

Book reviews

Book review: Elena dell’Agnese, *Ecocritical Geopolitics: Popular Culture and Environmental Discourse*

Ruijie Zhang

School of Foreign Studies, University of Science and Technology Beijing, People’s Republic of China

Amid global concern about environmental issues, the power of popular culture in framing the way we represent and interpret the world has been addressed by researchers from environmental humanities, sociology, cultural studies, ecocriticism, media studies and linguistics. This book contributes to these joint efforts by proposing a new approach to ecocritical geopolitics based on a synthesis of critical geopolitics, which addresses values assigned to places as well as representations of people-place hierarchies, and ecocriticism, which addresses relationships between human culture and the physical world. Aiming to seek power-knowledge mechanisms in the discursive articulation of popular culture, the book develops a wide-ranging yet thorough-going discourse analysis of three topics: dystopia and post-apocalypse, posthumanism and carnism.

The author walks readers through 12 densely packed but engaging and captivating chapters. Chapters 1–3 outline key messages of the ecocritical geography approach: that discursive representations of the land/environment are about power and that ‘the way we interpret the environment is connected with a somewhat hegemonic representation that deserves to be challenged’ (p. 4). Following these premises, the primary concern of this book is to see ‘the effects that popular culture can have on the way of thinking about the environment’ (p. 25) by examining the representation of environmental issues and their relationship with human beings in a wide range of texts. Drawing on a loose set of analytical tools, such as narratology, multimodal analysis and content analysis, the author sets out to analyze how authors’ taken-for-granted worlds influence the text situated in a wider cultural system.

The first set of environmental discourses under scrutiny is dystopian and post-apocalyptic narratives (Chapters 4–6), representations of bleak, chaotic, unstable and undesirable future worlds that reflect ‘the prevailing fears at a given historical time’ (p. 70). In a rich array of texts featuring political, environmental and technological dystopia, the author identifies fears of plagues, nuclear disasters, unstoppable climate change and others. Dell’Agnese categorizes three types of setting for these anthropocentric stories: ‘green places’ taken as alternative shelters offering salvation and freedom and places to aspire or flee to (p. 79); ‘territorial borders’ structuring social segregation, international inequalities and environmental injustice (p. 81); and ‘wastelands’ resulting from capitalism, consumerism and garbage (p. 83).

In post-apocalyptic texts the author finds both biocentric stories about the return of wilderness and continuity without human species in landscapes and anthropocentric stories about human beings’ ability to keep their spirit alive in the dead world. Finally, through an ecofeminist lens, the author criticizes the

dominant 'heroic, protective, white male agent' (p. 98) and the supporting, passive roles of woman and nature in these discourses, suggesting that ecological imbalance and gender and racial oppression go hand in hand. These analyses demonstrate how contemporary cautionary stories in popular culture portray landscapes of fear and warn people against dangers that could cloud the future of the planet.

Chapters 7–9 deal with discourses about the posthuman world, reflecting on the limits of human and nonhuman beings and the binary construction of the self and the other. The author sees stories of zombies, genetic engineering, androids and cyborgs as representations of visions for evolution (for better or for worse) when there is a loss of humanity. Representation of dogs in various texts are used to address the binary distinction between the human and the other in the landscape of disorder.

The analysis of contexts, characters and plots of dog stories shows that they are mostly gendered, stereotyped and portrayed as objects of power, reflecting human beings' dominance over non-human animals and nature in general. Here the author names a few exceptions where narrations of dogs' *Umwelt* are carried out through the smells or eyes of dogs. Finally, the author analyzes stories of hybrids, monsters and metamorphosis in novels and movies, regarding them as reflections of the male-female and human-animal dichotomies and as discursive efforts to overcome dualism and easy classifications.

Chapters 10–12 challenge anthropocentrism and speciesist ideologies by deconstructing carnism, the eating of meat as normal, natural and necessary to the diet. Multimodal analyses of advertising, movies and TV series reveal that hegemonic dietary discourses are created globally, in part by pervasive narrations of 'scientific and mechanically clean' meat industry, 'animal-absent' meat products, 'cartoon figures' and 'green pastures' and in part by representing vegans as 'ascetic, faddish, oversensitive and hostile characters' (pp. 171–172).

Through an ecofeminist lens, the author also reveals that a gender-meat nexus is established with narrations of erotic male predation, hamburger-eating men, nomadic cowboys and male chefs in literature, movies and culinary talent shows. The author concludes the discussion with a positive attitude by analyzing texts that go against or create openings in the carnist imperative, such as films revealing the reality of the meat industry and unfair treatment of animals in farm factories (p. 204).

This book combines critical geopolitical theory with ecocriticism to investigate the representation of power-knowledge mechanisms in three types of environmental discourses. Its highlighting of the power practices enacted in discourse – between human and nature, human and nonhuman as well as man and woman – opens new avenues for research on discourse about environmental issues. Though not always coherent as a whole, the extensive discussion of fears of ecological crisis, hopes and visions for an ideal living and various distorted views in the attractive selection of dystopia and post-apocalyptic, posthuman and carnist discourses can raise readers' awareness of the power of popular culture in shaping their understanding of the surrounding environment. The book will be an inspiring read to any scholars of the environmental humanities.