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THE UNEVENLY DISTRIBUTED FUTURES OF CLIMATE NARRATIVES

LOS FUTUROS DESIGUALMENTE DISTRIBUIDOS DE LAS NARRATIVAS CLIMÁTICAS

LES AVENIRS INÉGALEMENT RÉPARTIS DES RÉCITS CLIMATIQUES

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The distinction between speculative and realist fiction often hinges not on whether a scenario depicts a future possibility, but rather on its connection to present-day geographic, sociopolitical, and economic realities. A common but limiting approach to climate fiction in the Global North frames it as cautionary tales for a distant future, rather than an honest exploration of the diverse consequences behind processes of environmental degradation. Nick Wood and Faeza Meyer call this phenomenon "climate apartheid", and it describes how privileged populations, by being more shielded from immediate climate impacts —if only for the time being— tend to produce more abstract or less urgent portrayals of environmental degradation in their fiction (31). This creates a preference for the speculative genre to imagine the effects and consequences of the climate crisis. Conversely, authors from the Global South often depict survival struggles and systemic inequalities that are rooted in more present and pressing concerns

(Sankaran 114). Their fiction is better positioned to challenge dominant, detached narratives, and advocate for a paradigm of environmental justice that tackles the role of current unequal structures that do not need to be imagined as dystopic.

It is therefore unsurprising that debates surrounding climate narratives —whether they are best understood as speculative fiction or representations of ongoing reality— echo William Gibson's famous, though perhaps apocryphal, observation that "the future is already here —it's just not evenly distributed". Dystopian cli-fi narratives center on a future world marked by conflicts over the destruction of the environment, as if these effects were not present and did not affect disproportionally communities in the Global South (Lee 229-30). Ursula Heise offers a way to conciliate these tensions underlying the relationship between speculative fiction and climate narratives:

> Contemporary speculative fiction, then —as a distinct literary genre and as a rhetorical mode that has spread far beyond narratives about future worlds or other planets to mainstream fiction and to environmental nonfiction— defines itself in the tension between two different approaches to the present. From one perspective, the present appears as the past of imagined futures, and from the other perspective as an already if incompletely materialized future that makes palpable the obsolescence of the present. The Anthropocene, I would suggest, can usefully be understood as the second kind of speculative fiction, in that it focuses on the reality of a terraformed planet that the genre has long held out as a vision for the future of other planets, but which has already arrived in the present on our own planet (219-20).

Heise uses "the Anthropocene" —the term commonly used to refer to the geological but also cultural paradigm that incorporates the understanding of the long-lasting influence of human action on our planet— to show how the narrative tropes previously associated with science fiction are transferred to "mainstream fiction and environmental nonfiction" and showing, therefore, a "capacity to cast the present as a future that has already arrived" (203). It is, as Debjani Ganguly suggests, "a mutant literary form, one that encodes futurity in the present as it registers the shock of unpredictable biosocial and geological transformations on a planetary scale" (422). These debates are not petty arguments for academics over what specific category we should use to describe these fictions. Our understanding of what is being considered the representation of climate degradation and how it interrelates with current —not hypothetical, not futuristic— sociopolitical structures inform the language and symbolism available to make sense of the size, shape, and direction of the challenges.

If climate narratives remain speculative, responses to actual disasters —particularly in the Global North— lack the imaginative capacity to adequately address their traumatic impact. This is not necessarily an incapacity for fiction to meet the moment

predicated by Amitav Ghosh (27), but a lack of resources and tropes available and ready to describe an ongoing crisis that I argue is linked to two shrinking effects. On the one hand, the erroneous belief in the futurity of climate alterations facilitates a kind of procrastination of measures of prevention and adaptation —both in policy, as we are forced to face at every United Nations Conference of the Parties since at least Paris 2015, but also in imagination. On the other, an overt reliance on violent disasters as the sole protagonist of environmental degradation which obscures other processes of slow violence, in Rob Nixon's terms (14), that do not have as long a tradition in fiction from being represented.

