

Rhetoric of Ecology in Visual Culture

Retoryka ekologii w kulturze wizualnej

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The rhetoric of ecology in the post-apocalyptic cinematic landscape

Retoryka ekologii w postapokaliptycznym krajobrazie filmowym

Abstract

Contemporary post-apocalyptic films portray a world ravaged by ecological catastrophes, and humanity on the brink of extinction. Such films echo the urgent environmental discourses of the Anthropocene, while offering instances of a post-anthropocentric perspective and the new subject-formations it engenders. The article argues that the central rhetorical device that generates an ecocritical perspective in such films is the post-apocalyptic landscape. Cinematic space shapes the meaning of all films, and this is even more emphatic when setting is transformed into landscape (Lefebvre 2006). What is more, in the post-apocalyptic films, the landscape becomes the main site of the films' "rhetorical environmentality" (McMurry 2017). The article examines the post-apocalyptic landscape in *I Am Legend* (2007) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) and how it articulates the entangled relation between humans and the collapsing world that surrounds them. Using Rosi Braidotti's (2013) post-human theory, I contend that these cinematic landscapes hint at an "eco-philosophy of multiple belongings" (Braidotti 2013, 49) and enact "a process of redefining one's sense of attachment and connection to a shared world" (Braidotti 2013, 2019). Ultimately, I conclude that the affective appeal of these landscapes implicates the viewer in post-anthropocentric perspectives, thus prompting new modes of environmental consciousness.

Współczesne filmy postapokaliptyczne przedstawiają ludzkość na krawędzi wymarcia i świat zdewastowany przez katastrofy ekologiczne. Takie filmy odzwierciedlają naglące dyskursy antropocenu, jednocześnie oferując przykłady postantropocentrycznej perspektywy i nowych form podmiotowych, do których ta perspektywa prowadzi. Niniejszy tekst dowodzi, że podstawowym środkiem retorycznym generującym w takich filmach perspektywę ekokrytyczną jest krajobraz postapokaliptyczny. Pokazana w kinie przestrzeń kształtuje znaczenie wszystkich filmów, a w szczególności tych, w których sceneria zostaje przekształcona w krajobraz (Lefebvre 2006). Co więcej, w filmach postapokaliptycznych krajobraz staje się głównym miejscem „retorycznego środowiska” filmów (McMurry 2017). Artykuł analizuje postapokaliptyczny krajobraz w *I Am Legend* (2007) i *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) oraz splecioną relację między ludźmi a rozpadającym się światem, który ich otacza. Posługując się teorią posthumanistyczną Rosi Braidotti (2013), autorka argumentuje, że omawiane w artykule filmy krajobrazy nawiązują do „eko-filozofii wielorakich przynależności” (Braidotti 2013, 49) i niosą ze sobą „proces redefiniowania poczucia przywiązania i połączenia ze wspólnym światem” (Braidotti 2013, 2019). Ostatecznie dochodzi do wniosku, że afektywny urok tych krajobrazów skłania widza do przyjęcia perspektywy postantropocentrycznej, pobudzając w ten sposób nowe wymiary świadomości dotyczącej środowiska.

Key words

post-apocalyptic films, cinematic landscape, rhetorical environmentality, *I Am Legend*, *Mad Max: Fury Road*
filmy postapokaliptyczne, krajobraz filmowy, retoryczna środowiskowość, *I Am Legend*, *Mad Max: Fury Road*

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The rhetoric of ecology in the post-apocalyptic cinematic landscape

1. Introduction

In an article circulated in December 2020 on the RT news website, entitled “There will be no return to normality after COVID-19”, cultural philosopher Slavoj Žižek argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has forever changed the way that we exist. He contends that “we are entering a post-human era”, a state predicted in Michel Foucault’s statement that “man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end” (2005, 422). Žižek contends that the pandemic, global warming, and the digitalization of our lives “corrode the basic coordinates of our being human” and humanity thus requires new forms of political and social existence. Consequently, Žižek suggests that accepting “the challenge of post-humanity is our only hope” (Žižek 2020). This association between a new era for humanity and an environment-related crisis has a long lineage and can be traced back at least to the year 2000 when Nobel Laureate chemist Paul J. Crutzen proposed the term “Anthropocene” to describe the new geological era of our planet wherein human industrial activity has become a geological force capable of destabilizing Earth’s ecosystems. Such environmental discourses proliferated from 2000, signaling an emerging ecological awareness (Rust 2013, 192).

