

Cinematic Waesthetics: Wasted Worlds, Wasted Lives and Becoming-Waste in Contemporary Science Fiction Film

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“No one can win against kipple,” he said, “except temporarily and maybe in one spot, like in my apartment I’ve sort of created a stasis between the pressure of kipple and nonkipple, for the time being [...] But eventually I’ll die or go away, and then the kipple will again take over. It’s a universal principle operating throughout the universe; the entire universe is moving toward a final state of total, absolute kippleization.”

- John R. Isidore (Dick 1968: 52)

In Philip K. Dick’s celebrated science fiction (SF) novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), the eccentric side character, John R. Isidore, has a curious fascination with a phenomenon he calls ‘kipple.’ Kipple refers to ‘useless objects, like junk mail or match folders after you use the last match [...] When nobody is around, kipple reproduces itself’ (Dick 52). Kipple is a form of waste that never goes away, it is always in a process of change and it exhibits its own curious form of agency. In Ridley Scott’s filmic adaptation of the novel, *Blade Runner* (1982), this weird entropic entity has not been lost in translation: the film is teeming with leftover debris, trashed alleyways, and abandoned buildings. Waste is always *there*, lurking in the background and enveloping its characters with its ambient presence. But why is waste always found in these dystopic visions of the future? What is the purpose, if any, of this strange object?

In this article, I explore these questions by calling attention to a fascination in contemporary SF film with what I call ‘cinematic waesthetics’ – the tendency to make use of waste and wastelands to build story-worlds of the future. Looking at three contemporary SF films – Mike Judge’s *Idiocracy* (2006), Denis Villeneuve’s *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), and Neill Blomkamp’s *District 9* (2009) – I argue that an increasing prevalence of waste now characterizes the genre of SF filmmaking. By examining the symbolic meanings that waste carries, the role it

plays in different narratives, and the affective qualities it engenders, I argue that cinematic waste and wastelands perform a variety of aesthetic functions. These functions, I claim, can be traced across three modes that I call ‘Wasted worlds,’ ‘Wasted lives,’ and ‘Becoming-waste’ – modes that highlight the often-subtle ways in which waste participates in (i) cinematic world-building, (ii) representations of otherness, and (iii) depictions of radical forms of change. Taken together, these three modes, I suggest, represent a suggestive image of how waste forms part of contemporary SF film.

Science Fiction, Ecology, and Waste

The phenomenon of waste shares a close affinity with the genre of SF precisely because it holds the potential to unsettle our preconceived ways of making sense of the world. In *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979), Darko Suvin famously defined SF as the genre of ‘cognitive estrangement’ (4), suggesting that what characterizes SF is its ability to present versions of the world that are both recognizable and strange: where things like Isidore’s kipple appear both alien and familiar. By offering an escape to an altered yet recognizable world (what Suvin dubs its ‘novum’), the SF genre embodies a politically progressive potential for ‘disorienting and defamiliarizing the conditions of everyday life, opening up the mind to previously unimagined possibilities’ (Caravan and Robinson 2014: xi). SF narratives often function according to a logic of extrapolation in which the tendencies of the historical present – whether psychological, technological, or ecological – have developed in ways that make their long-term consequences visible. Waste, I claim, performs similar work. As William Viney writes, waste ‘disclose[s] ways of living, permit[s] certain ways of seeing and give[s] access to wider actions, collectives and environments’ (2014: 1). Waste, like SF, invites reflection, imagination, and contemplation of the world(s) around us. Waste, like SF, asks that we re-examine not only the future but the society we live in today.

As a genre defined by a capacity to mobilize perceptual readjustments, SF has been of obvious interest to scholars working within ecocriticism, which is a field of study that explores the relationship between literature/film and the more-than-human world¹ (Ivakhiv 2013; Garrard 2014; Clark 2015). Whereas SF scholarship is oriented toward the didactic capacity of literature and film to mobilize experiences of cognitive estrangement, ecocriticism centres on the