We are only beginning to understand the consequences of this flawed perspective. On October 28, 2024, torrential rains amounting to a year's worth of precipitation and caused by an unusually powerful cut-off low (a phenomenon locally known as "Depresión Aislada en Niveles Altos", or DANA) caused havoc in Valencia, destroying an area over 530km2 and causing the confirmed death of 225 people. Because of its geographic disposition, seasonal flash floods have been historically expected in the area and documented since at least the 14th century (Barriendos Vallvé 225), but none has been this intense, its strength and virulence attributed by the World Meteorological Organization to the effects of the climate crisis. Despite warnings by different scientific authorities, the local and regional governments, currently led by right-wing and climate skeptics politicians, delayed declaring a preventive emergency alert, aggravating the human and material costs. This event ranks among the worst disasters in Spanish history, leaving a traumatic impact that affected communities have not yet fully integrated.

Because of its novelty, initial reactions to this disaster defaulted to a narrow array of tropes and references from the cultural reservoir associated with catastrophes. Common associations have been a comparison with wartime destruction —both fictional and real depictions of the war and a comparison with other disasters, like the 2011 tsunami in Japan. These descriptions appear prominently in media, serving as a key forum for public discussion. It is the first line where to attempt collective elucidation, the first area of shared interpretation, with its own rules and language (Seeger and Sellnow 169). Other cultural expressions, like fictional narratives in artistic productions, require more time for development and maturation. In its interim, uncertainty not only appears because of a lack of knowledge of the extent of the damages. As Gregory Button shows, uncertainty is produced culturally, generating "conflicting public discourse about blame and the responsibility for remediation" (11) which creates an understanding of disasters as isolated events instead of as pain points that are part of the fabric of overarching social tensions.

To address this, narratives must incorporate an anthropogenic understanding of crises. While these narratives emerge, however, it would be also useful to revisit previous instances of representation. In Valencia, despite the aforementioned historical presence of flash floods, it is surprising to find missing a richer corpus of works that explore the impact of this reality. There are, however, a handful of exceptions. In his 1912-piece *Amor de madre* (*Mother's Love*), painter Antonio Muñoz Degrain portrays a woman, neck-deep in water, lifting a baby into the air. With menacing strength, the water runs towards the viewer, covering everything in its path. The orange trees and the farmer's house, the few distinguishable background elements, locate the scene in the fields south of Valencia, emphasizing the area's historical vulnerability and its lack of adaptation to the climate crisis. The city of Valencia owes its current urbanistic configuration to another recent disaster: the flooding of the Turia river in 1957, with unofficial estimates of up to three hundred victims and which forced a change of the course of the river and allowed creating the contemporary urban park that crosses the town. Despite its relevance both in historical and sociological terms, there aren't that many works that have attempted fictionalizing this episode.

María Beneyto wrote a novel in 1960 called *El río viene crecido* (*The River Runs Swollen*), which has been practically unavailable for numerous decades, although a reedition was green-lighted for 2025, prior to the latest disaster. The 2023 movie *Olvido* (*Oblivion*), by Inés París, takes the shape of a thriller and features flooding as a background rather than the focus of the plot, which is an interesting and productive strategy to discuss these matters too. Another film that also shows the region's vulnerability to floodings is *El agua* (*The Water*), by Elena López (2022). This movie, which is not set in l'Horta Sud but in nearby Vega Baja, explores the relationship between climate alterations and local beliefs that are ingrained in a patriarchal understanding of social order. These two films take the disasters as a secondary trope to discuss other thematic concerns, with varying degrees of success. While *Olvido* is a more conventional thriller, *El agua* crafts a more engaging story of displacement, economic precariousness, and gender expectations into its environmental critique.

These and other examples show how the slow buildup of cultural references, when taken through a historical perspective and with an anthropogenetic understanding of disasters —instead of just as "natural" disasters— can help. It also highlights the complex role of memory in representing and narrating ongoing disasters, which can act as an ally to relativize issues of scale and temporality. Ultimately, while disasters derived from climate change patterns merit significant attention, they should not serve as the sole lens through which we examine anthropogenic environmental degradation. The

representation of post-disaster experiences —including their traumatic impacts and societal challenges— is potentially compromised when disaster narratives are dominated by sensationalized or individualistic perspectives.