This developing awareness is also inscribed in Hollywood productions from the new millennium, and particularly in post-apocalyptic science fiction films, which offer a window into the current “cultural logic of ecology” (Rust 2013, 192). Such films focus on the changing relationships between humans and their environment, often suggesting the need to redefine conceptions of the human in such collapsing ecosystems. These cinematic post-apocalyptic worlds, ruined by ecological catastrophes, destabilize humans’ dominance, accentuating humanity’s interdependency and co-constitution with non-human nature (Alaimo 2010). Thus, they echo the urgent environmental discourses of our present reality, while offering instances of a post-anthropocentric perspective and the new subject-formations it engenders. This article argues that the post-apocalyptic landscape is

the central rhetorical device that creates an ecocritical perspective in such films. I examine the post-apocalyptic landscapes in *I Am Legend* (2007) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) and ask how they articulate the entangled relationship between humans and the collapsing world that surrounds them. These landscapes thus become the films' main sites of "rhetorical environmentality" (McMurry 2017). In what follows, I first delineate the theoretical context of the essay, specifically highlighting the concept of cinematic landscape and its rhetorical function and outlining Braidotti's (2013) post-human theory. Afterwards, I discuss the different articulations of the post-apocalyptic landscapes of *I Am Legend* and *Mad Max: Fury Road*. These films foreground and foster identification with the non-human world, thus prompting the expansion of the self into a post-human becoming. I conclude that the post-apocalyptic landscape offers a "memory for the future" (Kaplan 2016), thus eliciting a strong, affective appeal to viewers which has the potential to shape their ecological awareness.

2. Cinematic Landscape, Rhetoric, Posthumanism

In his 2006 essay "Between setting and landscape in the cinema", Martin Lefebvre distinguishes between two distinct ways of representing space in cinema: as setting, and as landscape. The author defines landscape as the opposite of setting, describing it as a "space freed from eventhood" (Lefebvre 2006, 22). In mainstream cinema, the majority of films depict natural or exterior spaces as settings rather than landscapes. That is, spatial surroundings serve as mere background for the action. This comes as no surprise, given that in mainstream narrative cinema all aspects of the film tend to be subordinated to the narrative. However, narrative cinema not only tells stories by following a series of events, but it also offers a visual spectacle. It is exactly these two aspects, the narrative and the spectacle, that generate two modes of spectatorial activity, "a narrative mode and a spectacular mode" (Lefebvre 2006, 29), which constantly interact with each other. The narrative mode is interrupted momentarily when spectators contemplate the filmic spectacle.¹ In these moments, space is emancipated from its narrative function. This "autonomizing" gaze, which can be traced back to the Western art of landscape painting, "enables [...] the transition from setting to landscape" (Lefebvre 2006, 29). It also belongs to both filmmakers and spectators, leading to two interpretations of the cinematic landscape. In the first case, the spectator attributes to the film (or to its director) the intention to use multiple visual strategies to present a landscape. For instance,

1. The article follows Lefebvre's description of the relation between narrative and spectacle. However, this relation is a much-discussed topic in film theory, which cannot be thoroughly examined here due to the limited space. See also Laura Mulvey's (1975) "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Tom Gunning's (1986) "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, its Spectators and the Avant-garde", Geoff King's (2000) *Spectacular Narratives. Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster*, among others.

long shots foreground the landscape and minimize the characters and the events; temps morts and transition shots enable a spectacular mode of viewing. In the second case, the spectator must shift her/his attention deliberately from narrative to landscape, and consequently assume that she/he is the source of the cinematic landscape (Lefebvre 2006, 30). These interpretations of filmic space can coexist, and this dual gaze (the camera's and/or the spectator's) encourages the emergence of landscape. Cinematic landscape is thus the result of an interpretive gaze—a new way of seeing beyond the human.

