20th-21st C. Dystopia Fiction: Endings and Beginnings

Week 1: Intro to Dystopia
Week 2: Character & Plot
Week 3: Setting & Point of View
Week 4: Scenarios – Environmental & Nuclear Disaster
Week 5: Scenarios – Biological & Social Disaster
Week 6: Purpose of Dystopia – Warn, Entertain & Imagine
Four common dystopia scenarios:

- Environmental
- Nuclear
- Biological
- Social/political
Reoccurring themes in environmental and nuclear scenarios:

- High tech vs. low tech solutions
- Validity of hope or pessimism
INTRODUCTION: SCENARIOS CONT

- What is cli-fi or climate fiction or environmental disaster dystopia fiction?
- Why do authors produce and readers consume this type of fiction?
WHAT IS CLI-FI?

Environmental disaster in books and film has a long history but:

- Term “cli-fi” coined in social media (Twitter) in 2007 by Dan Bloom
- Created a “buzz” and genre about global warming
WHY PRODUCE/READ CLI-FI?

Much cli-fi targeted to young readers

- Authors want to draw youth away from “virtual reality” into the “real world”
- Cli-fi is a way to create personal interest in global warming/state of Earth’s condition

= Social awareness and action
Two main kinds of disaster fiction:

- Solve a problem with practical solution
  - Test solutions
  - Overcome obstacles
- Pass moral judgment on causes of problem
  - No practical solutions
  - Change fundamental values/ways of thinking
ACTIVITY: CATEGORIZE READINGS

Decide which readings fit these categories and why:

- Focused on solutions to problems OR
- Focused on moral judgments OR
- Focused on a bit of both?

“Snows of Yesteryear” / “Staying Afloat” / “Martian Chronicles”
SOLUTION-BASED DISASTER

Angela Penrose, “Staying Afloat”

- Erratic weather -> submerge crops
- Solution must be cheap/simple
- Inspiration = personal, ancient, folk
“STAYING AFLOAT”

Theme: high-tech vs. low-tech

Solution are possible -> Sources =

- Collaboration with others
- Trial and error
- Practical, simple solution – do by hand
- Mix past and present resources
Jean-Louis Trudel, “Snows of Yesteryear”

- Climate pollution → global warming → food shortages → wild sci-solutions
- Ultimate solution may be leaving Earth
“SNOWS OF YESTERYEAR”

Theme: hope vs. pessimism
Solution may be possible -> Sources =
- Single minded, genius research
- Necessity/survival – will to live
- Personal knowledge of source - snow
- Sense of moral duty - rescue
MORAL JUDGEMENT DISASTER

Ray Bradbury, “Martian Chronicles”

- Earth wars/greed -> Mars colony -> nuclear war -> no return to Earth
- Only solution is to become Martian
“MARTIAN CHRONICLES”

Theme: hope vs. pessimism
Solution is escape from Earth =
- Humans are irrational, self-destructive
- Few remaining will leave – new order
- Hope lies in abandoning the past
- Can the past be abandoned – by what right is Mars to be colonized?
SUMMING UP: WHY DISASTER?

Critics of environmental & nuclear disaster argue that:

- Non-believers dismiss it as “just fiction”
- Believers get distracted by the drama

Can disaster fiction create emotion, awareness or action?
SUMMING UP: WHY DISASTER?

Studies show that:

- dystopia consumers have decreased sense of issues and solutions

Defenders say that:

- feeling overwhelmed is okay, points to the bigness of the problem
“In the next few decades, Nasa will take steps toward establishing a human presence beyond Earth.”

“We seek the capacity for people to work, learn operate and sustainably live beyond Earth for extended periods of time. Any journey to Mars will take many months each way and early return is not an option.”

“NASA and its partners are working... [to] answer some ... fundamental questions about life beyond Earth: Was Mars home to microbial life? Is it today? Could it be a safe home for humans one day?”

-9 Oct 2015, The Telegraph
SPACE-X, MARS & LIFE AFTER WWIII
‘Elon Musk is going to Mars. Speaking to Axios, he named the odds – a 70% chance – that he will live to ride one of his SpaceX rockets and explore the red planet. Contrary to experts,… Musk said he thought such a flight could be possible seven years from now, with tickets costing “... a couple hundred thousand dollars”. Should he succeed in landing on Mars, Musk expects “a very harsh environment. So ... there’s a good chance you die there. We think you can come back but we’re not sure. Now, does that sound like an escape hatch for rich people?” ’ (25 Nov 2018, The Guardian)
MUSK AND MARS AS FALBACK FOR EARTH

‘Musk made the comments at this year’s... [South by Southwest media conference]... in Austin.... [in an] interview conducted by director and writer Jonathan Nolan.... Musk announced ... plans to test SpaceX’s massive BFR rocket capable of reaching Mars as early as next year.

Why is Elon speeding up his Mars timeline? Because, Musk says, humanity is almost certainly headed very soon for a cataclysmic third World War, one he does not believe humanity will survive – on Earth:

“I think a moon base and a Mars base that could help regenerate life back here on Earth would be really important and to get that done before a possible World War Three. We want to make sure that there’s enough of a seed of human civilization somewhere else to bring civilization back, and perhaps shorten the length of the dark ages.” ’
FILM: SPUR OR SUPPRESS ACTION?

Interstellar (2014, Christopher Nolan):

Positive science - a solution

Useless machines or man’s salvation?

Finding a new world, Earth the exhausted planet

Failed search for a new planet