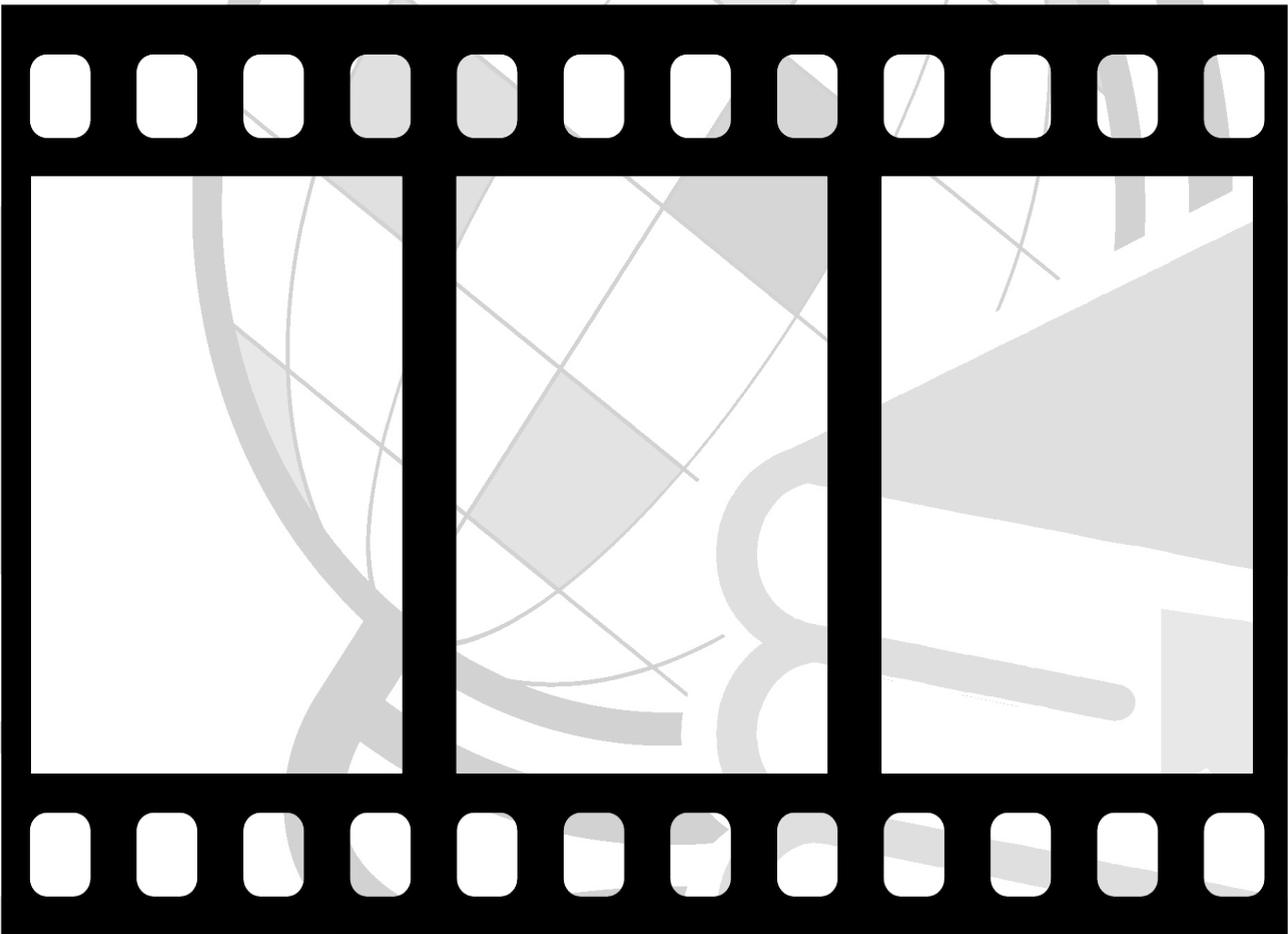


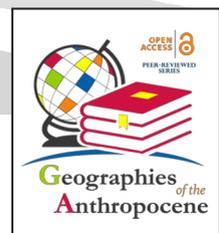
# CINEMA, DISASTERS AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

*Enrico Nicosia, Lucrezia Lopez (Editors)*



Foreword by David McEntire

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# Cinema, Disasters and the Anthropocene

Enrico Nicosia, Lucrezia Lopez

*Editors*



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Enrico Nicosia, Lucrezia Lopez (Eds.)