Gregory Clark explores another perspective on landscape in his 2004 monograph *Rhetorical Landscapes in America: Variations on a Theme from Kenneth Burke*. Clark addresses the rhetorical dimension of landscapes based on Kenneth Burke's concept of identification, as developed in his 1950 seminal study *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Clark 2004, 2-3), which promotes the application of rhetorical terms not just to language but to all aesthetic encounters. The concept of identification is the basis of Burke's definition of "rhetoric", which he describes as "the process of negotiating with others our notions of individual and collective identity", through "exchanges of collectively meaningful symbols" (Clark 2004, 3). Landscapes are such symbols, functioning as rhetorical devices that enable individuals of a nation (the United States in Clark's case study) to enact their individual and collective identity. Clark's book employs these concepts to explore the rhetorical power of iconic US landscapes, specifically major tourist attractions, which offer American visitors a symbolic experience of their homeland. Clark's central argument is that "national culture is wielded not only by public discourse, but also by public experiences" (Clark 2004, 4). Landscapes constitute public experiences capable of exerting rhetorical power, prompting individuals to identify themselves with a national collective. Thus, landscape acquires a conceptual dimension, and functions rhetorically when it is assigned a symbolic role. Extending Clark's thesis, I maintain that cinematic landscapes too are symbolic experiences that can reconstitute individual and shared identities. As David Blakesley argues, alluding to Burke, "film rhetoric—the visual and verbal signs and strategies that shape film experience—directs our attention in countless ways, but always with the aim of fostering identification" (Blakesley 2003, 3). It is exactly this rhetorical dimension of cinema, and specifically its landscapes, that concerns the present essay, which examines the rhetorical potential of the post-apocalyptic landscape to shape ecocritical perspectives.

Andrew McMurry discusses the rhetorical capacity of the non-human world in his 2017 chapter "Rhetoric and Environment". He argues that the concept of environment is so rhetorically charged that the biophysical Other cannot be conceived outside of human symbolic systems. This leads to an anthropocentric

rhetoric which frames biophysical matters, including environmental matters, as issues of human discourse. That is, rhetoric lacks the terminology or motivation to focus on non-human agents, and usually represents environmental crises such as global warming and resource depletion as discursive, rhetorical crises. The only exception to this traditional rhetoric is the work of Burke, “an eco-rhetorician *avant la lettre*” (McMurry 2017, 733) who foregrounded “Earth itself as the ultimate setting of critical activity” (quoted in McMurry 2017, 733). In turn, McMurry proposes that rhetorical inquiry must begin to account for the biophysical world beyond language and advocates for what he labels a “rhetorical environmentality,” “a cultural condition in which the thing-world is understood to exert rhetorical pressure” (McMurry 2017, 735). Rhetorical environmentality moves beyond human discursive systems, and urges rhetorical studies to include the “non-symbolic, the environmental Real, the thing-world” (McMurry 2017, 742). This confluence of rhetoric and environment can be effectuated in three ways: “critique of our overwhelmingly anthropocentric rhetorical tradition; theorization of the environmental conditioning of all rhetorical situations; and, finally, exploration of the rhetorical capacities of non-humans” (McMurry 2017, 742).

This attention to the non-human is the main object of post-human theory. Rosi Braidotti (2013) in *The Posthuman* argues that the limitation of the humanistic subject to the figure of the Western Man, and its concomitant exclusions, has resulted in the need for a new way to theorize the human. Braidotti (2013, 45) regards the post-human as “a transversal inter-connection or an ‘assemblage’ of human and non-human actors, not unlike Latour’s Actor Network Theory”.² The author grounds her post-human theory in Spinoza’s concept of the monistic universe which describes matter, humans, and the world not structured in binary oppositions but rather unified in a continuum of affinities. The post-human is thus an embodied and expanded subject “that functions in a nature–culture continuum and is technologically mediated” (Braidotti 2013, 61). This embeddedness of humans within the non-human world hints at an “eco-philosophy of multiple belongings” (Braidotti 2013, 49). As the author argues:

Becoming-posthuman consequently is a process of redefining one’s sense of attachment and connection to a shared world, a territorial space: urban, social, psychic, ecological, planetary... [and describes an] embodied subject [...] shot through with relational linkages [...] which interconnect it to a variety of others, starting from the environmental or eco-others, and include the technological apparatus. (Braidotti 2013, 193)

Braidotti’s post-human theory thus stresses the importance of the environment which, far from being an inert background for human events, is a constitutive

2. Latour’s (2005) Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is premised on the idea that a society is a network of associations and exchanges between heterogeneous elements such as human and nonhuman actors.

element of subjectivity. Through this lens of post-human theory, I will now turn to examine how the post-apocalyptic landscapes in *I Am Legend* (2007) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) perform a “rhetorical environmentality” (McMurry 2017) that foreground and foster identification with the non-human world. In this way, I argue, the films encourage a post-human expansion of subjectivity.

