

Abstract

People, Nature, and the Environmental Crisis: Speculative Fiction in the Anthropocene

In recent years, the climate and environmental crises have increasingly permeated the political, media, and societal discourses with growing intensity and urgency. Alongside climatic, ecological, energy, and economic facts, the social sciences and humanities are increasingly focusing on the social and psychological aspects of how people perceive pressing issues, the best ways to communicate expert knowledge to the general public, and the mechanisms that hinder effective communication. Although in March 2024 the International Commission on Stratigraphy rejected the term *Anthropocene* as a designation for our current epoch in which human activity has significantly impacted life on Earth, the environmental humanities have adopted the term as a helpful label for referring to a pivotal moment in the history of human self-reflection. In the 2010s, the concept of the Anthropocene significantly expanded in the media, art, and political and societal discourses.

Current environmental issues are naturally reflected in literature and literary theory. At the turn of the millennium, *climate fiction* (cli-fi) gained prominence as a genre explicitly addressing the causes, impacts, and potential scenarios of climate change. Since the 1980s, ecocriticism has developed as a discipline examining the relationships between literature and the physical world from multiple perspectives. To grasp entities so complex and dispersed in time and space that they exceed human comprehension, Timothy Morton developed the concept of the *hyperobject*, a classification fitting of both the climate and environmental crises. Many literary works now explore the nuances of the relationship between culture and nature. Ecocriticism critically reflects on representations of this relationship in art, highlights culturally conditioned stereotypes and values, and examines the extent to which environmental attitudes, affects, beliefs, and values are influenced by culture and media. Many environmental humanities scholars perceive the dualistic relationship between culture and nature, particularly the notion of nature as mainly inert matter and a resource for human use, as one of the sources of the current environmental crisis. The *concept of nature* itself is scrutinised, and alternative proposals for understanding the complex relationships between culture and nature have emerged;

Timothy Morton suggests the term *mesh* while Stacy Alaimo has developed the concept of *transcorporeality*.

This manuscript pursues several interconnected goals, the primary one being to explore various literary strategies for addressing the relationship between culture and nature and depicting the environmental crisis in speculative fiction. It also aims to raise awareness of the concept of speculative fiction in the Czech academic discourse, provide a comprehensive overview of the development of ecocriticism and climate fiction and the critical themes they address, and contribute to exploring how stories influence our perception of humanity's place in the world.

The manuscript is divided into three interconnected sections. The first introduces the concepts of the Anthropocene and speculative fiction. The Anthropocene is presented as a historically revisionist concept that calls for human self-reflection as a species. However, its universalising approach obscures the highly uneven contributions of different communities to the causes of the environmental crisis and how they are affected by its impacts. While far from an ideal term, it has become the basis for necessary debates about humanity's impact on the planet. Speculative fiction is understood in line with currently relevant approaches as a broad category with blurred boundaries that encompasses diverse non-mimetic artistic forms across all narrative media. Alongside the traditional Western genres of science fiction and fantasy, it also includes numerous hybrid and emerging forms and traditions, many of which are not based on the Western dichotomy between the real and the unreal. Since the transgression of essential categories (person, animal, plant, object, and artefact) through counter-ontological representations is a significant strategy of speculative fiction, an introduction to this issue concludes the first section of the manuscript.

The second section draws on the findings of cognitive psychology and empirical ecocriticism to consider the role of stories in shaping human understanding and action in the world. It addresses the notion that stories can significantly influence readers' emotions, empathy, and attitudes. The following chapter in this section explores the *concept of reality*, a crucial criterion for distinguishing mimetic from non-mimetic fiction. Building on a cognitive perspective, the manuscript distinguishes between objective, subjective and intersubjective realities to emphasise the influence of perception on the conception of reality. Explicit and implicit references to the reality of the actual world are an essential part of speculative fiction works; therefore, this section concludes by examining the role of mimesis in speculative fiction.