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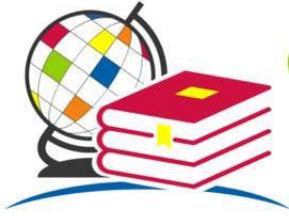


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The book series “Geographies of the Anthropocene” edited by the International Scientific Publisher “Il Sileno” (Il Sileno Edizioni) will discuss

the new processes of the Anthropocene epoch through the various worldviews of geoscientists and humanists, intersecting disciplines of Geosciences, Geography, Geoethics, Philosophy, Socio-Anthropology, Sociology of Environment and Territory, Psychology, Economics, Environmental Humanities and cognate disciplines.

Geoethics focuses on how scientists (natural and social), arts and humanities scholars working in tandem can become more aware of their ethical responsibilities to guide society on matters related to public safety in the face of natural hazards, sustainable use of resources, climate change and protection of the environment. Furthermore, the integrated and multiple perspectives of the Environmental Humanities, can help to more fully understand the cultures of, and the cultures which frame the Anthropocene. Indeed, the focus of Geoethics and Environmental Humanities research, that is, the analysis of the way humans think and act for the purpose of advising and suggesting appropriate behaviors where human activities interact with the geosphere, is dialectically linked to the complex concept of Anthropocene.

The book series “Geographies of the Anthropocene” publishes online volumes, both collective volumes and monographs, which are set in the perspective of providing reflections, work materials and experimentation in the fields of research and education about the new geographies of the Anthropocene.

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# **Introduction: Cinema and Disaster in the Geographies of the Anthropocene**

*Enrico Nicosia<sup>1</sup>, Lucrezia Lopez<sup>2</sup>*

The Anthropocene concept identifies a geological era in which human action leads to changes on a planetary scale with long-term irreversible effects. Thus, humanity continues to improve its quality of life, however bracketing the balance of the ecosystem, which reacts to the damages with significant changes and environmental disasters. Such irresponsible anthropocentrism will finally lead people to forget their humanity and develop a dystopian scenario. Such a nefarious conclusion needs immediate awareness and information on a global scale to ensure that environmental problems are known to all the human inhabitants of the planet, urging to collaborate to remedy the devastation that has already begun.

In the context of studies on the *Geographies of the Anthropocene*, this volume collects insights into geographical research, with a specific look at the challenges of the future, and the potential of visual communication offered by cinema, documentaries and television series. In fact, fiction could represent the appropriate medium to examine the notions of the Anthropocene, being a language of global diffusion and highly evocative since it uses the engagement of narration and entertainment to convey messages of vital importance, arousing emotions in the viewer, shared awareness and, finally, responsibility. In the Anthropocene era, the challenge of climate change is not a problem of science but a failure of politics. And politics fails because the Great Acceleration has led to the good life and certainly a better life for people everywhere. Who is willing to give up the great stuff of the Great Acceleration? What would that new life look like? What kind of challenges does the future propose? Some of these questions, among others, are raised in the chapters of the present volume. The different geographical contexts and approaches, here collected, can play an important clarifying function, to reduce the complexity of (today's) social, economic, political, and technological reality, presenting a much deeper vision of reality than it appears to us, and at the same time offering us the means to navigate it. Thus, the volume deals with these issues in three sections, moving from

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narrative methods to the representation of ecological disasters and finally analysing a more specific topic. Each of them wants to guide the reader in the comprehension of the different perspectives on the Anthropocene.