3. The return of nature: The post-apocalyptic landscape in *I Am Legend*

I Am Legend is set in a post-apocalyptic New York City where a re-engineered virus, originally created to cure cancer, has wiped out most of humanity, and has turned the remaining humans into the Darkseekers— nocturnal, zombie-like mutants. Dr. Neville (Will Smith) is the last surviving human in New York, due to his immunity to the virus, accompanied only by his dog Sam. Dr. Neville spends his days trying to develop a cure and waiting for any surviving humans to respond to his daily recorded radio broadcasts, while also defending himself against the Darkseekers. Although at first sight the film may not seem to negotiate explicitly ecological issues, such as resource depletion, catastrophic climate change, toxification of the biosphere, etc., the propagation of viruses is indeed deeply related to the environmental crisis (see Morse 1995, McMichael 2004). Recent studies of the COVID-19 pandemic have stressed the interconnection between the dispersion of the virus and climate change (Hulme et al. 2020, Sharma, Jinadatha, and Lichtfouse 2020). According to Hulme et. al (2020), the most recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) supports the notion that rising global temperatures modify the probability and dissemination of local, regional and global disease outbreaks. Similarly, Virender K. Sharma, Chetan Jinadatha, and Eric Lichtfouse (2020) claim that air pollution has been shown to affect the immune system, and that contaminants in the environment increase the probability of foodborne and waterborne diseases. The link between viral pandemics and climate change underlines the interrelated nature of environmental, health, social, and economic issues. In *I Am Legend*, the fictional Krippin Virus—the nature of which is not thoroughly explained—can similarly be understood to be intertwined with a collapsing ecological system. Thus, the post-apocalyptic landscape can be interpreted as a signifier of an ecological disaster.

The significance of the cinematic landscape is established in the opening sequence of *I Am Legend*. The film begins with a televised interview with Dr. Alice Krippin (Emma Thompson) explaining how her retrofitted virus managed to cure cancer. Dr. Krippin uses a spatial metaphor to explain the theory behind her treatment: “imagine your body as a highway and [...] picture the virus as a very fast car being driven

by a very bad man [...] if you replace the man with a cop the picture changes". In spatializing the body, this metaphor alerts spectators to the importance of physical space in understanding the relation of humans with the non-human world. This metaphor also "evokes a simple world of moral binaries" (Bould 2012, 18), with the contradistinction of good cops and bad men, the ineffectuality of which is graphically depicted in the following scene. The television broadcast cuts to black. A high-angle shot of a highway full of abandoned cars follows, alongside the text "3 years later," implying that some sort of catastrophe has occurred due to this treatment. The camera starts to slowly tilt up, revealing the iconic New York City skyline absent of obvious human activity. The only sign of life comes from the non-human world, as we see and hear birds flying over the desolate city. The next shots reveal closer views of the city, with emblematic edifices such as the Flatiron and the United Nations (UN) building surrounded by empty streets and taken over by wild flora. Vegetation dominates the urban landscape, and the birdsong continues: we realize that the apocalyptic disaster has paved the way for a new, non-human world. A bird's-eye view shot of the city shows the empty city streets, until the first sign of human life enters the picture: a fast car driven by a man. This image alludes to Dr. Krippin's spatial metaphor of the human body and the virus, and in literalizing this metaphor, the film establishes once more the importance of space.

In *I Am Legend*, space is not simply a setting for human action. Despite the fact that the narrative is structured around the human protagonist and his actions, in many instances the setting comes to the foreground and becomes a landscape (Lefebvre 2006). The spectator is encouraged to contemplate these spatial surroundings, not only in the opening sequence but also throughout the film. Different techniques emphasize the landscape, such as long shots that capture the post-apocalyptic world as a cinematic spectacle. In many scenes where Dr. Neville drives, hunts, or defends himself against adversities, the film further draws attention to this strange environment and to the protagonist's interaction with it. Such scenes of spatial exploration, enhanced by a dialogue-free soundtrack, entice the viewer to enter a spectacular mode of spectatorial activity and to contemplate the significance of space beyond human events (Lefebvre 2006). For example, towards the end of the opening sequence, a high-angle shot depicts only a field of tall grass from above, before Dr. Neville and Sam enter the frame. As the camera lowers, moving behind Dr. Neville, the rest of the urban landscape is revealed, creating a striking composition where derelict buildings in the background are framed by wild flora in the foreground (see image 1).



The human figure in the midst of this natural/urban landscape is minimized, his actions rendered less important than the startling environment that surrounds him.

