Afraid of the Dark and the Light: Visceralizing Ecocide in *The Road* and *Hell*

Alexa Weik von Mossner
University of Klagenfurt

As a speculative genre that "dreams" alternative and often futuristic worlds into existence, science fiction is in a near-ideal position to explore perceived risks and anxieties regarding large-scale environmental change. Science fiction *film*, with its ability to visualize and *visceralize* speculative future worlds, is particularly powerful in this regard. Maurizia Natali suggests that the "fantasies" we find in recent science fiction films, such as Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), may "offer a means for arresting the many preemptive wars of the Empire" we have seen in older movies, and instead "inaugurate a new sublime Desolation: that of 'global warming' and future catastrophes of a different nature" (121). Natali does not explore further what exactly such a "new sublime Desolation" would entail, but she certainly is correct in pointing out the remarkable increase in disaster science fiction films in recent years that directly or indirectly evoke potential future ecological catastrophes as a consequence of present human behavior. While this is not an entirely new phenomenon – the 1970s, especially, saw a number of ecologically-themed dystopian science fiction – the re-emergence of such narratives indicates their relevance in a time of ecological uncertainty and change.[1] Robin Murray and Joseph Heumann even argue in *Ecology and Popular Film* (2009) that such films should be seen "as indicators of real changes in worldview" (3).

However, not all science fiction filmmakers who invent eco-futures embrace the openly political stance that Murray and Heumann see behind *The Day After Tomorrow* as well as behind a number of computer-animated family films such as *Ice Age: The Meltdown* (2006) and *Happy Feet* (2006). Some of these filmmakers are more interested in an exploration of the future subjectivities and societies that may result from radical ecological changes, and in the representation of human bodies and minds that are marked by much more hostile environmental conditions than most of us enjoy today. In this essay, I will look at two pertinent examples from two different national traditions: John Hillcoat's 2009 film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Road* (2006), and one of the very few German-Swiss science fiction films with an environmental theme, Tim Fehlbaum's *Hell* (2011). My focus will be on how these two films represent future environments and the ways they shape human communities and individual destinies. Of particular importance in this context is the complex role of *setting* and *location* in both films. Given that they both represent post-apocalyptic scenarios with an all but dead biosphere but, for various reasons, rely on no or very little

[1] Pertinent examples of ecologically-themed science fiction films of the 1970s are Douglas Trumbull's *Silent Running* (1972) and Richard Fleischer's *Soylent Green* (1973).

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computer animation, I am interested in the use of real-world ecological spaces as locations for futuristic diegetic spaces of their narratives and the effect such transformation has on the viewer.

In film parlance, the natural (or built) space that surrounds characters in a given scene is usually referred to as the "setting," and in most mainstream narrative films this diegetic space is subordinated to the needs of the narrative. Setting, therefore, functions as a background to the foregrounded action, literally framing the characters' actions. However, there are also moments when such spaces take on additional importance. In "Between Setting and Landscape in the Cinema" (2006), Martin Lefebvre differentiates between "setting," "landscape," and "territory," arguing that film landscape emerges in the moments when a natural space becomes "autonomous" from the narrative. At such moments, the filmmaker invites viewers to focus their attention on a specific landscape (for example through the use of long shots or extreme long shots of a desert landscape, mountain range, or other natural environments) rather than on the story, or viewers themselves shift their attention away from the narrative and towards the "background" (34).[2] Territory refers to cinematic places that are depicted as owned and inhabited by humans, and to the ways in which humans are "fighting for it" or "working on it" (53).

The feature that Lefebvre does not really account for is what in German is called a "*mithandelnder Schauplatz*," a diegetic space that is not so much the setting for the action as it is an active agent and part of the action. This, I will argue, is what we find in both *The Road* and *Hell,* where the imagined natural world has considerable agency and forces characters to behave in certain ways, making it nearly impossible for them to act differently. The situation is more complex, though, since in both cases it is unclear whether the changed environment is the result of human action, and so at the very least a potential interrelation exists between human and nonhuman modes of agency. I am particularly interested in the relationship between the imagined ecological spaces and the actions of the protagonists of each film, on the one hand, and in the relationship between these futuristic diegetic spaces and the contemporary real-life ecological spaces that "play" them, on the other hand. Together with the performances of the human actors and the tension and suspense built by the narratives, I will argue, the spectacle and insinuated agency of these ecological spaces are centrally responsible for the films' emotional force and for their ability to engage viewers in stories of global ecocide and human survival.