The first section “Narrating the Anthropocene in Cinema: Its Imagery between Romanticism and Symbolism” presents five contributions on the different ways of translating Anthropocene topics. For example, fiction can develop a sense of nostalgia, thus evocating resignation through the present. In line with this, in the opening chapter, Pedro Artur Baptista Lauria pretends to analyse the mediatic romanticization of the cinematic productions regarding the suburbs. His aim is to understand how they are portrayed in the suburban fantastic cinema. Indeed, the fantastic suburban subgenre provides fantastic elements that destroy the world, and people fight to reboot the balance of their daily life and socio-cultural ground. He will go through the “The Return of the Suburban Fantastic Cinema: Nostalgia and Ecological Dystopia in the Suburbia” by presenting a selection of audio-visual pieces (starting in the 2010s). In his opinion, the suburban fantastic cinema normalizes the suburb and the suburban lifestyle by putting them in the place of being defended by new generations. The author finally recognises a utopic narration and historical perspective of the American Dream, which has fuelled the dystopian present.

As an alternative to the representation of nostalgia for a bygone era, we can choose to focus on the effects of environmental degradation, communicating a dystopian scenario with apocalyptic images. In this regard, Floribert Patrick C. Endong’s chapter provides an analysis of the zombification metaphor, using the thriller *Ojuju* to present a relationship between the precarious environmental situation and the living conditions of Nigerian urban cities, denouncing environmental risks. The author makes a deep analysis of the increasing use of the zombie and zombification in ecology-oriented or pro-environmental communication to emphasize the negative consequences of man’s anti-environmental attitudes, his anti-ecological actions on earth or the consequences of such actions. Zombies embodies environmental anxieties and collapse, but also pollution, deforestation, poor land development practices and natural catastrophes, among others. Considering this, in his work *Using the Zombie Metaphor and Apocalyptic Imageries to Preach Environmentalism in Nigeria: A Semiotic Reading of C.J. Obasi's Ojuju*, he investigates the zombie metaphor in *Ojuju* as a way of speaking about environmental degradation and the resultant precariousness of human life in most Nigerian towns. The zombification metaphor and apocalyptic imageries of this cinematic production becomes a way to advocate environmental protection.

In addition to cases of Anthropocene's visual effects, fiction can also provide examples of damages on an existential level. Such an aspect is quite relevant, especially as the Third World society is paying the consequences. The chapter by Paul Joshua and Paul Tomlin investigates Jamaican cinema, using the movie *The Harder They Come* to present a symbolic narrative of Jamaica's struggle against the harmful effects of colonisation and European slavery, historically linked right in the Anthropocene era. The authors study the emergence of cinema in Jamaica in relation to the effects of slavery and colonialization. Indeed, they are assumed to be roots of the Anthropocene, thus marking the future of a territory. Throughout their work, with the help of the selected audio-visual productions, the authors underline how the European colonization and the transatlantic slave trade have, somehow, contributed to enact socio-ecological disruptive forces. This position is manifested by means of symbolic mechanisms that express the struggle of the black man and his need for identity and roots.

In sum, cinema could afford the difficult-to-grasp Anthropocene concept. In fact, the debate on Anthropocene concerns both the definition and the classification of the specific period of reference, and for this reason, it is essential to build a common vocabulary and imaginary, thus developing a common ground of reality interpretation. These are the reflections of Andrea Nocera, whose chapter analyses cinematographic products and streaming platforms (e.g., *Arrival* and *Don't Look Up*) to find different examples of feature films that propose a new approach to the world. Thus, in his selection of cinematic works he poses different questions regarding different moments with the intention to trace a sort of storyline of the representations of the Anthropocene. In such an exercise, it is certainly urgent to pay more attention to the "possible futures" and to adopt a language that might achieve as many people as possible: cinema might be one of them, but a common symbolism ground is needed, to avoid misunderstanding. In order to prevent disasters such as global warming from leading to a dramatic outcome, proposals for a new era of harmony between human beings and the rest of living beings (as in the case of the Ecotopian solution in Robert Crumb's *A Short History of America*) could be mandatory.

However, more than analysing the Anthropocene starting only from the unsustainability of human activity may be required. In the face of damage to the ecological system, it is also necessary to broaden the perspective of non-human entities, observing their agency in a post-human scenario. In this regard, the chapter by Seçil Erkoç Iqbal analyses the post-apocalyptic action thriller *I Am Legend*, inspired by Richard Matheson's novel. The author aims to compare the cinematographic and narrative products to analyse how the

Anthropos was visualised in two works distant from each other by more than fifty years. Also, such an argument manifests all its contemporaneity since we have observed the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic as the result of human actions far from the ecosystem balance, reducing humanity's "legendary" vision. Thanks to the cinema, it becomes possible "to illustrate the dialogue between the human and the nonhuman agents of the Anthropocene, and the changing dynamics of the 'recent age of man' calls for a new conceptualization of the human on a material and philosophical ground".