In shifting the viewer's attention to the non-human world independent of the frame of human action, the film renders the landscape a symbol, a signifier that encompasses not only a literal meaning, but also a metaphorical one. As Burke (1969, 192) argues, "[w]hen we use symbols for things, such symbols are not merely reflections of the things symbolized, or signs for them; they are to a degree a transcending of the things symbolized." By using techniques that momentarily detach the setting from its function as a passive receptacle for human activity, and thus its primary meaning in narrative film, new significations are able to emerge. Therefore, the ruined iconic spaces of New York City not only describe how the city has been transformed during the absence of humans, but also become signifiers laden with environmental connotations. As Mónica Martí (2020, 179) argues, the "dystopian places of cinematic eco-disasters remind viewers of their collective dependence and submission to nature", and such "film spaces illustrate the apocalyptic effects of fuel-based unsustainable 'progress'" (Martí 2020, 181). Indeed, the envisaged return of wilderness to the heart of capitalism's global cities is a "timely reminder of past violence against a depleted world" (Franck 2020, 254). The representation of "icons of modern urban progress" (Martí 2020, 183), such as the emblematic sites of New York City, in total collapse underscores the post-apocalyptic landscape as a symbol of the destructive ecological consequences of a profit-driven late modernity. Such symbols therefore become a site of identification with the ecosphere. The powerful images where wild nature reclaims former sites of technological civilization, and where humans are no longer the dominant species, prompt spectators to identify with the non-human world.

In this way, the film's landscape becomes an "assemblage of human and non-human actors" (Braidotti 2013, 45) that functions as a symbol to foster identification with a post-human becoming. In other words, spectators are invited to reconsider

their sense of connection and attachment to a shared planet (Braidotti 2013, 193), and to contemplate new ways of being in a world where human supremacy is challenged. Although the film is narrated and framed from Dr. Neville's perspective, the fact that he is the only human in the film—at least for its major part—prompts the viewer to shift her/his attention to the non-human world. Indeed, Dr. Neville is shaped by his interaction with a variety of environmental Others—his dog, Sam, the wild flora and fauna that surrounds him, the store mannequins with which he talks, and of course the mutant Darkseekers.³ In spite of his humanist viewpoint and his effort to restore humanity, Dr. Neville cannot escape his embeddedness in this new non-human world. Viewers are thus cued to consider their mutual interdependency and co-constitution with the non-human environment (Alaimo 2010). Hence, the film advances this identification with the post-human not through Dr. Neville's narrative trajectory⁴, but through the landscape's symbolic power which draws attention to the “environmental Real” (McMurry 2017).

The film's production team also notes the importance of the landscape. Director Francis Lawrence and screenwriter/producer Akiva Goldsman decided to shoot the film in New York City instead of Los Angeles, where the novel on which the film is based was set, because the sense of desolation would be more emphatic in such a usually-crowded and dense city (Carnevale 2007). Warner Bros. initially opposed filming in New York City due to “costs and logistical challenges” (Halbfinger 2007), however the production team insisted on their decision. As Goldsman highlights, “[m]oving ... [the location] to New York was actually a storytelling device” (Carnevale 2007). This remark underlines the significance of the exterior space, and its transformation from mere backdrop to narrative agent. Furthermore, the director stated that he was influenced by John Ford's westerns, which inspired his choice to render beautiful the harsh and desolate landscape of *I Am Legend* (Jensen 2007). John Ford's westerns, where the staple location of Monument Valley becomes an equal star alongside John Wayne, are well known for their emblematic use of landscape. Ford's repeated use of this iconic site in many of his westerns, even when the diegetic world does not justify its presence, pushes the audience “to arrest their gaze on the space despite its strong diegetic incorporation in each of the films and the absence of formal strategies to render it autonomous” (Lefebvre 2006, 49). In a similar fashion, the iconic locations of New York City in *I Am*

3. Neville's relation with the Darkseekers is also imbued with racial undertones. However, owing to the different scope of the article I will not expand upon issues of race in *I Am Legend*, which have been thoroughly discussed elsewhere (see Brayton 2011, Hart 2015, Soles 2016, Heyes 2017).

4. It is worth noting here that the director's cut ending is more aligned with the film's source, Richard Matheson's 1954 novel of the same name, and it deviates from this humanist trajectory. During the final scene in the lab attack, Dr. Neville realizes that the Darkseekers are sentient and have feelings similar with humans. He decides to stop the experimentation on Darkseekers, and realizes that he was a “legend” for the Darkseekers, as vampires used to be legends for the almost extinct humanity (Žižek 2010, 64).

Legend constantly capture the spectator's attention, even if their primary function is to frame the narrative events spatially. The decaying urban structures taken over by nature become a symbol of the Anthropocene, invoking environmental discourses about the limits of progress and the ephemerality of human civilization. Hence, the cinematic landscape becomes a site of identification, exemplifying the film's "rhetorical environmentality" (McMurry 2017). A similar environmentality is articulated in the wasteland of *Mad Max: Fury Road*.