Staging the Future: The Uncanny Performance of Ecological Space

Given that *Hell* was released two years after *The Road*, and that Fehlbaum was well aware of Hillcoat's earlier film, both the similarities and differences between the

[2] Drawing on the work of the French art historian Anne Cauquelin, Lefebvre explains that the setting "is above all else the space of story and event: it is the scenery of and the theatre for what will happen. No representation or discourse recounting action or events can be made without a setting, even if that setting can be understood and interpreted by spectators in a variety of ways. Setting refers to spatial features that are necessary for all event-driven films—whether fiction or documentary" (20).

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two films are striking. A very faithful adaptation of McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel, Hillcoat's *The Road* is at heart a road movie, telling the story of an unnamed father (Viggo Mortensen) and his son (Kodi Smit-McPhee) who try to make their way south through the barren landscapes of what used to be the United States. McCarthy's novel does not specify what kind of disaster has caused the utter devastation of the Earth's biosphere, and McCarthy has explained that he does not "have an opinion" in this regard. In an interview in the *Wall Street Journal,* he recalls geologist friends suggesting that "it looked like a meteor to them. But it could be anything—volcanic activity or it could be nuclear war. It is not really important. The whole thing now is, what do you do?" (Interview n.p.). McCarthy thus demonstrates disinterest not only in the nature of the catastrophe but also in whether or not it was brought about by humans.

Like McCarthy, Hillcoat prefers to take the ecological devastation as a given, and to focus on how his protagonists fight for their lives and their morality in a hostile environment. How hostile it really is becomes apparent in the narrative's main antagonists. In a world in which vegetables, grain, and animals have all become as scarce as sunlight, some humans have taken to eating the only source of protein left: as cannibals, they hunt other humans and keep them in the basement of an abandoned house that they now occupy. Man, quite literally, is now a wolf to man. With the collapse of the biosphere, all forms of species solidarity seem to have vanished as well.

Fehlbaum's *Hell* paints a related, but in certain ways quite different picture of the planet's ecological future. Unlike *The Road*, *Hell* is very specific about its temporal setting: the film transports us to 2016 when, as we learn at the outset of the film, the earth's atmosphere has heated by a full 10 degrees Celsius. Playing with a genre that is much more common in American than in German cinema, Fehlberg's science fiction film comes with a deliberately ambiguous title that exploits the fact that the word "hell" is what linguists call a "false friend." At first glance, even German viewers tend to attribute the rather gruesome English meaning to the title, but director Fehlberg has explained that the German meaning of the word *hell* – "bright" – is what he originally had in mind.[3] Indeed, the two meanings turn out to be closely related, since the unbearable brightness of the sun in the film makes being outside a hellish experience. The sunlight is now so strong that it burns everything on the surface of the planet. Moreover, since water and food resources have been exhausted and societal structures dissolved in this future version of Germany, the film also confronts viewers with another kind of hell: as in McCarthy's novel and in Hillcoat's film, some humans have become cannibalistic, even though they are arguably more humane in their cannibalism than their American counterparts. Another important difference between the two films is that while *The Road* is narrated from a decidedly male perspective, *Hell* focuses on the way women survive in its hostile ecological future. As we will see, even the film's version of cannibalism is related to that female mode of survival.

[3] Fehlberg explained the true meaning of the title of his film in an answer to a question posed by a member of the audience at the Swiss premiere of the film in Zurich on November 18, 2011.

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In both films, the extremely hostile environment is central to plot and character development. At the same time, their visual worlds were from the beginning of production circumscribed by serious budget constraints and their directors' creative visions, who, in both cases, were determined to find real-life equivalents for their fictional ecologies. For this reason, the selection of shooting locations was of the utmost importance in order to assert that what is plausible in the script and on the level of the diegetic space of their films is also realistic in the images they present to viewers. As Lefebvre points out, "it is common knowledge that a director need not respect the natural geography" (49). In film, geographical spaces often stand in for different, fictional spaces, be it the frequent substitution of Toronto for parts of New York, or John Ford's infamous use of Monument Valley (on the border of Arizona and Utah) to represent Texas in his Western *The Searchers* (1956).[4]

In the case of *The Road* and *Hell*, things were somewhat less complicated, because both narratives are set in a future where local landscapes have become all but unrecognizable. Furthermore, their geographies remain rather vague. *The Road* takes places "somewhere" in the United States, with the protagonists progressively moving south and seaward during the course of the story. *Hell* is a little more precise in this regard, since the protagonists pass some highway signs with the names of towns that viewers who are familiar with the geography of Germany will situate in the southeastern region of Bavaria. However, since most of the action is set in the middle of the woods, and glaring light alternating with gloomy dusk and complete darkness dramatically reduces what viewers can actually see and recognize, the need for geographical authenticity is dramatically reduced. The problems confronting these two filmmakers were therefore of a different nature: how to find real, existing natural spaces that looked as bleak and devastated as the imaginary future places in their film scripts.

