

Reading the Environment: How Contemporary Environmental Fiction Changes Our Minds *Eline Tabak*

“Where are the novels, the plays, the poems, the songs, the libretti, of this massive contemporary anxiety? ... [A]n imaginative repertoire is urgently needed by which the causes and consequences of climate change can be debated, sensed, and communicated.”

- Robert Macfarlane in *The Guardian* (Sept 2005)

Recent publications in literary studies and the environmental humanities emphasize that the way people perceive and relate to the environment is changed by anthropogenic global warming. As we speak, the as of yet informal epoch of the Anthropocene creates and demands new networks intersecting humanity, nonhuman life, and nature. Increased awareness of global warming and other global environmental changes determines and influences our situated human experience on Earth. What is the role literature can play in this?

Anthropocene fictions, to borrow Adam Trexler’s term, add to the Anthropocene as a cultural phenomenon, which functions as a particular narrative of modern and contemporary history based on our understanding of the epoch’s material reality. Similarly, cultural objects, such as novels, that “write the Anthropocene” shape our understanding of the epoch.

Of all the material markers of the Anthropocene, some speak more to the human imagination and our sense of urgency than others. The public debate on humanity’s influence on the Earth is heavily centered on global warming. This focus is reflected upon in contemporary art and other cultural media, including a growing body of fiction that is sometimes named climate change fiction, or more popularly “cli-fi”. It is important to look at how this epoch is presented and represented in literature because, citing Trexler, the “imaginative capacities of the novel have made it a vital sign of the articulation of the Anthropocene.” The environmental aspects of such novels, then, can move beyond mimetic representation and pleasure and become part of a dialogue between the text and the reader.

So why turn to literature in times of environmental crises? While science and scientific discourse help us understand the material reality of the Anthropocene, literature is able to more clearly articulate its social and cultural effects and ethical dimensions. In order to fully grasp the changes and implications of global warming, readers need to be confronted with a more emotional response or immersive experience than scientific texts usually offer. Studies have shown that the employment of emotional strategies in communicating global warming is more effective than only using scientific discourse. This could either refer to using more individualized and local accounts or apocalyptic narratives. Therefore, with the overwhelming scientific evidence that global warming is indeed real, literature, not restricted by scientific conventions of writing, can become an effective way of communicating both the material and cultural realities of our current epoch and possibly affect readers’ attitudes.

In this project, in which I combine theory and methods from ecocriticism, narratology, cognitive literary studies and psychology, and empirical literary studies, I will examine several texts and their emotional and reflexive effects on readers in a selection of contemporary literature that exemplifies climate change and the environmental challenges that define this epoch. To begin with, I will establish a corpus of contemporary environmental literature: a selection of contemporary novels and short stories that deal with global warming and related environmental crises, such as mass extinction and environmental pollution. Then, I will examine how readers read these texts. This project focuses on whether or not readers gain better insight into and understanding of current environmental crises when reading certain texts, and if these texts affect their attitudes towards said crises, focusing on their emotional response and reflexivity. Besides drawing on ecocriticism, theories of narratology, and both cognitive psychology and literary studies, I will conduct a series of empirical studies that focuses on the personal reading experience.