change. This is the human nature derived from the Enlightenment figure of "the rational man," "the steward of nature," "the hoarder of wealth and goods," and "the champion of individualism." Terrestrial horror sets this figure against a new breed of terrains who perform very different ways of being human. Taken as a group, these texts theorize ways to exist divorced from a human nature derived from such kinds of Enlightenment thinking. Think of texts like Octavia Butler's *The Parable of the Sower* (1993) or Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Drowned Cities* (2012).

3. CONCLUSION

Driven by the necessity of cooperative community structures, these texts intersect with current theories of posthumanism. Joining forces with current trends in philosophy and critical theory working to envision what comes after the human. Taken as a whole the body of fiction that I am calling terrestrial horror is without exaggeration, the most important preparation material for the later half 21st Century that exists on Earth. Terrestrial horror comes to us in many genres, and they all contribute to this preparatory project, and all, especially the novels, are a privileged site for this preparation because as a genre novels offer the most insight into the interiority of characters and the imagining of the unimaginable that are required for survival during and after environmental collapse are largely intellectual, conceptual, and emotional changes. Terrestrial horror texts are a call to action, but not to environmental action (too late for that) but instead toward envisioning and enacting posthuman practices as necessary survival techniques in a brave new world.

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