Looking specifically for areas that would be icy and mostly overcast during wintertime and spending "three weeks full time scanning America with Google Earth," Hillcoat ended up shooting much of his movie in the area around Pittsburgh.[5] Not only was the climate perfect, the decaying ruins and remnants of the region's coal and steel industry also fit well with the film's vision of the future. To add more visual drama, the team also shot a few scenes in the area that was devastated by the 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens in Washington State. The location's bleak hills, charred trees, and collapsed streets are a horrifying sight. A shot of the nearby lake whose surface is still covered with hundreds of thousands of dead tree trunks completes the picture of devastation, which in the film looks even gloomier because of the general absence of

[4] Lefebvre argues that Ford's use of Monument Valley in several of his films, some of which were set in different geographical regions, "strongly risks pushing the spectator … to arrest their gaze on the space despite its strong diegetic incorporation in each of the films and the absence of formal strategies to render it autonomous" ("Between" 49). For Lefebvre, this is a typical example of an autonomous landscape that is not so much the result of conscious directorial choices, but rather an unintended side effect produced by the viewer.

[5] Hillcoat explains the method of his team's location scouting in the *Notes on Style* documentary, which is part of the bonus features accompanying the DVD version.

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color and light. Shooting in widescreen 35 mm, *The Road*'s director of photography, Javier Aguirresarobe, deliberately underexposed his film stock to achieve a lower contrast and thereby to suggest the limited sunlight. In addition, the filmmakers made use of some physical effects, such as biodegradable grey paper pieces, which in the film look like ashes. Since they could not entirely avoid shooting on clear winter days, they also had to use CGI in postproduction processing to remove the blue sky and to further dim down the images (Hillcoat n.p.).

In certain ways, Fehlbaum's visual world is the diametrical opposite of Hillcoat's world. If Hillcoat's fictional future is plagued by lack of sunlight, there is way too much light in *Hell.* The filmmakers used strong lamps and reflectors on the set, and director of photography Markus Förderer *over*exposed his material to create the impression of blinding sunlight that does not allow viewers to orient themselves properly in the light-suffused landscape. However, since a number of scenes are set during dusk or dawn, which allows for visual orientation, the makers of *Hell* also needed to find natural spaces that could visually communicate the film's devastated future world. Like Hillcoat and his team, they found them in areas that had been hit by (natural) disaster. Part of the film was shot in a region on the Mediterranean island of Corsica that had been destroyed by catastrophic forest fires in 2009. Because the German funding system forced the filmmakers to shoot the majority of the film in Germany, they found their second main location in a part of the Bavarian forest that had been severely infested by the bark-beetle.[6] To make the location look even more devastated, they used biodegradable black spray paint to color the trees (Fehlbaum n.p.). Following a recommendation by Roland Emmerich, who later became executive producer of the movie, they also blew mounds of dust and dirt into every single shot of the film to create the impression of severe desiccation.

Both filmmakers relied on the sites of past real-life disasters for their own imagination of a post-apocalyptic future and the creation of corresponding cinematic worlds. As Hillcoat explains in the 'Making Of' documentary of his film, looking at environmental and man-made disasters such as Katrina and Mount St Helens, "was inspiring because… it was like we could see the world of the book coming alive." Unlike science fiction films whose imaginary alien ecologies are set on far-way planets, *The Road* and *Hell* "dress up" real natural spaces to have them "perform" the future world, which creates an eerie relationship between real and imagined environmental crisis. Viewers are taken aback by the impressiveness of these sights and in all likelihood will experience moments in which they shift their attention away from the characters and plot, focusing instead on the spectacle of ecological devastation. Hillcoat, especially, invites such a shift in focus, pausing his narrative for a moment and inviting the viewer to take in the camera's extreme long shots and slow pans of the environmental wasteland.