Therefore, with different narrative methods it is possible to provide different perspectives on Anthropocene issues, arousing awareness through conflicting emotions in the memory of the past and the hypotheses of future scenarios. However, the emergence of the Anthropocene manifests itself primarily in the present, or in any case, in historical events and disasters whose long-term effects are still visible and draw attention to a current situation in which humanity is immersed. Humanity tries to carry out a negotiation process with which it hopes to be reborn from the ashes of the disaster, trying to manage the effects of global disasters caused by itself. This topic is covered in the second section "Environment and Landscape Disaster during the Anthropocene: a call for Sustainability through Cinema". By portraying a real-life disaster, fiction can transcend pure entertainment, thus constituting a cultural phenomenon that allows people to demand an understanding of a global phenomenon and consequently develop a collective consciousness. This topic is covered in the chapter of Sonia Malvica, Lucrezia Lopez and Enrico Nicosia, who present the case of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986, which marked the fate of the Soviet Union, as well as making world history. More specifically, the case study refers to the *Chernobyl* miniseries (produced and released by HBO in 2019), which has been a world audience success showing how this event turned a city into a ghost town. In their research, the authors recognise in HBO miniseries *Chernobyl* not a documentary, but a compelling storytelling of irresponsible choices, incorrect use of technological possibilities and censorship as the leading causes of the construction of a dystopian city, still today a global symbol of the danger of human self-extinction. The miniseries *Chernobyl* reminds the public about the global consequences of an uncontrolled human activity. In addition, the miniseries contributed to restore a central role of this catastrophic site, awakening consciences at an international scale.

A specific example of a documentary is instead provided by Fabio Pollice and Patrizia Miggiano, whose chapter presents the case of the documentary film *Il tempo dei giganti* to tell the case of *Xylella fastidiosa* in Puglia, Italy.

In this case, attention is paid to the Salento landscape (Italy), characterized over the centuries by changing social conditions, different cultural and collective practices and the progress of agricultural techniques. No less important for this territory is the olive-growing and olive-production, an identity factor to be valued both in economic and cultural terms. Such an inheritance is being menaced by the above-mentioned *Xylella fastidiosa*, a pathogen that causes a phytosanitary disaster among olive productions in Apulia. Considering the urgency of this problem, the paper encourages a critical reflection on the possibility of resorting to visual tools to explore the social perception of the consequences of this plague. In this sense, the language of the documentary could exploit the power of the visual tool to develop a sensitivity to the problem in the population and local actors, also conveying the formation of a sustainability laboratory in Salento and a rethinking of Apulian agricultural models.

In line with people's engagement and the impact of visual communication, Maria Laura Pappalardo's chapter finally overviews the "Festival Terra2050" held in Verona and Mantova (in Italy), an event dedicated to sustainable development through relief cartography. In the same, she questions the way in which mankind uses technological improvements with a homogeneous and one-dimensional paradigm leading to an unreal infinite availability of the assets of the Planet. But, according to her, we are facing an era with urgent unsolved problems, such as environmental degradation, the depletion of nature reserves, pollution, the spread of poverty, housing problems, the pervasive discrimination, among others. The three-dimensional tool allows all participants to represent the effects of humanity activity on the world. She shows how using an "old" investigative tool which, with its communicative power, could allow people to develop a powerful sense of responsibility, especially among the youngest, the new generation.

In closing, the third section "Water Exploitation and its Consequences in the Anthropocene Era: contribution from cinematic productions" collects contributions dealing with the theme of water. It is a renewable energy resource generally associated with life and rebirth but is also used in religions to identify punishments and new beginnings. However, in the Anthropocene era, irresponsible use of water resources can prove fatal, causing poverty and devastation. In the first chapter, by Maria Conte, we assist to *The conquest of power. A look to hydroelectric landscapes of Alps through the lens of audiovisuals and cinema*. She suggests the changing role of mountains, which are no longer places for the contemplation of nature, rather they undergone different transformative processes that alter their function. Throughout the analysis of the selected productions, she will demonstrate how mountains

have become “privileged places for the direct and active experience of the subjects”, whose landscape are mainly experienced. More in detail, she advances a review of how representations and narratives of the hydroelectric industry are conveyed through television and cinema. In this sense, she invites to reflect on the active role of mountains, which have assumed a more functionalistic and utilitarian role to sustain the economic and social progress.