4. The wasteland as a topos of environmental awareness in *Mad Max: Fury Road*

Mad Max: Fury Road is the fourth instalment and reboot of the iconic *Mad Max* series, directed by George Miller. In *Fury Road*, the world's ecological and social systems have completely collapsed due to the depletion of natural wealth, and ongoing wars for the remaining resources. In the film's opening credits sequence, we hear Max's (Tom Hardy) voiceover narration intermixed with phrases that indicate the events that led to this post-apocalyptic wasteland: "Oil wars," "we are killing for gasoline," "the world is running out of water," "now there's the water wars," "mankind has gone rogue, terrorizing itself." The first image depicts, in black and white, the destruction of a physical landscape. The voiceover continues: "thermonuclear skirmish." The image cuts to black, and as the credits roll, the voiceover moves on to enumerate the consequences of the destruction: "the earth is sour, our bones are poisoned, we have become half-life." As Max's voiceover goes on, the camera cuts to a long, high-angle shot of the desolate landscape, framing Max and his retrofitted vehicle from behind (see image 2).



This brief opening scene makes the environmental tone of the film explicit. Unlike *I Am Legend*, *Fury Road* clearly links the Earth's desolation to anthropogenic environmental catastrophes. Furthermore, it emphatically foregrounds the landscape as the main site of negotiating these environmental issues.

The long shot that frames Max from behind recalls the Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich's landscapes. Specifically, it alludes to the artist's recurring motif of the *Rückenfigur*—a human figure seen from behind, contemplating the view (Koerner 2009, 36). The *Rückenfigur* stands as surrogate for the viewer, encouraging her/him to shift her/his attention to the landscape, and to admire its monumentality. Prior to Friedrich, "no major Western artist had fashioned canvases as empty as these" (Koerner 2009, 22), where space is free from human action and events. This motif is most famously evident in Friedrich's painting *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818), where a human figure gazes upon a magnificent yet threatening landscape, a composition reminiscent of *Fury Road*'s first image. In Friedrich's art, the landscape is clearly not a background subordinate to human drama, but an autonomous subject. Other romantic artists, such as J. M. W. Turner and John Martin, were also well known for their powerful usage of the landscape and/or miniaturization of the human figure amidst vast spaces. For example, in his oil painting *The Last Man* (1849), John Martin presents an apocalyptic, grim landscape that surrounds the last survivor of humanity. John Timberlake (2018, 96) argues that this trope of "Figure in Landscape" in apocalyptic artworks is so common that the apocalypse may be considered a subgenre of the landscape. Furthermore, in these apocalyptic landscapes, "the dyad of figure/ground...is played out *in extremis*" (Timberlake 2018, 95). Greg Garrard labels this formal strategy of human absence in artworks as "disanthropy", arguing that it can evoke "the awesome scale of the Earth... [and] its ecological complexity" (2012, 43), and therefore is intertwined with environmental discourses. Thus, the post-apocalyptic science fiction films draw from this artistic tradition, not only to narrate stories of human survival, but also to foreground the ecosphere. In this manner, the importance of the environment is highlighted, marking its "emancipation [...] from its supporting role as background or setting to events and characters" (Lefebvre 2006, 23). *Fury Road* continues this tradition: from the first diegetic shot, the film situates the environment at the centre of the spectatorial gaze. The spectator's attention, like Max's, is drawn to the landscape as a topos of ecocritical recollection.

Another aesthetic influence behind *Fury Road* which emphasizes the importance of landscape is the western genre. As noted above, the director of *I Am Legend* was inspired by the cinematic landscapes of John Ford's westerns for his stylization of the post-apocalyptic New York as both beautiful and threatening. *Fury Road* is also influenced by the western genre, George Miller characterizing the film as "a western on wheels", and describing his intention to make the movie look like "one long extended chase" (Child 2014). Miller also noted that the relation between figure and landscape that is central to the western genre directly inspired him: "Survival is key [...] I think it's a reason why the American Western was