representational challenges posed by the structural and perceptual patterns of anthropocentrism. In turn, one of the most striking overlaps between the two areas is their shared interest in cli-fi films, a sub-genre of science fiction that portrays ‘the consequences of man-made climate change and global warming’ (Salmose 2018: 1429), as seen in films such as *Waterworld* (1995) and *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004).² Ecocritical studies of science fiction film, however, extend beyond the representation of climate change. In *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction* (2014), for instance, Gerry Caravan and Kim Stanley Robinson present a number of studies that take the contemporary planetary ecological crisis – summarized with the advent of the Anthropocene – as an occasion to probe further ‘the Suvinian interest in cognitive estrangement and utopian dreaming’ (xi). Examining films such as *Soylent Green* (1973), *WALL-E* (2008), and *Avatar* (2009), these scholars show that contemporary SF – or, as they call it, ‘ecological science fiction’ – has become increasingly marked by ‘a claustrophobic sense of impending ecological limit, the creeping terror that technological modernity, and its consumer lifestyle, may in fact have no future at all’ (Caravan 2014: 9).

Combining scholarship on ecological SF with waste studies provides a study of the role of waste in theory, society, and culture that is of immense benefit to both. Though much has been written about the socio-ecological significance of dystopian and utopian ecological SF (Baratta 2012; Weik von Mossner 2017), nobody has so far presented a detailed analysis of the aesthetics of waste that characterize the genre. Importantly, this should not be taken to suggest that scholarship on waste aesthetics does not exist. Indeed, there are plenty of work by scholars who have offered critical interpretations of how waste can be read as reflecting anxieties about everything from commodity culture and environmental destruction to human finitude and anthropocentrism, in areas from philosophy and art history (Brown 2001; Scanlan 2005; Clark and Scanlan 2013; Boscagli 2014; Thill 2015), as well as various strands of ecocritical writings (Buell 1998; Morton 2007; Yaeger 2008; Sullivan 2012; Morrison 2015; Estok 2018). One of the foundational voices within this field is Mary Douglas who, in her influential anthropological study *Purity and Danger* (1966), famously proclaimed ‘dirt’ as ‘matter out of place’ (36-37).³ In doing so, Douglas laid forth a constructivist ontology of waste that emphasizes what is perceived as waste is never fixed. Waste, Douglas argues, is a product of historical circumstances, cultural systems, codes and values. In *Waste and Want* (2000), Susan Strasser extends Douglas’ perspective, arguing that ‘[g]arbage as we know it is a relatively new

invention predicated on the monumental technological and social changes wrought by industrialization [...]. Garbage as we know it is an outcome of a fully realized capitalist system' (17-18). In *Wasted Lives* (2003), Zygmunt Bauman famously applied such perspectives to people, arguing that modernization and globalization has become 'the most prolific and least controlled, "production line" of human waste' (6), i.e. the parts of the extant population that are perceived to be 'redundant,' 'out of place,' 'unfit,' or 'disposable' as exemplified by the asylum seeker, the beggar, or the waste-picker. For a study on the role of waste in contemporary SF film, the insight that waste constitutes a culturally mediated and technologically enabled capitalist act is fundamental to understanding its prevalence within the genre, as it is precisely such themes that the films I examine below call attention to.

Another core idea is the materialist approach to waste. Exemplifying this trend, Viney argues that waste should be considered from a distinct *temporal* perspective as 'matter [...] out of time' (2). When we encounter waste, we encounter 'the time of things,' Viney argues, 'objects that arise from time felt in and with matter' (2014: 11). Waste objects not only reflect a loss of value and utility, as ascribed through cultural classification, but also the passing of 'a particular kind of time, a use-time, which provides an occasion where time materializes in and through use' (7). In *The Ethics of Waste* (2006), Gay Hawkins echoes Viney's view that waste cannot be reduced to questions of social construction, though for Hawkins it is the *materiality* of waste that reflects this excess. Taking an overflowing bin as her main example, Hawkins argues that our embodied and affective interactions with waste reflect a two-way relationship: while our experiences of waste are culturally mediated (informed by discourses, images, narratives, and so on), the arresting sight of an overflowing bin is marked by an agency that is tied directly to its materiality (it smells, it outlives us, and it cues emotional and affective responses).⁴

In the analyses that follow, I model an approach that integrates the insights of both the constructivist and the materialist perspectives on waste into the analysis of SF film. I approach cinematic waste, on the one hand, as an object of critique that is part of the genre's efforts to portray the negative consequences of contemporary consumer-capitalism and its rationalities of accumulation, disposal, and exploitation, while, on the other hand, paying close attention to how waste forms part of cinematic worlds that can shape the distinct *feel* of a film, rendering its fictional *novum* believable – as a place that is lived-in, with its own agencies and relations.