In the second chapter, we move to *The China-Tibet relationship in the film story. Disasters announced?*, in which Antonietta Ivona analyses the film story's contribution to discussing the delicate geo-economic framework between China and Tibet, physically close but culturally distant realities. In her work, she considers different documentaries aimed at pointing out the geopolitical implications that water exploitation and the construction of dams have in the already difficult relations between China and Tibet. This problem also brings environmental issues into play, such as the use of dams by China to use Tibet's resources, increasing an environmental diseconomy. It implies the lack of water supply for entire populations, difficulties for the agricultural activity and for the whole ecosystem. Added to this is the problem of global warming. Due to its high altitude, the Tibetan plateau suffers more strongly than the global average, all increased by the effects of burning fossil fuels in China and India.

In the same line of the former contributions, Sony Jalarajan Raj and Adith K Suresh introduces how to *Picturing the Anthropocene through flood narratives: The environmental disaster discourse in Indian cinema*. They present the potential of cinema as a popular art of technological reality, thus capable of providing a realistic visualization of environmental disasters and global repercussions. The main aim of the work is to explore how narratives of flood in Indian cinema define the notion of ecological disaster in India. Here, floods represent one of the most common natural disasters; of course, their consequences do affect population and biodiversity. Specifically, the authors focus on the narratives of the flood in Indian cinema: cinema can present the water element in an anti-romantic way, thus emphasizing its devastating impact on the region's geography and presenting at the same time the vulnerability of the human species in the face of an environment that they themselves have made hostile. By means of the disaster discourse, authors deconstruct the spectacles of flood in Indian cinema to understand its overarching impact on geography, culture, and life. In so doing, they pretend to warn about risks and vulnerability and the consequences of an uncontrolled human activity.

Thanks to the diversity of approaches and to the diverse geographical contexts of the contributions, we believe that the present edited volume will

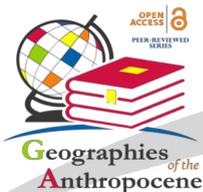
contribute to understand and discover the manifold relations existing between the Geography of the Anthropocene and the cinema. The reflections and the critiques raised by the participating authors could be inputs and stimulus that pave the way to further similar research, thus reinforcing the utility of the audio-visual productions in promoting sensibilization and consciousness towards problems and disasters deriving from the Anthropocene.

Finally, we would like to thank all the authors for having answered the call and for their commitment in delivering their contributions. And of course, we would like to thank the editorial team of *Il Sileno*. Without the interest and the work of all of them, this book would not have been produced.

The Anthropocene concept identifies a geological era in which human action leads to changes on a planetary scale with long-term irreversible effects. This volume collects insights into geographical research, with a specific look at the challenges of the future, and the potential of visual communication offered by cinema, documentaries and television series. In fact, fiction could represent the appropriate medium to examine the notions of the Anthropocene, being a language of global diffusion and highly evocative since it uses the engagement of narration and entertainment to convey messages of vital importance, arousing emotions in the viewer, shared awareness and, finally, responsibility. In the Anthropocene era, the challenge of climate change is not a problem of science but a failure of politics. And politics fails because the Great Acceleration has led to the good life and certainly a better life for people everywhere. Who is willing to give up the great stuff of the Great Acceleration? What would that new life look like? What kind of challenges does the future propose? Some of these questions, among others, are raised in the chapters of the present volume. The different geographical contexts and approaches, here collected, can play an important clarifying function, to reduce the complexity of (today's) social, economic, political, and technological reality, presenting a much deeper vision of reality than it appears to us, and at the same time offering us the means to navigate it. Thus, the volume deals with these issues in three sections, moving from narrative methods to the representation of ecological disasters and finally analysing a more specific topic.

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