

THE ECOLOGICAL DOMINO EFFECT: A POSTHUMANIST EXAMINATION OF HUMAN VULNERABILITY AND INTERDEPENDENCE IN FICTION AND THE REAL WORLD

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Abstract

*The ecological collapse always forces human beings to re-evaluate their perceived dominance as exceptional beings in the whole web of life. The reason for this ecological devastation may not necessary be a cosmic or alien threat but could be even biological or terrestrial, wherein one species has overextended its reach and disrupted the delicate balance of the global food web. The study aims at focussing how the progression of ecological crisis leads to mass deprivation, pointing out to the fact that human existence is inextricably linked to the well being of the more-than-human world. The main argument of this study is validated by drawing a comparison between the depiction of ecological crisis in the fictional movie *Interstellar* and its real-life representation in the documentary series *Our Planet*. The film's depiction of 'blight' as a powerful metaphor for human-induced environmental collapse, challenges the humanist idea that humans can exist as a self-sufficient, exceptional species. Even though blight is a plant pathogen and does not have any direct impact on human beings, people started to suffer from famine, malnutrition and lung diseases, indicating that if left unchecked, it would ultimately make the Earth uninhabitable for human beings. The first episode "One Planet" in the series *Our Planet*, focuses on how Earth's varied habitats are interconnected in a way which is not directly visible to humans and, depicts the incredible variety of species and global connections that support them. Thus, the study examines how the loss of a foundational species could alter the harmony of biological web of existence, triggering a catastrophic cascade. The theoretical framework of posthumanism enables a deeper understanding on how humanity is stripped of by its dominance, ultimately pointing towards a future where human survival is not based on control or intrusion rather a deeper understanding and respect for ecological interdependence.*

Keywords: *Interconnectedness, Posthumanism, Ecological Interdependence, Human Exceptionalism, Zoe Egalitarianism*

Introduction

The natural wonders and the astonishing biodiversity of the planet Earth reflects the complex array of interconnected species, emphasising the rich capacity of the planet to sustain a multitude of species. The interdependence between various organisms and the subsequent formation of various ecosystems is the result of evolution of time and not a spontaneous development. At a time when there is rapid environmental and climatic change, the need to protect the rich diversity of species in the planet is not an optional charity but the urgent need of the hour. No species in the planet exist in isolation; all life on Earth is fundamentally linked. The sudden environmental changes seem not to affect the dominant and all-pervasive life of human beings, but in the long run, human beings will be under threat. The human activities, on the other hand has led to an unprecedented decline in the life on Earth, and that they must act urgently to restore its balance. The stability of the Earth deeply lies in the interconnection of all living beings.

The contrasting situations of ‘human activity leading to ecological crisis’ and the subsequent ‘ecological imbalances affecting human life’ are two inextricable phases of the same catastrophic loop, pointing out the fact that the fate of humanity is fundamentally bound to the health of the planet. The unsustainable practices including resource exploitation, pollution etc, destroy the natural ecosystems. The destructed natural rhythm fights back in the form of unstoppable ecological failures, which then directly threatens the existence of the entire human race. In the Anthropocene epoch where human population is growing at an alarming rate, protecting and preserving the nature is matter of hope and urgency.

A comparative analysis between the portrayal of ecological crisis in science fiction cinema and its plausibility in the real world is explored in this paper. By examining how ecological collapse is represented in a fictional context and juxtaposing it with actual ecological concerns, the study seeks to investigate the extent to which such fictional scenarios could manifest. The paper also examines the boundaries between imaginative speculation and tangible threats, shedding light into the relevance of these narratives in understanding real world environmental vulnerabilities.

Interstellar, a 2014 iconic sci-fi film, directed by Christopher Nolan, depicts a dystopian future where the Earth is suffering from blight and famine. The film follows a group of astronauts who travel through a wormhole near Saturn in search of a new home for humanity. Though the movie is widely recognized for its visually and conceptually audacious approach to space and theoretical physics, this paper delves deeper into the ecological concerns raised by the movie in terms of the pathetic condition of blight infestation. Human beings are not too far from this devastating reality. The Netflix original documentary series, *Our Planet* (2023), validates this argument as it shows how human actions such as overfishing, deforestation, pollution, and burning fossil fuels directly cause the loss of natural habitats and ultimately results in the climate change. It emphasizes the unparalleled pace of this change, citing the statistics of a sixty-percentage decline in the global wildlife populations. This crisis is ongoing and not a future event. Even though the documentary directly sets a warning sign towards human beings to be the saviour of the planet, this study specifically focusses on how the real events depicted in the documentary can be taken as a reminder to humanity to validate the possibility of leading a life of interconnectedness and co-existence with others.

