

Militarizing the Anthropocene: Hollywood, Climate Fiction and Security in Future Americas

Johan Höglund, EAAS presentation, 2021

As DeLoughry (2019) has observed, “[m]ilitarism remains the elephant in the room when considering issues of climate change” (69). In response to this enormous but unspoken presence, this paper discusses how the climate crisis has been imagined as a “threat multiplier” (Gilbert 2012) that aggravates already existing security issues. The US military plays a central role in this development. As the “largest single institutional consumer of hydrocarbons in the world” (Belcher et al. 2020) the US military is a dominant engine of global warming, but it is paradoxically also the institution most immediately tasked with the preservation of US national security. From this institution’s perspective, the climate crisis thus appears as a national security issue rather than as a planetary emergency. Marzec (2015) has importantly noted that this securitization of the climate crisis has produced “a militarized mentality, one that commandeers a consciousness to wholly rethink and replace a rich, complex, multinarrative environmental history with a single ecosecurity imaginary for the post–Cold War, post-9/11 occasion” (4). The imaginary of climate change not as a universal planetary crisis but as a military problem has an effect for how the crisis is understood, represented and acted upon.

The intermedial genre termed climate fiction (cli-fi) explores this precise debate, but scholarship has so far devoted little attention to this the military aspect. Previous work by Trexler (2015), Ghosh (2016), Mehnert (2016), Bracke (2018), Johns-Putra (2019), and Andersen (2019) has investigated how cli-fi, by “depicting humans in worlds resembling those forecast by the IPCC [...] provides speculative insights into how it might be to feel and understand in such worlds” (1). While this is undoubtedly an important aspect, this fiction needs to be understood as simultaneously responding to the restructuring of the global geopolitical landscape that has taken place during the twenty-first century and specifically to the militarization of the challenges that the climate crisis brings into focus. Cli-fi, I argue, both underwrites and problematizes the notion that military violence can usefully address the climate crisis.

So far, the only study to explore the way that cli-fi addresses (military) security concerns is De Bruyn (2018). Noting that “contemporary authors explicitly link climate change and the war machine” (44), he proceeds to investigate this link through a set of novels, most set in SE Asia. His study connects the anxieties expressed in climate fiction with

those that emerged in the 9/11, novel and it furthermore accounts for how the texts studied narrate the “ecoimperial” (59) histories, presents and futures of the climate crisis. My paper focuses a different and more widely circulated set of narratives: the Warner Bros kaiju movies *Godzilla* (2014) and *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (2019).¹ These blockbuster films describe how gigantic monsters rise out of the Earth itself to reduce iconic urban environments such as San Francisco, Tokyo, and New York to rubble while fighting human forces and each other.

The first film to place an enormous and monstrous being in a modern urban environment was *King Kong* (1934), but kaiju cinema proper began with the release of *The Beast from 20,000* in the US in 1953 and with *Gojira/Godzilla* in Japan in 1954. In both these latter cases, gigantic reptile monsters have been awakened by atomic testing. The atomic bomb has a unique and vital place in the history of securitization as well as in the planet’s geological history. In 2019, members of the Anthropocene Working Group voted to declare that the planet has departed the geological epoch of the Holocene and entered the Anthropocene, and then that the most important geological evidence of this new epoch should be the sedimentation of plutonium fallout from atomic bombs. In this way, the atomic bomb can be described as one of the most powerful indicators that human activity is indeed changing and eroding Earth’s geology and climate. In relation to this, it should be noted that “human activity” here in fact refers to a program of military violence that encompasses some 2000 tests between 1945 and the present and that is part of a massive industrial securitization of national borders. In this way, the atomic bomb can be considered both an important marker of a new geological epoch, and evidence of what Bonneuil and Fressoz (2016) has termed a “natural history of destruction” where the modern (US) war machine’s attempt to maintain global hegemony is producing a far-reaching ecocide. Bonneuil and Fressoz propose the concept *Thanatocene* as an alternative to the Anthropocene, as the best descriptor of this history. Of course, as Bonneuil and Fressoz discuss, the most appropriate denominator may be Jason W Moore’s (2015) Capitalocene. Again, atomic bomb usage and testing may be markers of human activity, but they are more specifically, and usefully, understood as attempts to manage the economic geopolitical project termed capitalism.

Kaiju cinema clearly comments on this precise discussion by depicting how atomic testing provokes the rise and evolution of enormous creatures belonging to previous geological epochs out of oceans depths or the glaciers of the Arctics. The early *Godzilla* can

¹ The third *Godzilla* film: *Godzilla vs Kong* (2021), had not premiered when this paper was uploaded.

thus be read as an avatar of a battered planet. The monster is a direct and monstrous reaction to the violence done to the planet, and its instincts are to obliterate the human society that has caused this violence. The Warner Bros films that are the focus of this paper tap into this context, but they also complicate and partially erase it by repeatedly renegotiating first the role that both Godzilla and other gigantic so called “Titans” play, and then the function that the military has in relation to the emergence and management of these enormous beings.