This special issue takes up this and other challenges related to the representation of climate narratives and explores them through a rich array of case studies. The papers included in this selection cover topics from ecoanxiety to droughts, studying works of literature, movies, and theater pieces, and deriving from a culturally diverse origin that also puts the focus on the need to include analysis of works from Latin America and East Asia in dialogue with cultural products from Europe and the United States. They all have in common a preoccupation with the possibilities and limitations of genre in the representation of the climate crisis. These works seek to question the extent to which the collective cultural imagination of these crises provide tools for subjects —acting as readers, viewers, audience participants, or players— to handle intellectually and emotionally predicaments derived from the challenge of living in a slowly degrading environment.

Marco Caracciolo explores how the short form —either referring to brief literary pieces, like short stories, or a style within longer forms that reflects or creates a sense of fragmented narration— is being used to represent and process the experiential aspects of eco- or climate anxiety. Caracciolo suggests a connection between brevity and the way individuals grapple with this distress, particularly as seen in the works of Lauren Groff (*Florida* and *Boca Raton*) and Jenny Offill (*Weather*). Building upon the work of Katherine Hayles regarding cognitive attention, this paper argues that contemporary literature is being significantly influenced by a shift from "deep attention" (sustained focus) to "hyper attention" (rapidly processing multiple streams of information). This influence manifests in how narratives are structured and presented, with traditional forms incorporating elements of digital practices and commenting on our culture's connection-driven mindset. Caracciolo suggests that literary genres traditionally associated with deep attention (like the novel) are being reworked to reflect and critique the affordances of digital technologies—including social media and video games. This reworking isn't just about form; it's also a commentary on the hyper-attention culture these platforms foster. In that regard, Caracciolo puts forward the term "cognitive realism" to explore precisely how climate fiction can pursue a representation of "realism" through a portrayal of eco-anxiety in their characters.

Matías Chiappe's article investigates Japanese folklore surrounding submerged islands —specifically Urashima Tarō and Uryūjima— to illuminate their significance within Japanese cultural memory and, crucially, how they resonate with contemporary climate

fiction. He doesn't want to create a direct link of causation between these legends and the Japanese strand of cli-fi, but rather aspires to show how they provide a deep historical and cultural foundation for its recurring themes. Chiappe highlights how these legends have been transmitted and reinterpreted across generations and through various media, from oral tradition to written accounts, scientific investigations, and modern literature. This paper emphasizes the intertextual nature of these stories, showing how they've been adapted and incorporated into different cultural contexts. Following this line, Chiappe positions contemporary Japanese climate fiction as a direct descendant of these older narratives, arguing that the anxieties about environmental catastrophe expressed in modern cli-fi are rooted in this long history of imagining submerged worlds and the end of civilization. Chiappe's approach is then to frame climate fiction in Japan as indebted to a more speculative, dystopian tradition of imagining disasters.

Ignacio Martínez-Armas' article centers around a critical examination of film through the framework of ecocinema. This approach isn't simply about environmental representation in films; it's a broader scope that integrates analysis of both the narrative content and the material production and distribution practices involved in filmmaking. Based on a study of James Cameron's *The Abyss*, Hayao Miyazaki's *Ponyo*, and James Wan's *Aquaman*, Martínez-Armas aims to interweave material and narrative elements —essentially demonstrating how the way a film is made (its materiality) shapes and is shaped by its story (narrative). A key observation presented in the article is that ecocinema expands the scope of film studies beyond traditional textual analysis. It demands consideration of factors like energy consumption during production, transportation of equipment, waste generated, and even the environmental impact of screening technologies. In relation to the discussion over questions of genre, magical and ambiguous nature of the oceans in the selected films could be interpreted as metaphors for climate change anxieties, ecological fragility, or humanity's relationship with a changing planet.

Maria Kuzina's piece centers on the idea that theatrical representations of the climate crisis can foster emotional literacy and critical action against systems of oppression. Her core argument revolves around the concept of the "implicated subject" and how theatre offers a unique pathway to grapple with the often overwhelming reality of our current times of environmental degradation. Kuzina argues against treating it as a distant or imagined problem, emphasizing instead its "always-already present" nature within contemporary society. This framing is crucial because it moves beyond abstract discussions and forces engagement with the immediate impact of climate change. A key analytical technique employed by Kuzina involves examining theatre —specifically Colectivo Nerval's *That Other Place*— as a "cultural laboratory" for developing emotion-

al literacy that may help build capacities for empathetic understanding and informed action. Kuzina sees this theatrical space not just as entertainment, but as a medium for cognitive and affective meditation on the crisis. The embedded nature of these representations is vital; it suggests that direct confrontation with the issue through performance can be more impactful than passive consumption of information.