Posthumanism is a mode of thinking about the intersecting human, nonhuman, and technological worlds that has gained theoretical currency in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, especially in the wake of ecological consciousness and environmental campaigns that call into question the role of humans in shaping the fate of the Earth. In post humanist thought, human beings assume an agency wherein they participate in actions with their companion species such as plants, animals and all other non-human forms and thus deconstructs the traditional notion of human tendency to extend control and dominion.

By challenging the idea of human exceptionalism, posthumanism thereby supports the goal of animal studies that advocate for the ethical and political recognition of non-human animals.

Critical posthumanism is a theoretical approach which maps and engages with the ongoing deconstruction of posthumanism. It deconstructively inhabits humanism and critiques its anthropocentrism and works both genealogically, in historicising the contemporary figure of the posthuman and speculatively in imagining, analysing and evaluating scenarios of humanity's perceived exceptionalism, challenges, or ends. It thus critically engages with unsettling anticipations of the future, provides timely critiques of the present and produces rewritings and alternative narratives with a post anthropocentric or nonhuman dimension.

Planetary Kinship: Ecology, Crisis, and The Zoe Ethos

Interconnectedness is not merely a philosophical idea but the basic operational reality that sustains the Earth. Ecological connectivity is a complex system wherein the loss of even seemingly distant organisms and their habitats directly affect humanity. The interdependence between various habitats and the significance of such sort of relationships may be unknown to the human population but a trivial threat to any one of the components in the ecosystem, disrupts the entire rhythm of the natural ecosystem. Environmental stability is not a luxury; rather it is the precondition for human existence. By destroying the planet, human beings set a chain reaction in motion that ultimately destroys itself.

The ecological crisis depicted in the movie *Interstellar* is an existential threat to humanity as the mysterious, virulent and fast evolving plant pathogen, blight, causes widespread crop failure triggers a massive ecological collapse, transforming the Earth into a dying world. Blight systematically wipes out almost all the major crops like wheat, soy, rice, and even okra globally, leaving corn as the last remaining viable food resource. The pathogen feeds on atmospheric nitrogen and not oxygen. It has become an irreversible threat that the blight continues to kill the plants that produce oxygen, resulting in the gradual drop of oxygen levels in the atmosphere. The massive scale soil erosion and desertification turned a vast region into a dust bowl, accelerating the crisis by blocking out the sun and burying the rest of the viable crops, making farming nearly impossible. In the wake of existential collapse, society de-prioritizes technology and space exploration, focusing entirely on the basic survival necessities, highlighting a failure of long-term vision.

Our Planet highlights the present-day scenario laying out the cause-and-effect with scientific evidence. With the rapid loss of biodiversity, the stability of the planet is weakening as the interconnected web of life loses its thread. The series basically aims at celebrating the natural wonders that remain and reveal what we must preserve to ensure people and nature thrive. David Attenborough, the narrator of the documentary, starts the episode by saying, "When human beings built their first settlements, some 10,000 years ago, the world around them, on the land and in the sea, was full of life. For generations, this stable Eden nurtured our growing civilizations. But now, in the space of just one human lifetime, all that has changed." (01:40 - 02:44)

The documentary underscores the fact that the stability of the planet relies on different unexpected connections between a multitude of organisms and their environment. The narrator elaborates on different interconnections between habitats. For instance, some deserts, hundreds of kilometres from the ocean, provide raw materials for life. Every year, winds sweep up around two billion tons of dust into the sky. At least a quarter of it, eventually falls on the sea, providing nutrients needed for the microscopic organisms, that are the foundations of ocean life. The dolphins feed on mackerel which in turn feed on the krill. The microscopic plants become food for the crustaceans. The dolphins propel the mackerel towards the surface of the water and the migratory birds who can dive six meters deep into the sea, feed on them. While the birds feed on the top of the shoal, dolphins attack from underside. The predators from both the sea and the air takes part in this frenzied feeding procedure. The interdependence between these organisms breaks apart and gets destroyed if any one of the organisms fails to contribute to the overall stability of the planet. On the periphery, though these organisms are not directly linked to each other, the intricate web of relationship between these species adds to the point that the ecological connections are not to be disrupted.