Ultimately, it is precisely in the shifting to and from these two affordances and experiences that we may locate the distinct workings of cinematic waste, as it is used in contemporary SF film.

Finally, in proposing the three modes outlined below, I draw inspiration from Ivakhiv's description of cinema as an '*anthrobiogeomorphic machine*' (2013). What characterizes cinema is its three-fold ability to depict worlds in their givenness (geomorphic), the subjectivities that inhabit it (anthropomorphic), and the human-nonhuman relations that unfold within it (biomorphic). Taking Ivakhiv's triad as my structuring principle, the following three segments focus on the different uses of cinematic waste and its specific morphogenetic register or *mode*. This reveals how the varied representations of waste in SF film shift between taking the form of an object (geomorphic), a subject (anthropomorphic), and – occasionally – something in-between the two (biomorphic).

I. Wasted Worlds

The first mode, 'wasted worlds,' employs waste to construct film-worlds in which the project of modernity – echoing Bauman and Strasser – has led to the collapse of ecosystems and civilization alike. By offering glimpses into future worlds covered in the waste of our historical present, these cinematic environments embody tension between the familiar and the strange, as they offer images of waste that, usually because of its sheer size and magnitude, are made to seem alien and incomprehensible yet which, despite this fact, remains inherently familiar, as it brings to mind places that make up the world we live in today. Waste forms part of what Ivakhiv calls 'the geomorphic dimension of cinema, the territorial ontology that underlies the world of any film' (2013: 70). Cinematic waste contributes to the process of world-building through establishing shots, atmosphere, and setting, highlighting how such worlds may come to elicit a form of critique and/or estrangement precisely through its integration of waste in its various forms.

One film that exemplifies how waste can be employed for world-building is Mike Judge's SF comedy *Idiocracy*. Set in the year 2505, the film depicts a future US where humans with strikingly low IQs have outnumbered their more intelligent counterparts, resulting in a society that is no longer run by the people (*democracy*) but – as the title of the film suggests – by idiots. The film's story follows twenty-first century soldier Joe Bauers (Luke Wilson), who, following

a series of unlikely events, finds himself in a hibernation pod that carries him into the future, where he becomes humankind's only hope of being saved from its own stupidity.

Idiocracy uses waste to establish its cinematic environment. At the end of the film's opening sequence, which features a heavily edited montage condensing half a millennium of historical decline into four minutes, we get the first sight of the 2505 film-world through an extreme long shot of a towering mountain of garbage that is first seen in silhouette, but is gradually revealed to form part of a vast and sublime landfill. A voice-over tells the viewer that the landfill has been built up over generations and thus signifies – through its sheer size – the immense stupidity of humankind. But in addition to this perhaps somewhat banal allegorical meaning, the garbage mountain also discloses one of the key interconnections between the SF genre and waste: their shared engagement with time. Echoing Viney's conception of waste as matter-out-of-time, the garbage-mountain manifests a specific temporal relationship: 'With our recognition of waste,' Viney writes, 'comes an acknowledgement of time's passing, its power to organize notions of wearing, decay, transience and dissolution [...] to disclose how things are imbued with a sense of duration, punctuation and intermission that makes time an explicit, tangible thing of thought' (2014: 203). More than an archaeological record of a culture, the accumulation of garbage in *Idiocracy* – and waste in SF more generally – is an integral part of its futuristic world-building precisely because it makes the temporal gap between the viewer's the screen's worlds tangible. Waste conveys the ambiguous (dis)continuity of the cinematic novum; it reflects the more-than-human timescales that define its diegetic world (a place that will be there once we are gone) while providing a conceivable sense of its historically situated genesis (where the world came from, what processes led to it, and how it relates to our own).