[6] Bark beetles reproduce in the inner bark of certain kinds of trees, with some sub-species attacking and killing live trees. When they spread, they can cause widespread tree mortality and alter whole forest ecosystems. In the Bavarian forest, such epidemics have led to widespread damage.

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In such moments of pause and reflection, Lefebvre locates the emergence of an "intentional landscape" ("Between" 30). "*Any strategy*," he explains, "*for directing the spectator's attention toward the exterior space rather than toward the action taking place within it (regardless of whether the strategy is motivated diegetically) can be attributed to an intention to emphasize landscape*" ("Between" 33, emphasis in original). He admits, though, that "the more the landscape's spectacle is legitimized or recuperated by the unfolding of the action … the less violent the interruption of the story feels" ("Between" 33). In Lefebvre's understanding, a spectator constantly moves back and forth between what he calls the "narrative mode" and the "spectacular mode" during the viewing experience. How smoothly these transitions occur in the experience of the spectator depends at least in part on the director's creative choices. Although I doubt that there are indeed two different and distinct "viewing modes" available to the viewer, I agree with Lefebvre that most viewers' attention and emotional engagement will shift from character and narrative to exterior space and back if they are invited to do so by the filmmakers through the shooting and editing of individual scenes. As we will see in the next section, this is particularly crucial in the case of science fiction films like *The Road* and *Hell*, where the exterior space – which resembles a complex environment much more than the purely visual spectacle of a landscape – is in fact a central actor in the story itself.

Ecological Change Scenarios and the Agency of (Cinematic) Environments

The Road opens with bright, colorful shots of tree leaves, flowers, a small white house, and blue skies, which are all inspired by the American photographer William Eggleston, picturing, as Hillcoat has put it, "little snippets of life that we take for granted" (Director's Comments, DVD version of *The Road*). A closing screen door darkens this beautiful sight and eases the transition to the next sequence, in which the Man is woken up by a yellowish haze of light and hectically begins to fill the bathtub and sinks with water. He is observed by his disbelieving wife (Charlize Theron), who holds her pregnant belly and stares fearfully at the window. The next cut, which is a close-up of the Man's heavily lined and dirty face, makes viewers realize that what they just saw was a flashback; the Man's memory of a happier time and of the night when it all changed. He now lies on the frozen ground with his young son in a shabby sleeping bag, and when the two get up and grab their few ragged belongings, spectators are immediately confronted with the spectacular images of Mount St. Helens mentioned above. The narrative moves slowly at this point and lacks dialogue. We only hear soft piano music and the father's melancholic account of what happened while we see him and his son struggling to make their way through a devastated landscape that looks shockingly real – for good reason.

Through his directorial choices, Hillcoat thus creates two kinds of relationships. He reminds viewers how dependent their present comfortable lives are on a certain type of environment and how dramatically things would change if that environment were to

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be destroyed. "Our referencing," Hillcoat has explained, "was … about things that have actually happened, in documentaries, in photographs, man-made and natural disasters as opposed to a futuristic fantasy or a CGI spectacle"(*Notes on Style* documentary, DVD version of *The Road*). Because of these references, viewers are never allowed to just enjoy the future scenario as pure *fiction*. Instead, the film suggests that such devastation may happen and then speculates how human societies would fare under such conditions. Hillcoat's directorial choices foreground the second kind of relationship: the close relation between humans and their environment.

Interestingly, this relationship is crucial not only on the level of the narrative, but also on the level of performance. Hillcoat remembers the way Mortensen and Smit-McPhee "both reacted to being in these locations. It was like it gave a reality to something. [Smit-McPhee] would have had a hellish time trying to get those emotions and get to that place if it was a green screen comfort studio. Actually it gave it a visceral reality" (*Notes on Style* documentary, DVD version of *The Road*). This *visceral* sense of reality, felt by the actors as well by the viewers in a more imaginative way, gives the film its emotional strength. Again and again, close-ups of human facescapes are juxtaposed with long shots of landscapes, with the filthy, haunted faces mirroring the devastated environment. The close-ups are crucial for the empathetic engagement of the viewer. As cognitive film theorist Carl Plantinga explains in "The Scene of Empathy and the Human Face on Film" (1999), "the prolonged concentration on the character's face is not warranted by the simple communication of information about character emotion. Such scenes are also intended to elicit empathetic emotions in the spectator" (239). "This is possible," Plantinga explains, "because viewing the human face can elicit response through the processes of affective mimicry, facial feedback, and emotional contagion" ("The Scene" 240). Emotional contagion – the process by which we "catch" other humans' emotions – is an empathetic response, and as Plantinga and a number of other cognitive film and studies scholars have argued, the human capacity for empathy is of central importance for our understanding of fiction in general and narrative films in particular (Keen, *Empathy*; Hogan, *Mind*; Plantinga, *Moving Viewers*).