such a staple for the better part of a century in American cinema. They were allegorical tales with figures in the landscape working these things out” (Lesnick 2015). *Fury Road*’s affinity with western/action films was observed by several critics. For example, A. O. Scott (2015), a critic for the *New York Times*, wrote: “The themes of vengeance and solidarity, the wide-open spaces and the kinetic, ground-level movement mark *Fury Road* as a western, and the filmmakers pay tribute to such masters of the genre as John Ford [and] Budd Boetticher”. Other reviewers described the film as a “punk western [...] a bizarre convoy chase action-thriller in the post-apocalyptic desert” (Bradshaw 2015), or noted that the film has “its roots in the Western and the post-apocalyptic road-rage action saga” (Duralde 2015). In an academic essay, Belinda Du Plooy (2019) also remarked: “the [film’s] fight scenes are the equivalent of dialogue, which is also reminiscent of the westerns and samurai films of Leone and Kurosawa.” The importance of landscape in the western genre, and its concomitant implications of environmental issues, is well-established in academia (see Lefebvre 2006, Bandy and Stoehr 2012). As Deborah A. Carmichael (2006, 2-3) argues, “[i]n the stories of settlement on a new continent [...] the natural world posed the possibility of both danger and profit... [and this depiction] changed the American relationship with the environment.” This association between the western genre, landscape, and environmental issues is foregrounded in *Fury Road* not in a nostalgic tone, but in a prescient manner that firmly connects us with the present historic moment.

This correlation between cinematic landscape and environment is stressed in many scenes where the setting transforms into a landscape laden with signifiers of a “rhetorical environmentality” (McMurry 2017). The film is staged as an extensive road battle through the wasteland, where Furiosa (Charlize Theron), the Five Wives, and their ally, Max, try to escape from the tyrant of Citadel, Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Byrne), and his army of “War Boys”. This road battle is often presented through long shots that not only capture spectacular action scenes, but also foreground the significance of environment. For example, at the beginning of the road battle, an extreme long shot depicts a sandstorm, producing the effect of a miniaturized convoy of vehicles that has been swallowed by a fierce weather phenomenon. The tableau clearly draws attention to the surrounding space, since the depicted action (the car chase) is almost subsumed by the monumentality of the environment. This scene, where human events are minimized in the face of natural phenomena, becomes an equivalent of *temps mort* or transition shot, thus enabling a spectacular mode of viewing that shifts the attention to the landscape (Lefebvre 2006). What’s more, this landscape is marked by extreme weather patterns that are also characteristic of our current Anthropocene era. Although such expansive scenes are brief, they are repeated throughout the film, accentuating

the importance of the surrounding space. The cinematic landscape is rendered as a site of identification with our own afflicted environments, eliciting the viewer's attention to the "environmental Real" (McMurry 2017), and engendering ecocritical perspectives.

The post-apocalyptic landscape in *Fury Road*, like the re-naturalized urban landscape in *I Am Legend*, is charged with environmental connotations, albeit in a different way. While the absence of humans in *I Am Legend* allows nature to re-appear in the cities, in *Fury Road* it seems that humans have dominated long enough to banish almost every sign of non-human life. The film's inhospitable desert where no vegetation grows resonates with our current environmental crisis, marked by deforestation, severe drought, and the depletion of natural sources. Midway through the film, as Furiosa and her allies cross a swampland during the night, their armored truck—the War Rig—becomes stuck in the mud, so she and her companions decide to use a lone standing dead tree to pull the vehicle. The disappearance of flora and humans' subsequent unfamiliarity with it is stressed when Nux (Nicholas Hoult)—a former War Boy that now helps the group—calls this tree, a "thing". Nux's unfamiliarity with the word suggests that not only has vegetation disappeared from the face of the earth, but also that it begins to vanish from human language. As the group manages to move on, the camera lingers over this bleak landscape where dying trees and half-alive humans stand as skeletal figures upon a barren land. Furiosa and the others take a last look at this dreadful place, their prolonged gazes indicating the uneasiness that this sight engenders. Both the gaze of the camera and of the characters transform the setting into a landscape loaded with ecological reverberations. The foregrounding of such desolate landscapes as sites where human and non-human life alike is in the process of dying, reminds the viewers of the fragility of our planet and the life that it sustains, helping us negotiate the current ecopolitical moment.

It is also noteworthy that the Green Place, the place which Furiosa and the Five Wives have spent the majority of the film trying to reach, no longer exists. The Green Place "of many mothers" is Furiosa's former homeland, an idyllic, verdant land she remembers from her childhood. When the group encounters the remaining women of the Green Place, they learn that the land was so heavily polluted that it became sterile and uninhabitable, and that the Green Place was actually the swampland that they had struggled across the previous night. The group initially plans to search for a new home beyond the immense flat salts they have to traverse. However, Max persuades them to return and reclaim the undefended Citadel and its hidden vegetation and water, which are controlled by Immortan Joe. The absence of the Green Place and the decision of the group to reclaim the existing natural resources marks the clearly un-nostalgic tone of the film (Yates 2017).