The significance of waste in *Idiocracy* is, however, not restricted to this world-defining establishing shot, nor is it a passive backdrop for the characters. Rather, *Idiocracy*'s wasted world actively influences all three registers of our cinematic experience, whether it be in terms of narrative, spectacle, or extra-textual significance (Ivakhiv 2013: 57-64). Waste's contribution to the narrative, for instance, is made particularly tangible in the sequence following the establishing shot in which a truckload of commercial garbage is dumped at the peak of the sublime mountain, resulting in what the voice-over describes as 'The Great Garbage Avalanche of 2505' – an event that awakens the protagonist from his tomb underneath the landfill and thus sets the plot in motion. Here, the waste mountain's narrative agency takes on the character of a

‘cinematic environment’ in the sense described by Alexa Weik von Mossner as ‘not so much the passive *setting* for the action (or an autonomous landscape) as [...] an *active agent* and thus *part* of the action’ (2017: 61, original italics). Waste takes on a life of its own, as it shapes the events of the story-world and the actions of the characters who inhabit it.

This ‘coming-alive’ influences our experience of the film as a spectacle: through a series of long shots, we witness the sudden disintegration of the colossal waste mountain, as it is transformed into a monstrous and violent body of waste that blasts into the surrounding cities, eventually colliding with the cinematic frame itself and overwhelming the viewer. The waste that makes up the film’s backdrop is both dynamic and unruly, capable of affecting viewers and characters alike. Finally, the waste avalanche can also take on more symbolic or referential meanings that relate to ‘the real world’ of the viewer. The waste rumbling through the city bring to mind the actual garbage avalanches increasingly occurring in places like Indonesia and China, where such phenomena present serious threats to those forced to live and work in proximity to the ever-growing piles of waste (Lavigne et al. 2014; Ouyang et al. 2017). As such, it is here, at the juncture of spectacle, narrative, and symbolism that we may identify the first set of critical functions that cinematic waste embodies, as the waste-ridden world turns into something more than a place we simply inhabit in its undifferentiated givenness. The cinematic wasteland can itself become an active narrative agent, capable of setting events in motion that both drive the story forward as well as cuing specific emotions and cognitive associations amongst the audience.

Steen Christiansen (2019) further argues that SF can be regarded as ‘an archive of atmospheres that taken together produce a distinctive cognitive environment’ (2019: 10). His suggestion that ‘looking at the background becomes a useful way to analyze the atmospheres and their relevance’ seems particularly appropriate for understanding the waste we encounter in this film. With most of the film’s set pieces scattered with derelict waste objects, ranging from household trash to dilapidated buildings and abandoned cars,⁵ such objects can also contribute to the distinct *feel* of the film, as they infuse the story-world with a ‘background feeling’ (Christiansen 2019: 8) that is characterized by a sense of neglect, loss, and decay. Unlike the eruptive waste avalanche, these waste objects ‘become part of the storyworld atmosphere’ (2019: 8), which works toward the exact opposite of estrangement: instead of rupture, this kind

of waste naturalizes the cinematic novum, imparting it with an atmosphere that we, as viewers, can inhabit.

While the use of waste for such purposes might at first glance seem to divest the wasted world from its (eco)critical potential, the act of employing waste for the purposes of world-building may still retain a critical edge. In *Idiocracy*, we see this when considering the more conspicuous, figurative forms of waste that litters the film's background, which features an equally prevalent number of immense LCD screens celebrating what can only be described as 'trash-TV' and 'junk-food.' Set against this backdrop, the viewer learns that the denizens of the film's landfill novum have in fact become pacified by their consumption of these stupefying cultural products, eventually leading to the formation of the dustbowl that resulted from the loss of basic knowledge about irrigation (instead of water, the citizens use energy drinks to grow crops with little success). By pitting this environmental crisis against the film's primitive culture, *Idiocracy*'s construction of a story-world can be seen as its primary vehicle of estrangement, as the moronic behaviour of the future citizens, type-casted as ignorant 'white trash' consumers, is made both recognizable and hyperbolic – naturalized and estranged. In combination with the literal trash scattered across the streets, these figurative forms of 'trash' convey that the film's mass culture, not unlike the extra-cinematic reality of the viewer, has somehow become stuck in time, haunted by a manifest inability to enact any meaningful change outside the confines of the existing social structures. In doing so, the film's wasted world makes for an effective socio-cultural satire taking us into a film-world where 'trash culture' and the trashing of the environment go hand in hand.