Hillcoat makes ample use of close-ups and extreme close-ups to involve viewers in the tragic life stories of his main characters. The Man's exhaustion, his mourning for the past, and his constant fear for the life of his son are often communicated not through dialogue, but through Mortensen's mimic, his eyes, and his trembling lips. Every parent in the audience will likely be able to relate to some of his emotions and empathize or sympathize with his desperate situation. What makes *The Road* so difficult to bear for spectators is the fact that the future world it imagines strips its characters of almost all agency and leaves little room for hope. In addition, the frequent shots of a "dead" but nevertheless sublime nature also have strong emotional effects on viewers. As Cynthia Freeland reminds us, "the sublime object presents us with a sensory and emotional experience of some sort that is so extreme, unsettling, or intense that it would be disturbing on its own. But in its context it forces us to shift into another mental mode, cognition, or thought," with the result that "[w]e become more able to handle the deep

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feelings evoked by the work" (68). For Lefebvre, the contemplation of cinematic nature has the additional effect of isolating the object of the gaze and freeing it from its narrative function. In his view, it is the viewer's "autonomising gaze" that "*enables the notion of filmic landscape in narrative fiction . . . film; it makes possible the transition from setting to landscape*" ("Between" 29, emphasis in original). However, when Hillcoat invites viewers to focus on sublime sights of ecological devastation, he does not so much offer them moments of "autonomous" landscape or pure spectacle as he encourages them to put these sights in context and to reflect about the relationship between the ecological space and the fate of his characters.

In a way, the sublime environment therefore functions as "setting," which, according to Lefebvre, "is the place where something happens, where something takes place and unfolds" ("Between" 24). There is an important difference, however. Typically, Lefebvre explains, "From the perspective of a film's narrative or event-based economy—in other words, *from the narratological point of view*—exterior space frames the action and is subordinate to it" ("Between" 24). This is what makes it a *setting* for the film's plot. However, this is not the case in *The Road*. After all, it is the total degradation of the environment and the ensuing lack of food, warmth, and shelter that causes the Man and his son to live as wretched wanderers, and which causes other Americans to become cannibals. The exterior space here does not really frame the action, since it is part of the action itself and a driver of both plot and character. Therefore, story is in fact subservient to the space and the landscape in which it is set, rather than the other way around. And since the film leaves open whether or not the environmental change it depicts is anthropogenic, it is not even clear to what degree human agency is responsible for the catastrophic situation.

Similar to *The Road*, *Hell* offers viewers a glimpse into a future in which the planet – or at least the portion of it we see in the film – no longer sustains human life. As in *The Road*, all non-human mammals and most other complex life forms seem to have gone extinct, and the few humans that are still alive rely mostly on leftover convenience food and bottled water for their subsistence. A dramatic increase in sun radiation and a resulting increase in global temperatures are named as the cause of the drastic environmental change that has led to the desertification of central Europe. As in *The Road*, the new environmental conditions have led to the breakdown of social and political structures, and individuals are left to fend for themselves in a hostile and dangerous world. The main protagonists are two sisters, Marie (Hannah Herzsprung) and Leoni (Lisa Vicari), who, together with Marie's boyfriend Phillip (Lars Eidiger), are on the road to find food, water, and a better place to live. We meet them for the first time in the claustrophobic, dust-filled space of their rundown car, whose blacked-out windows keep out the sun while bringing the temperature inside close to the boiling point. If the characters in *The Road* are constantly cold, the protagonists of *Hell* are always sweating, panting, and in dire need of water. When they want to go outside, they have to protect themselves from the sun with multiple layers of clothes, hats, and gloves; and they need headscarves to cover their faces below their dark ski goggles. The changed environment

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dictates their lives, now dominated by the constant search for basic existential needs. Only Leoni, who is still a teenager, dares to ask whether the CD player of the car can play an old CD she found, and she can enjoy the brief moment when Nena's "*99 Luftballons*" ("99 Red Balloons") sounds from the loudspeakers. Phillip then stops the music, reminding her and Marie that they have more important things to take care of, and that they cannot afford to waste energy on such trite things as music.

