

Fiction prepares us for a world changed by global warming

April 23 2014



Screenshot from *The Day After Tomorrow*, 2004

Climate fiction, or simply cli-fi, is a newly coined term for novels and films which focus on the consequences of global warming. New research from University of Copenhagen shows how these fictions serve as a mental laboratory that allows us to simulate the potential consequences of climate change and imagine other living conditions.

"Global warming is much more than scientific data on changes in the atmosphere; it is also a cultural phenomenon in which meaning is being shaped by the books we read and the films we see. And there are so many of them now that we can speak of a completely new genre, cli-fi, says PhD Gregers Andersen who has just defended his thesis *Climate-Changed Existence and its Worlds; Global Warming in Fiction and Philosophy* at the University of Copenhagen.

"We use these films and novels to imagine what life and society might be like in a future when [global warming](#) has dramatically changed our world because, as opposed to numbers and statistics, fiction can make us feel and understand the changes."

In his thesis, Gregers Andersen analyses 40 different novels, short stories, and films produced between 1977 and 2014 which all, in one way or the other, employ global warming as a theme. And in the 40 works, he has identified five themes that each represents global warming in a different way: The Social Breakdown, The Judgment, The Conspiracy, The Loss of Wilderness and The Sphere.

Nature passes judgment

The 2004 Hollywood blockbuster *The Day After Tomorrow* is a prime example of the theme Gregers Andersen has termed the Judgment; during the film, global warming has catastrophic consequences and causes a new ice age that lays most of Earth waste.

"In *The Day After Tomorrow* and a number of similar fictions, nature passes moral judgment on mankind's exploitation of Earth's resources and becomes an avenger who, quite literally, clears the air and thus restores the proper balance between man and nature," Gregers Andersen says.

Climate change speeded up for effect

Apart from the Judgment theme Gregers Andersen, as mentioned, points to four other recurrent themes in the climate fictions he has analysed: The Social Breakdown, The Conspiracy, The Loss of Wilderness and The Sphere (see explanation in the factbox below). Despite the thematic differences displayed in these fictional takes on global warming and

climate change, they all seem to have one central trait in common:

"If we do not take care of our environment, of or our home, it will change, and it will feel and seem very different – "unhomely" if you will. This is exactly the feeling the fictions want to leave us with. And even though UN's panel on climate change (IPCC) has previously issued a report stating that global warming may lead to abrupt and irreversible changes , most of these fictions do tend to exaggerate the consequences of global warming, and the climate changes often happen extremely quickly," Gregers Andersen points out and continues:

"They do this to depict characters who can remember how the world was before the climate changes set in – the characters are, in other words, able to spot that "our home" has changed. However, it is still a recognizable world the characters inhabit in these fictions. And it needs to be recognizable because we are supposed to feel uncomfortable with the fact that our home planet has become a strange and alien place."

The five themes

The Social Breakdown

When [climate change](#) leads to conflicts about natural resources and social disintegration.

The Judgment

Man is punished by nature for exploiting its resources.

The Conspiracy

Climate change is seen as a scientific and political conspiracy to mislead

the public.

The Loss of Wilderness

Global warming destroys the planet's last places of wilderness. The wilderness is depicted as a place of extraordinary aesthetic value.

The Sphere

Man adapts to climate changes by constructing artificial atmospheres. A theme that is often seen in science fiction.

Provided by University of Copenhagen

Citation: Fiction prepares us for a world changed by global warming (2014, April 23) retrieved 12 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-04-fiction-world-global.html>

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