



NORLIT 2011

Conference on literature and politics

ROSKILDE, AUGUST 4.-6. 2011

ISBN: 978-87-7349-818-7

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Literature and Global Warming

By Gregers Andersen

In the last two decades anthropogenic global warming has presented itself as the most serious challenge to human existence and the biodiversity of the planet. However, the sciences about the human - the humanities - have been fairly slow to react to this challenge. In fact it is only recently that the humanities have begun to realize that it should play a part in the prevention of what for Man could become an apocalyptic event. This of course raises the fundamental question: What exactly is the part of the humanities in a time where Man along with many other species is threatened by extreme global warming? An answer to this question, when it comes to literary studies, could be that researchers in the field of comparative literature should decrease their interest in aesthetics and instead focus on how literary studies can help the social sciences. In this regard I think it would be appropriate for at least some literary studies to embark on the mission set forth by professor of Climate Change at the University of East Anglia, Mike Hulme, when he writes:

[...] We need to see how we can use the idea of climate change – the asymmetric matrix of power relationship, social discourses and symbolic meanings that climate change reveals – to re-think how we can take forward our various political, social and economic projects over the decades to come, whatever they may be.¹

What I mean by this is that literary fictions seems an obvious place to look, if we follow Hulme and acknowledges that global warming is not just an atmospheric event, but also has a cultural clothing made of discourses, narratives and other symbolic meanings. In fact global warming as represented in literary fiction along with the media and other narrative-producing cultural objects in this sense both generate and reveal some imaginaries about the future. By investigating and

¹ Mike Hulme: "Four Meanings of Climate Change" in *Future Ethics: Climate Change and Apocalyptic Imagination*, edited by Stefan Skrimshire, Continuum, London, 2010, p. 54.

analyzing these imaginaries I think it becomes possible for literary studies to make a social impact, because when analyzed these imaginaries can enlighten both the public and decision-makers about the imaginative foundation that guides their actions in relation to global warming.

This is a contribution to the social sciences I think comparative literature and literary criticism is yet to make. This is evident by the fact that comparative literature and literary critics have so far only dealt sporadically with the literary representations of anthropogenic global warming, even though global warming has been a major public concern for the last twenty-five years. An odd fact considering that the discussion of environmental issues in regard to literature and literary criticism has been ongoing for several decades in the shape of ecocriticism. But even today, as ecocriticism is gaining ground, ecocritics generally seem to avoid the literary representations of the event that is causing the most ecological havoc to the planet.

One explanation is that ecocritics have found it hard to accept the literary value of science fiction, eco-thrillers and other kinds of disaster-fictions, which are the genres, in which anthropogenic global warming has been most depicted. This again has something to with the fact that these literary genres typically do not deal with nature as a pure entity, but rather describe nature as an extension of culture. Or as pointed out by Lawrence Buell in *The Future of Environmental Criticism*:

Science fiction has taken a long time to win much respect from academic critics, including ecocritics. [...] ecocriticism has been behind the curve, partly no doubt because of its resistance to nature as artifice.²

This is an obstacle ecocritics along with researchers of comparative literature must move past in order to make the much needed contribution to the humanistic research on global warming. This

² Lawrence Buell: *The Future of Environmental Criticism*; Blackwell, 2005, p. 56.

implies that the criteria for judging literary fiction as good or bad according to usual standards must be dropped. Instead of being interested only in high-brow nature poetry, ecocritics and researchers of comparative literature must instead embrace popular genres such as the thriller, science fiction and even youth books.

Even though this can be a hard pill to swallow for most of us, it does hold some advantages. In fact what can be outlined here is something that assembles a method, a sociological dimension of comparative literature. In other words by showing an academic interest in the imaginaries that all the various fictions about anthropogenic global warming reveal, it becomes apparent that these imaginaries can be seen as narratives in a more general perspective. That is as modern social imaginaries that participate in the production of the public discourses about global warming. I am here using a term coined by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, who in his book of the same name (*Modern Social Imaginaries*) defines a social imaginary in the following way:

By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations. [...] I adopt the term imaginary because my focus is on the way ordinary people “imagine” their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories and legends.³

In other words my suggestion following Taylor is that there are various sets of imagery and narratives that unconsciously supports the public discourses about global warming in different cultures. And furthermore that there various sets of imagery and narratives are exactly what can be found in the cultural and literary representations of anthropogenic global warming. In fact in the western and primarily anglophone fiction about anthropogenic global warming I think it is

³ Charles Taylor: *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Duke University Press, 2004

possible to discern five “master imaginaries” that participate in the production of how a future climate disaster is imagined and presented in public discourse.