Rosi Braidotti, a feminist philosopher and post humanist thinker, essentially argues for an ethical shift from *bios* to *Zoe*, emphasising the concept of *zoe*-centred egalitarianism. According to Braidotti, *zoe* refers to all nonhuman beings that are not considered as belonging to the category of *bios* (human). *Zoe* spans across a wide spectrum of biotic and abiotic entities, from bacteria and other animals to geological structures and technology. *Zoe*-egalitarianism is the claim that all these elements of life are equally as dynamic, self-organising, and intelligent as *bios*, which is the core of post anthropocentric turn. Thus, it operates as a principle for becoming other-than the dominant humanist subject and for emancipating oneself from the logic of anthropocentrism. It aims at creating new posthuman subjects that do not comply with the dominant norms and thus results in the generation of counter subjectivities that can challenge the dominant human subject. Braidotti stands for the creation of a new common world that encompasses newer forms of subjectivities, which are typically different from the humanist subjectivities.

As the blight gradually deteriorates the exceptional dominance of the human folk in the movie *Interstellar*, humanity was forced into a survivalist, agrarian existence, forcing them to acknowledge the fundamental equivalence of *Zoe* (all other life forms). Even though the pathogen blight results in the larger systemic imbalance, the one that is caused because of decades of bios-centric practices such as environmental degradation, unscientific farming practices etc, that reduced the Earth's natural power of resilience, it is in fact the planet's feedback mechanism to make humanity co-exist with the dynamic forces of *zoe*. The ethical focus of the film is solely on the continuation of the human species, leaving a dead planet behind and seeking a new one to potentially exploit. The significance of this paper lies at this point, where rather than human beings focussing on complete species extinction, the priority would be shifted from the safety of humans to the restoration of the generative force of life on Earth.

The goal of humanity should be of existence and co-evolution with other possible life forms, non-human others and the dynamic ecology in its entirety, even if it demands the change of the entire way of living of humanity.

The post-blight generation on Earth would have to become posthuman subjects, recognizing and valuing their dependence on other non-human forms. They would become the caretakers of the planet, identifying themselves as just one strand in the huge web of life, equal in value to the microscopic life forms on the Earth. The episode "One Planet", successfully demonstrates the ecological interconnectedness, showing that the collapse of one habitat directly affects countless species and, ultimately, the human systems. On the other hand, it views human beings as the one who can save the entire planet, the manager or the shepherd of the planet, which is fundamentally anthropocentric. The documentary ends with the following note: "All across our planet, crucial connections are being disrupted. The stability, the we and all life relies upon is being lost... What we do in the next twenty years, will determine the future of life on earth" (46:08-47:47). What human should do in the next twenty years should be the acceptance of true egalitarianism, by recognizing all zoe as equally important components of the planetary whole.

"In my view, posthuman ethics urges us to endure the principle of not-One at the in depth structures of our subjectivity by acknowledging the ties that bind us to the multiple 'others' in a vital web of complex interrelations" (Braidotti, 2013, p. 193). She suggests that to be ethical in the posthuman world, one must stop seeing oneself as independent, separate individual; instead, should recognize that the identity and existence are completely tied to and dependent on a massive, dynamic network of human, animal, environmental, and technological others. The existence of human beings solely depends on all other entities in the ecosystem and an imbalance in any one of the components in the ecosystem may ultimately result in the complete destruction of humanity as what is seen in the movie and the documentary.

Thus, the metaphor of the domino effect of interconnected ecological crises directly exposes the myth of human autonomy. The posthumanist approach critiqued the anthropocentric notion, arguing that the cascading nature of ecological collapse reveals the often-denied interdependence with the non-human world. By comparing the dystopian world as portrayed in fiction with the tangible threats in the real world, the study establishes that human vulnerability is not a temporary inconvenience, but a fundamental ontological condition of being inextricably embedded within a planetary system that we cannot control or escape. The study also underscored the need to have a paradigm shift from human supremacy to a relational, planetary ethics.

Conclusion

The comparative study using the stark imagery of ecological collapse, argues that the path to a viable future lies in abandoning the human desire to control and master the ecosystem, and embracing their identity as highly fragile, yet vital element in the planet. *Our Planet* stands as a testament to the reality of deep and interconnected form of existence of all life forms.

On the other hand, *Interstellar* depicts the dramatic failure of this planetary kinship by portraying species escape as the only possible way of justifying environmental collapse. The framework of *Zoe* egalitarianism offers a critique of both these aspects, as it suggests that true survival depends neither on the interstellar fantasy of cosmic escape nor on the hierarchical pretence of human management. The instability in nature is not an anomaly—it is a perpetual, self balancing process. The unsettling reality is that this equilibrium does not inherently require or safeguard human existence. Since this natural process of finding equilibrium does not guarantee the protection of humanity, it is essential that humans take proactive intervention to secure their collective future during this inevitable flux. Human beings are to accept their non exceptional place within the web of life, recognising that the survival depends on that egalitarian existence and should not be for the mere preservation of a system for the singular benefits of human beings.

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