Like *The Road*, *Hell* is a road movie of sorts, which, at least during the first half of the film, keeps its characters in a constant movement that leads them away from the urban and towards the rural and "wild." The three protagonists have left the city because they hope to find better living conditions in the mountains, and seeing glimpses of the dusty, blinding, and dead world outside, it is easy for the viewer to understand that the characters must get away. Because of the complete breakdown of infrastructure, gas is as much of a problem as water, and it is during a stop at an abandoned gas station that they meet Tom (Stipe Erceg), who trades leftover gasoline for bottled water and then joins the trio after repairing their car. Tom's body is scarred from overexposure to the sun when he was left lying unconscious outside for two hours after having been mugged. Similar to the Man in *The Road*, he looks emaciated from the daily struggle for survival, and given the environmental and societal conditions, one can only wonder how the two young women manage to be so healthy and good-looking. Herzsprung and Vicari's performances, though, are solid, and so their faces successfully convey the anxieties and strong emotions that bind the two sisters together in this post-apocalyptic world. As in *The Road*, many of these anxieties arise from the recognition that ecological catastrophe means not only the breakdown of social organization, but also the end of species solidarity. In both films, the protagonists' bodies are threatened not only by the harsh environmental conditions, but also by other humans who have developed eating habits that most viewers would consider perverse. Moreover, both films suggest that a future ecological catastrophe would be the most brutal test of our individual moral integrity.

Precarious Bodies: Cinematic Cannibalism and the Moral Structure of Film

Although it tends to be ostracized in real-life societies, perverse behavior clearly is highly pleasurable to read and watch for many members of those same societies once it has been fictionalized. As Murray Smith points out, "Moral perversity . . . is an enduring subject of fictional representation, both filmic and literary" (219), and there are whole genres, such as psycho-thriller and horror film, which rely on their audiences' fascination with the dark and amoral side of human behavior. What is important, however, is the way in which such moral perversity is depicted. "A key aspect of this phenomenon," writes Smith, "concerns the way in which viewers and readers of fiction depicting 'perverse' acts and agents are invited to respond to them (cognitively, conatively, emotionally); and especially whether and in what circumstances we are invited to endorse them" (219).

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Although both *The Road* and *Hell* centrally rely on the conventions of psycho-thriller and horror film to propel their narratives forward, neither film invites viewers to endorse the perverse acts of the cannibals they feature. In both cases, the man-eaters are clearly positioned as the story's antagonists, and viewers are not only *aligned* with characters that act in moral ways, but are also invited to build sympathetic *allegiance* with them. Alignment, Smith explains, is a result of "our access to the actions, thought, and feelings of a character" (220). If we see the events from a certain character's perspective, we are aligned with that character in the sense that the character is the focalizer of the story. Allegiance, by contrast, "refers to the way in which, and the degree to which, a film elicits responses of sympathy and antipathy toward its characters, responses triggered—if not wholly determined—by the *moral structure* of the film" (220, original emphasis). Typically, alignment with a character is combined with allegiance to that character, and this is the situation also found in *The Road* and *Hell*.[7] In both cases, viewers are most directly aligned with protagonists that behave morally, even in the most adverse situations. Not only would they rather starve than eat a fellow human, they also only use violence in self-defense. Both films, however, pose some very interesting questions regarding the relationship of human morality and environmental change. Particularly interesting, as we will see, are their different approaches to the issue of cannibalism not only in terms of viewer allegiance, but also in terms of their gender-related moral structure.

In *The Road*, the roaming band of cannibals that hunts down humans is unequivocally a sight of horror. Hillcoat introduces his very zombie-like man-eaters in minute 12 of his film, thus ensuring that viewers will from that point on expect their horrific reappearance in a scene that will immediately threaten the life of the Man and his son. Each time something moves behind their backs and each time they enter an abandoned house in their search for food, viewers tense up and wait for the cannibals' attack. The film does not disappoint their expectations. When father and son walk past a decaying mansion, they cannot resist entering it through one of the windows. Numerous sleeping bags suggest that there are people camping out here, which immediately alarms viewers. But even when the boy notices dozens of shoes heaped up in one room, this does not deter his father. Apparently, he is too fixated on finding food to think any further. He finds and forcefully opens a hidden trap door, leading his son into the basement where they – after minutes of anxious searching with a minimal light source – find a group of emaciated humans. Like the heaped-up shoes, the sight references images known from Nazi concentration camps, and triggers emotions of shock and compassion. These feelings, however, shift to a sense of horror when one of the zombie-like humans attacks the Man. Instead of compassion, the viewer, who is clearly aligned with the protagonists in this scene, now feels disgust and fear and wishes nothing more than to leave the nightmarish humans behind. Fleeing the dungeon, the Man and his son notice that the

[7] Smith suggests that we find non-typical modes of alignment in films such as Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), in which the narrative invites viewers to at least partially align themselves with a deeply immoral agent.