The manuscript's third and most extensive section focuses on several interconnected issues. First, it introduces ecocriticism, which provides questions and methods for the subsequent examination of the relationship between culture and nature and the environmental crisis in speculative fiction. Since ecocriticism is still a relatively new approach in the Czech context, the chapter dedicated to ecocriticism outlines its history and the evolution of its key concepts, milestones, and methodological approaches. Examining representations of the relationship between culture and nature in speculative fiction requires critically reviewing how nature is conceived; here, the manuscript approaches the concept of nature as a cognitive model and, in exploring the nuances of the relationship between individuals and society on the one hand and nature on the other, draws on environmental psychology, particularly the work of Czech environmental psychologist Jan Krajhanzl who has proposed five characteristics of people's relationships with nature and the environment. In response to the problematic nature-culture dualism, this manuscript explores alternative understandings of this relationship, primarily through the concepts of mesh and transcorporeality. Furthermore, it analyses strategies for subverting the nature-culture dualism, such as the decentralisation of the human, the anthropomorphism of nature—understood primarily as anthropomorphic interaction from a cognitive perspective—and the incorporation of permaculture ethics.

The hyperobject of the environmental crisis in literature is examined through the perspectives of the tragic and comic modes, as introduced by Joseph Meeker and further developed by Don D. Elgin and Marek Oziewicz. While the tragic mode views humans as separate from and superior to nature, the comic mode sees humans as part of the biosphere, emphasising the interdependence of the human and non-human, the ability to adapt, and the appreciation of nature's inherent value. This manuscript proposes criteria for assessing speculative fiction in terms of its inclination towards the tragic or comic mode, focusing on nature's inherent value and agency, the dynamics of anthropocentric and biocentric attitudes towards nature, and the use of interspecies metaphors and humour. Many of the works analysed in this section can be classified as climate fiction (cli-fi); therefore, the manuscript also presents this genre's central features and development. Using insights from cognitive psychology and empirical ecocriticism, it examines how well cli-fi has lived up to its stated ambition: to motivate readers to take climate action.

The theoretical chapters of the manuscript are interspersed with analyses of speculative fiction works through which the presented concepts can be demonstrated or explored. The selection of works for detailed analysis primarily stems from a set of texts

whose fictional worlds, though perhaps implicitly, are close to the current world, feature a broader spectrum of perspectives and diverse characters, prioritise understanding over violence in conflict resolution, and seek solutions to challenging situations rather than merely depicting images of doom when reflecting on the environmental crisis. Novels or short stories that differ significantly from each other were deliberately chosen and, within the finer division of speculative fiction, fall into various genres and target different readerships.

Examining speculative fiction's fictional worlds and theoretical perspectives reveals recurring patterns that can be summarised as *proximity and acceptance* on the one hand and *distance and detachment* on the other. These patterns concern the relationships between culture and nature, from the general, abstract level to the most intimate, personal connections. They are closely related to Meeker's comic and tragic modes of the relationship to the world. Distance, rooted in the tragic mode, is characterised by the nature-culture dualism, anthropocentrism, and the denial of the urgency of the environmental crisis, whether through doubts about its existence or the belief that it threatens only other people or future generations. Consequently, a barrier arises not only between nature and culture, and the present and the future, but also between *us* and the *others* affected by environmental issues. This barrier results in resignation from efforts towards a better biocentric future. Proximity, as a value close to the comic mode, emphasises the interconnectedness of nature and culture at all levels and recognises that the environmental crisis is a global problem affecting all life. It stems from bio- or ecocentrism, viewing humans as part of the web of life, not as superior rulers of nature. Nature has inherent value regardless of its utility to humans. Another feature of proximity is the acceptance of one's share of responsibility for the world, an effort to adapt and transform the old system unjust to both nature and people. As this reading of selected novels demonstrates, the strictly separate categories of proximity and distance do not exist, but rather they are the endpoints on a continuum encompassing many aspects. For example, understanding the urgency of the environmental crisis is not necessarily linked to a biocentric stance. As demonstrated in the textual analyses, significant authorial strategies for emphasising the inherent value of non-human nature include giving nature direct and implicit agency, subverting essential categories (in particular person, animal and object), and embodying the connection between the individual and the environment.

Overall, the manuscript aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on the role of art in understanding and shaping the world and to point out the specific visions, inspirations and scenarios that speculative fiction can offer.