Laia Ventayol analyzes four stories (two "real" and two fictional, *El Imperio de las Mareas*, by Luis Hernán Castañeda, and *The Wall*, by John Lanchester) —through the lens of a novel and creative essayistic structure that juxtaposes them. Vantayol challenges Jean Baudrillard's notion that simulation (the virtual) undermines truth, arguing instead that fiction expands reality by activating present facts and potential futures. In Ventayol's view, fiction isn't a denial of truth but a catalyst for understanding it. The two narratives also explore the unequal distribution of climate crisis impacts, highlighting how the "center" (wealthier nations/regions) often benefits while the "periphery" suffers disproportionately. Ventayol reinforces her arguments by performing herself a blurring of the lines between fiction and documenting reality through the parallelism between the two "facts" and the two "fictions", which are, in turn, consistently grounded on real-world examples.

In "Que alguien preserve las semillas" Esteban Vera Campillay explores the burgeoning field of cli-fi within Latin America, and particularly works written in Chile, arguing that it represents a vital shift in literary studies. He has a rather passionate approach that positions this genre as an "anti-canon", challenging traditional hierarchies that have historically marginalized science fiction from mainstream academic recognition. Campillay highlights how Latin American cli-fi distinguishes itself from globalized trends by prioritizing local narratives and perspectives, resisting the imposition of Western cultural frameworks. This resistance is seen as a response to historical power dynamics within literary criticism. The article specifically examines Josefina Hepp's novels (*Las herederas*, *El desierto*) as prime examples of this evolving genre. Campillay explores Hepp's solarpunk aesthetic, based on the blending of technological innovation with ecological consciousness, to envision alternative futures. Campillay highlights how the protagonists in Hepp's novels actively resist corporate control over biodiversity while grappling with the psychological toll of environmental collapse.

Following on this Latin American strand, Marta Puxan-Oliva's article explores the intersection of environmental crisis, narrative techniques, and scientific understanding, specifically focusing on "red tides" (Harmful Algal Blooms or HABs) and their representation in both scientific reports and contemporary literature. A key element of Puxan-Oliva's analysis is a comparative study between scientific reports on HABs and

Uruguayan novelist Fernanda Trías' *Mugre Roja* (*Pink Muck*). She contrasts the factual, often optimistic tone of official reports —which tend to emphasize monitoring efforts and mitigation strategies while sometimes downplaying other contributing factors like agricultural runoff— with the novel's more unsettling portrayal of a community grappling with ecological disaster. Puxan-Oliva points out that scientific narratives frequently prioritize manageable solutions, whereas, on the other hand, fiction can explore the deeper anxieties and uncertainties surrounding environmental collapse. Puxan-Oliva uses this study to argue that cli-fi demands new approaches to storytelling, particularly in grappling with complex temporalities and causal relationships. Following the work of Caracciolo and Erin James, she emphasizes the need for narratives to move beyond linear timelines and simplistic cause-and-effect explanations to capture the layered realities of environmental degradation.

Gala Arias and Irene Sanz's paper explores the complex relationship between drought, national identity, and climate change in Spain. Based on a comparative analysis of *El salario del gigante*, by José Ardillo, *Por si se va la luz*, by Lara Moreno, and the trilogy of Rosa Montero *Lágrimas en la lluvia*, *El peso del corazón*, and *Los tiempos del odio*, they argue that the fear of drought isn't solely a product of recent environmental shifts but is deeply rooted in historical narratives and socio-economic factors. Their article analyzes how Spain's experience with famine during Franco's regime, fueled by economic mismanagement masked as a "persistent drought", has created a deep-seated national anxiety around water scarcity. They argue that this historical context is crucial for understanding the emerging landscape of Spanish climate fiction.

Lastly, Marco Caracciolo and I discuss in an interview some of the current branches that the field of ecocriticism is sprouting in the spring of its life, the need for ecocritics to reach out to fully embrace the interdisciplinary directions that are at the vanguard of theory and method, and critically question the sometimes-arbitrary limitations of genre conventions. Caracciolo also offers very exciting insights on how to create bridges between perspectives, interests, and objects of study that constitute a provocative invitation to keep pushing the boundaries of our collective work.

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