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tormentors are returning to the house at just that moment, and – after discovering the blood-filled bathtub where the cannibals carve up their victims – they barely escape being slaughtered themselves.

Because *The Road* is not genre cinema, the film does not end in some blood-soaked showdown. When the father eventually dies at the end of the film, it is because he is terminally ill, not because of human predators. While the existence of cannibals does contribute considerably to the film's narrative arc all the way to the ambiguous ending, which makes viewers wonder whether the family that picks up the boy will help him or have him for dinner, Hillcoat for the most part stays away from spectacular effects and scenes of gore. Faithful to the novel, he is much more interested in the moral questions related to the phenomenon of cannibalism in a world that is marked by a lack of material sustenance and radical uncertainty. Almost obsessively, father and son discuss the question whether they are "good people" who "carry the fire" in their hearts. Again and again, the boy gets the father—who has been hardened by the harsh circumstances—to show compassion with fellow humans, giving them precious and much-needed food, or returning clothes to those who had tried to steal from them. Much more than his exhausted and disillusioned father, the boy is the moral compass of the narrative, regardless of the fact that he, too, has been confronted with some of the most horrific sights imaginable. Viewers are invited to share both the boy's deep compassion for others and his hope for a better future, and the father's sad recognition that in the post-apocalyptic world in which they live, his boy's ethics and hope will in all likelihood be doomed. When viewers witness the father's death and the boy's departure with the strange family at the end of the film, they can hardly help feeling depressed, perhaps hoping for a happy ending but at the same time knowing that there can be no happy ending once the natural and social worlds have been so thoroughly destroyed.

Fehlbaum's *Hell* is – much more than *The Road* – a genre film, and so it does drive its narrative to a spectacular, bloody showdown; nevertheless, its moral treatment of cannibalism is intriguing. Similar to *The Road*, it suggests that intra-species predation must be expected once all other sources of sustenance have become extremely scarce. But it introduces the issue in a very different way. The very first scenes of the film depict a French couple who – severely injured – have survived a car accident somewhere in the mountains. The woman tries to help her husband get out of the car wreck when she notices that she is being observed by a man. Immediately sensing the danger, she tries to escape, but is soon hunted down in the woods.

When the four protagonists hit a road block on a mountain road twenty minutes into the film, viewers may or may not make the connection with the earlier incident. After a number of mishaps, Leoni disappears, and Marie is determined to find her sister. She ends up wandering alone and aimlessly through the dead woods, getting slowly grilled by the mid-day sun. Eventually, she seeks protection in a small chapel, and it is in this holy place that she meets the farmer Elisabeth – played by the renowned German stage actress Angela Winkler – who gives the younger woman water and takes her to her nearby farm so that she can recuperate and eat. Even here, far away from the city, Marie

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learns, the peasant family has been hard hit by the new environmental conditions, but is still able to get by. She sits down at the dining table with Elisabeth and her sons, but at this point she has already connected the dots and knows that the stew that they so generously put on her plate is made from human flesh. She tries to escape but ends up in the family's old slaughterhouse where she later witnesses – in terror – the highly professional slaughtering of her own boyfriend.