Fury Road thus suggests that, although we cannot return to the Edenic nature of a pre-Anthropocene era, there is still time to act and defend the extant ecosystems of the Earth. Furthermore, it suggests that new post-human subjectivities that move beyond anthropocentric concepts of control and domination over nature (embodied in Immortan Joe), and embrace interconnection and sharing, are essential if humanity is to conserve the natural world. Furiosa and the Five Wives not only reclaim their own bodies, which have long been exploited by the patriarchal reign of Immortan Joe⁵, but they also, with Max's assistance, liberate nature from the same anthropocentric rule that seeks to take advantage of both human and non-human Others (women and nature). This double struggle that "deals with the twin oppressions of the domination of women and nature" (Merchant 2005, 195) expresses the film's ecofeminism which, according to Braidotti (2017), is also a form of posthumanism. Furiosa's and her allies' ecofeminist resistance thus exemplifies the becoming-posthuman, since it "asserts the need for both bio-and anthropo-diversity" (Braidotti 2017, 25). The wasteland becomes not a pessimistic dead end for humanity, but a site of symbolic experience that can suggest new post-human identities and ecocritical ideas.

5. Conclusion

In this essay I have argued that the post-apocalyptic landscapes in *I Am Legend* and *Mad Max: Fury Road* are the main sites of the films' "rhetorical environmentality" (McMurry 2017). Through the films' mis-en-scène, cinematography, and spectacular action scenes, the setting is rendered a landscape, and attention is drawn to the humans' relationship with their milieu. The natural/urban assemblages of post-apocalyptic New York in *I Am Legend* and the desolate wasteland of *Fury Road* illustrate the possible effects of a profit-driven technological civilization, thus indicating the environmental discourses of our current Anthropocene era. Although in different ways, each film accentuates the non-human world and human's interdependency with it. The convergence of the urban and the rural in the landscape of *I Am Legend* suggests new possibilities for enhancing the interconnection of the human with the non-human, despite the fact that Dr. Neville fails to explore such potentials and insists on the separation of the two worlds. Hence, the humanist narrative trajectory of Dr. Neville is undermined by the scenes that constantly stress the protagonist's mutual co-constitution with his environment. In opposition, the desolate terrain of *Fury Road* is more generative of post-human becomings. These arid landscapes harbor new social and environmental relations that move beyond

5. The representation of Immortan Joe, as well as the War Boys, also raises issues of a hegemonic white masculinity, given the hyper-whiteness of the characters (see Yates 2017).

the patriarchal and anthropocentric power. The film's ecofeminist narrative is underlined by the depiction of the wasteland as a topos of ecopolitical resistance. Despite the films' differences, the cinematic landscape in both cases represents a symbolic experience that urges individuals to identify with their own collapsing world, and to reconsider their relationship with non-human Others. In this way, the post-apocalyptic landscape exemplifies the "rhetorical capacities of the non-humans" (McMurry 2017, 742), encouraging the expansion of the humanist self into a post-human becoming.

These landscapes of possible worlds exert an affective appeal on the viewer, prompting new modes of environmental consciousness. As these representations anticipate ecological, political, and social collapse, they function as warnings, as a "memory for the future" (Kaplan 2016, 18). These future memories are "less a disabling anxiety than a productive warning to bring about needed change" (Kaplan 2016, 18). The cinematic post-apocalyptic landscapes visually juxtapose images of contemporary society with speculations about a future world, and this merging of present and future tackles our "Anthropocene anxiety" (Merola 2018) in a productive way. As we identify with our "future selves" (Kaplan 2016) in barren worlds, the films invite us to contemplate what we are in the process of losing. The post-apocalyptic landscapes of the examined films might evoke a strong affective response in the viewers, fostering an identification with a more-than-human world, and shaping our affective connection to the present ecosystem. Although the "reliance on visuality" (Ivakhiv 2008, 14) to shape eco-critical awareness has inevitable limitations, I nevertheless argue that the post-apocalyptic landscape is a highly environmentally charged image, and that popular culture can use it to tackle prescient questions subtly yet productively. At the very least, such landscapes function as cultural diagnoses, urging us to reflect on the pressing environmental issues of our time—from the most recent COVID-19 global pandemic to climate change—and thus to face the "challenge of posthumanity" (Žižek 2020). In this way, the "rhetorical environmentality" (McMurry 2017) of these cinematic landscapes compel us to "rethink links of affectivity and responsibility" (Braidotti 2013, 103) between humans and non-human Others. The post-apocalyptic landscapes of *I Am Legend* and *Mad Max: Fury Road* thus not only offer warnings for the future, but also suggest new ways of being in this ever-changing and endangered world.

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