This renegotiation begins with Gareth Edward’s 2014 reboot of *Godzilla*. In this film, we are told that the 1954 atomic bomb tests on the bikini atoll, where the US performed 23 infamous nuclear tests between 1946 and 1954, where in fact attempts to destroy *Godzilla* and thus to contain the threat he constitutes. Against this background, the US military appear not as agents of ecocide, but as an organization taking responsibility for global security. This turn may seem odd, especially considering the harsh critique against the US military inherent in Edward’s first movie *Monsters* (2010), but it is not very surprising in view of the fact that the US Department of Defense helped fund the movie. As work by DerDerian (2001), Lenoir and Lowood (2005), Robb (2004), and Höglund (2012, 2014) shows, the entertainment industry in the US has a reciprocal relationship with the DoD often termed the Military Entertainment Complex, where the DoD helps fund films and other entertainment media in return for narratives that support the institution and its goals. As a result, *Godzilla* (2014) reimagines the military and its soldier protagonist Ford Brody as fighting with Godzilla against a number of less iconic gigantic monsters, thus co-managing the planetary threat these monsters, rather than atomic warfare, constitute within the narrative.

The 2019 *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* both disrupts and reinforces this narrative trajectory. In the film’s first part, a global collective of researchers named Monarch restores the narrative from the earliest films, when Monarch scientist Serizawa argues that: “It was our atomic testing that awoke Godzilla. Other creatures like the MUTOs from strip mining and seismic surveys.” The film then theorizes the rise of Godzilla and other Titans as a part of a planetary regeneration process. Another Monarch scientist, Dr. Emma Russell, explains:

Humans have been the dominant species for thousands of years, and look what's happened. Overpopulation. Pollution. War. The mass extinction we feared has already begun. And we are the cause. We are the infection. But like all living organisms, the Earth unleashed a fever to fight this infection. Its original and rightful rulers. The Titans. They are part of the Earth's natural defense system. A way to protect the planet, to maintain its balance.

However, as soon as this understanding of Godzilla and of the other Titans as agents of an ecology damaged by humanity has been expressed, the film restores the first film's faith in the US military as assisting in the protection of the planet. The true threat to ecology, it turns out, is not capitalist, militarized, fossil fuel, atomic society, but Ghidorah, an "invasive species" from another planet who is "reshaping the planet to his own liking". From this moment, the military again fights side-by-side with Godzilla against an external, monstrous Other set on "extinction". Thus, the military-industrial complex is narrated as the only entity capable of assisting in the regeneration of the planet.

In this way, the new Godzilla franchise, sponsored by the DoD, underwrites the imaginary that the US military is the only entity capable of securing the US nation, global geopolitics, even ecology itself. In these films, as described by Marzec, "nature comes into existence [...] as fundamentally a concern of the war machine, and catastrophic climate change is taken as an 'engagement opportunity'" (9). This realisation is potentially vital both to the exploration of the work that cli-fi performs in relation to the climate emergency, and to work devoted to the understanding how narratives of national and planetary security are adapted by the Military Entertainment Complex.

Bibliography

- Andersen, G. (2020). *Climate Fiction and Cultural Analysis*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Belcher, O., et al. (2020). Hidden Carbon Costs of the "Everywhere War". *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 45(1), 65-80
- Bonneuil, C., & Fressoz, J.-B. (2016). *The Shock of the Anthropocene*. London: Verso.
- Bracke, A. (2017). *Climate Crisis and the 21st-Century British Novel*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- De Bruyn, B. (2018). The Hot War: Climate, Security, Fiction. *Studies in the Novel*, 50(1), 43-67.
- DeLoughrey, E. M. (2019). *Allegories of the Anthropocene*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Der Derian, J. (2009). *Virtuous War*. New York: Routledge.
- Ghosh, A. (2016). *The Great Derangement*. Chicago ; London: Chicago ; London : The University of Chicago Press.
- Gilbert, E. (2012). The Militarization of Climate Change. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 11(1), 1-14.
- Höglund, J. (2012). Militarizing the Vampire. In *Transnational and Postcolonial Vampires* (pp. 173-188). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Höglund, J. (2014). *The American Imperial Gothic*. Farnham, Surrey: Farnham, Surrey : Ashgate.
- Johns-Putra, A. (2019). *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lenoir, T., & Lowood, H. (2005). Theaters of War: The Military-Entertainment Complex. *Collection, Laboratory, Theater 1*, 427.

- Marzec, R. P. (2015). *Militarizing the Environment*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mehnert, A. (2016). *Climate Change Fictions*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Moore, J. W. (2015). *Capitalism in the Web of Life*. New York: Verso.
- Robb, D. L. (2004). *Operation Hollywood*. Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books.
- Trexler, A. (2015). *Anthropocene Fiction*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.