These are without question the most horrific scenes of the film, yet they are very different from the ones we see in *The Road*. There is, in fact, almost no blood in *Hell*, and the killing is done in a much more "humane" way. What triggers disgust and horror in viewers is the normalcy and equanimity with which the peasant family slaughters and then eats other humans: they do it in exactly the same way they used to slaughter cows or pigs. Phillip is first dazed with an electric shock and then killed with a bolt gun, and it is insinuated that his body will subsequently be treated exactly as one would treat a slaughtered animal. As Elisabeth explains to Marie at some point, as a woman and mother, she must take care of her family, and so she and her sons have simply exchanged humans for cattle. Just as Marie loves and feels responsible for her sister, Elisabeth loves and feels responsible for her sons. The way in which she takes care of them seems to disturb her so little in moral terms that she still regularly goes to the small chapel to pray. Because of Winkler's star appeal and the fact that we meet her as someone who is offering help to Marie (she does not plan to kill Marie but wants both her and her sister as future wives for her sons), we are tricked into an at least temporary sympathetic allegiance with Elisabeth, which is something that we will recoil from in disgust once we learn the full story. And while the narrative then culminates in a rather clichéd rescue of the human "cattle" held by the family and a dramatic escape, it is the film's peculiar treatment of cannibalism that is likely to stick in viewers' minds. Like *The Road*, *Hell* aligns its viewers with morally sound characters, but it also coolly suggests that deteriorating environmental conditions will eventually lead to the breakdown of moral norms and species solidarity.

Viewers with an interest in animal rights issues, of course, will also recognize another, and perhaps unintended, dimension of the film: that the same practices we find horrific when exercised on humans seem perfectly humane and acceptable to most of us when exercised on other mammals, such as cows or pigs. As philosopher Peter Singer reminds us, "most people draw a sharp line between humans and animals. . . . If our interest conflicts with those of animals, it is always their interest which should be sacrificed" (78). The slaughtering of sentient beings that turns them into human food in the presence of abundant vegetarian alternatives may be questionable for some, but most humans find it perfectly reasonable. Yet the slaughtering of humans in the complete absence of alternatives horrifies the same people. The moral line drawn here is what Singer calls *speciesism,* which he aligns with sexism and racism, all implying that "the boundary of my own group is also the boundary of my concern" (79). Like Hillcoat (and McCarthy), Fehlbaum uses human speciesism for dramatic effect and as a reminder of the fragility of moral principles.

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Conclusion

Despite their interest in human-nature relationships and their dystopian visions of the future, *The Road* and *Hell* both remain strangely apolitical. This is not only because the disappearance of all power structures suggests that pure coincidence decides who gets eaten and who does not, but also because the directors' decisions to remain vague about the nature of the environmental changes they portray diminishes their films' critical force. Writing about the novel, Lydia Cooper states that *The Road* "expresses a deep pessimism regarding humanity's self-destructiveness, but it concurrently proffers an affirmation of the individual's ability to experience a transcendent, and perhaps ultimately redemptive, empathic connection with others" (234). The film mirrors the book's pessimism and, to some degree, affirmation, albeit with fewer religious connotations. Yet it is primarily, as Hillcoat explains, a "projection . . . of humanity's worst fear and every parent's worst fear and every individual's worst fear, which is coming to an end and how do you move on and are your loved ones prepared" (Hillcoat n.p.). How humanity came to that end is of lesser importance to him, and yet it might have made a difference in how viewers (and readers) react to the narrative's horrific future.

Hell, which has received the "Förderpreis Deutscher Film," a prestigious national award for young filmmakers and the predicate "Besonders Wertvoll" ("particularly valuable") by the German Board of Film Classification, is in the end too much of a genre film to fully develop the critical potential inherent in its subject matter.[8] Praised for his successful adaptation of a traditionally American film genre into German cinema and for the atmospheric density of his imagery, Fehlbaum offers a fascinating and chilling glimpse into a radically different near-future. Yet he does not provide an explicit link between the present and the dystopian future that would encourage viewers to reflect on their own role and involvement in radical environmental change.[9]

As it is, one can only hope that the two films' powerful evocation of real-world disaster in emotionally engaging stories about future humans nevertheless encourages people to think about their real-world lives. After all, science fiction scholar Tom Moylan has famously asserted "the particular capability of sf texts not only to delight but also to teach" (xvi) because "[i]maginatively and cognitively engaging with such works can bring willing readers back to their own worlds with new or clearer perceptions, possibly helping them to raise their consciousness about what is right and wrong in that world" (xvii). As eco-dystopian science fiction films, *The Road* and *Hell* should be similarly able to foster such clearer perceptions, not least because they confront their viewers with

[8] The official justification for the predicate can be found (in German) at http://www.fbw-filmbewertung.com/film/hell_2.

[9] Fehlbaum has explained that one of the inspirations for the future scenario of his film was a talk given by the German sociologist Harald Welzer on the future risk of climate wars. Welzer has since published a book on the topic called *Klimakriege* (2008).

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emotionally powerful images of a dying future environment and its powerful effects on human lives.

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