I will now present these five “master imaginaries” - not only as they are present in literary fiction, but also in relation to cultural theory and philosophy. I think this offers an interesting perspective that to my knowledge yet haven’t been applied to the fiction about anthropogenic global warming.

- 1) The first “master imaginary” is the imagination of a future climate disaster as a: **Social Breakdown**. In this imaginary anthropogenic global warming leads to war, civil war or even a return to the Hobbesian “state of nature” or anarchy. What unites these different forms of the imaginary is that anthropogenic global warming here leads to a major loss of the human ideals and values that underlies the social contract between men. **The Genre** is here typical science fiction or post-apocalyptic fiction. In this imaginary man is destined to cause havoc. Therefore there is a straight line between the havoc made by man before the disaster in the shape of anthropogenic global warming and the havoc caused by man after the disaster. Man is simply regarded as a destructive being. Ex. Paul McAuley: *The Quiet War* (2008), Marcel Theroux: *Far North* (2009)

- 2) The second “master imaginary” is the imagination of a future climate disaster as a **Judgment Seat**. In this imaginary Man is punished for his or her emissions of greenhouse gasses by nature. Nature simply runs amok. In the sense Bruno Latour has described it: Man’s ecocide here becomes a boomerang that comes back to hit Man with all kinds of calamities. **The Genre** is here typical the ecotrillers, where nature is monstrous and alive. It objectifies or guilt as something Unheimlich. That is as an uncanny estrangement

of the planet, we thought we knew. Ex. Frank Schätzing: *Der Schwarm* (2004) Jean McNeil: *The Ice Lovers* (2009), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) [movie].

- 3) The third “master imaginary is the imagination of a future climate disaster as a **Conspiracy**. In this imaginary global warming is configured by the people in power as a means of manipulating and/or terrifying the public. **The Genre** is here typical the thriller or crime fiction. An imagination of truth drives the fiction forward. Global warming simply conceals a secret that must be uncovered. The imaginary comes in both a right and a left-wing form. In the right-wing form the truth is that anthropogenic global warming is a lie, in the left-wing form the truth is that anthropogenic global warming is much worse than what is presented to the public. Ex. Michael Crichton: *State of Fear* (2005), Stephen Baxter: *Flood* (2008).
- 4) The forth “master imaginary” is the imagination of a future climate disaster as a **Loss and a return of wilderness**. Anthropogenic global warming is here generating the loss of the last authentic spots of nature. However this loss augurs the rise of a new wilderness, when man is gone from the planet. The imaginary therefore both contains a pre-apocalyptic and a post-apocalyptic wilderness. **The Genre** is here typical both popular fictions and more high brow fictions. In both types of fiction the loss of wilderness is regarded as a loss of aesthetic quality and as a loss of a place for existential peace. In fact what is lost here resembles Martin Heidegger’s notion of nature as a place, where Man can experience relief or *Gelassenheit* from the technology that dominates modern life and thereby be attuned to the suffering state of beings. Ex. Jean McNeil: *The Ice Lovers* (2009), TC Boyle: *A Friend of the Earth* (2000).

5) The fifth “master imaginary” is the imagination of a future climate disaster as a recreation of the planet through **Spheres**. Anthropogenic global warming here leads to a reconstruction of the planet through terraforming and the creation of artificial biospheres. **The Genre** is here typical science fiction. After the loss of wilderness man will rebuild the planet. This is not so much something to lament, but rather to embrace. Man is a geo-engineering being destined to destroy and recreate his or her surroundings. This idea resembles the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk’s view of Man’s vitalism as something connected to the production and destruction of inner-worlds in the shape of bobbles and globes. Ex. Kim Stanley Robinson: *Science in the Capital* (trilogy, finished 2007), Paul McAuley: *The Quiet War* (2008).

So to summarize: By analyzing these “master imaginaries” I think comparative literature can provide a mapping of the general imaginative foundation that guides the actions of different cultures in relation to global warming.

This is not, though, the point on which I want to conclude. Instead I would like to exit by turning to the last two master imaginaries: “The Loss and return of wilderness” and “The sphere”. The reason for this is that these imaginaries show how anthropogenic global warming is affecting the way nature is culturally conceptualized. To be more exact, I will here argue that anthropogenic global warming is slowly causing an imaginative shift from a modern to a postmodern concept of nature that makes it increasingly hard to imagine nature as a pure entity. In this regard the representation of the two mentioned imaginaries in climate change-fiction can also be seen as a progression. That is as a shift from a modern imagination of nature as something authentic to a

postmodern imagination of nature as simulacra or something that can be artificially created in order to solve the problems caused by anthropogenic global warming.