II. Wasted Lives

Another form of waste used in SF films that portray issues of social hierarchy, inequality, and marginalization is 'wasted lives.' Moving from what Ivakhiv calls cinema's geomorphism (i.e. its capacity to create worlds) to anthropomorphism (i.e. its capacity to create experiences of subjectivity), the waste in SF films does not only form a dynamic canvas for the narrative of a failed future but serves to structure the social relations that exist within it. Echoing Bauman's concept of 'wasted lives' (2004), this second mode presents a form of waste that goes beyond its

conventional definition as discarded objects, as it exposes the processes by which some human beings are forced to live *in* and *as* the waste of society.

In Denis Villeneuve's *Blade Runner 2049* (2017), the sequel to Ridley Scott's acclaimed *Blade Runner* from 1982, we see a distinct environment of waste that reflects the social dimension of environmental destruction.⁶ Though the film itself is interesting as an example of a film that is highly atmospheric in the sense described by Christiansen above, I wish to draw attention to a particular sequence that takes place about halfway through the film and which features a distinct environment of waste that reflects the social dimension of environmental destruction. In this scene, the protagonist, K, has left the perpetually murky city centre of Los Angeles in order to follow a lead on a missing child at an orphanage found in 'Los Angeles Municipal Waste Processing – San Diego District.' What meets the viewer, however, is not an image of present-day San Diego, but a vast junkyard populated by derelict shipwrecks and obsolescent monuments of e-waste. Visually speaking, the *mise-en-scène* is shaped by broken ships and abandoned satellites that, when combined with the recognizable orange and brown colour schemes of corroding scrap metal, create a clear iconographic reference to shipyards and landfills in Bangladesh and China (Hamblin and O'Connell 2020: 43; Hurst 2020). The film draws on a visual economy commonly employed in depictions of the Global South to transform a geographical location in the Global North.⁷ In doing so, the film's dystopic vision embodies a geopolitical reversal that highlights that the current distribution of waste may soon come much closer to the societies that produce it (Liborion 2018). When compared to the cinematic environment of its predecessor, *2049* expresses a concern for the socio-economic issues that characterize its historical context: the pan-Asian *mise-en-scène* well-known from the initial *Blade Runner* has – 30 years later – been supplemented with a concern for the prolific accumulation of e-waste and the increasing precarity associated with its disposal, as seen in places like Ghana and China today (Dados and Connell 2012; Yeung 2019; Li and Achal 2020).

This reversal takes on a further critical edge when K travels to the orphanage, which is located underneath one of the discarded satellite dishes that adorn the landscape with their mysterious and monumental presence. Here, he is met by hundreds of enslaved orphans placed throughout a factory floor, busy picking apart electronic circuit boards. 'The nickel is for the colonial ships,' the manager of the orphanage explains, as he presents his human stock to what he believes to be a prospective buyer, 'closest any of them or any of us is gonna get to that grand

life off-world.’ Through this iconic scene, *2049* calls attention to two things. Firstly, it illustrates that, as Hardt and Negri (2000) argue in their doctrine on Empire, ‘the spatial divisions of the three Worlds (First, Second, and Third) have been scrambled so that we continually find the First World in the Third, the Third in the First, and the Second almost nowhere at all’ (xiii). Secondly, it makes explicit that the price of technological growth and modernization exemplified by the colossal satellite disc that frames the entire *mise-en-scène*, is not only environmental, but also human. The child laborers – Bauman’s unwanted, unfit, human waste – live underneath these monuments of e-waste as the underbelly of society, sustained by the material discards of the modernized world. These wasted humans are like the replicants featured in the film: both make up the disposable workforce for the project of modernization and both are, as a consequence, dehumanized. This perceptual confluence is accentuated by the appearance of the orphans, who are all wearing rags, shaved, and engaged in mechanical-repetitive labour, leaving the viewer uncertain whether they are prisoners, workers, robots, or something in between. This parallel is noted by Sherryl Vint (2020), who argues that the San Diego junkyard ‘encourages us to make the connection between real-world sites of dehumanised and expendable labour and the treatment of replicants’ (28). Echoing Bauman, *2049* effectively unsettles the modes of perception that preconfigure some environments as ‘able to absorb the excess of the population of the “developed countries;” natural destinations for the export of “redundant humans” and obvious, ready-made dumping sites for the human waste of modernization’ (2004: 6).

Like *Idiocracy*, *2049* employs cinematic waste to convey a critical social commentary on the destructive connections between global capitalism, technological development, and ecological devastation. However, the two films do so by focusing on separate issues and, importantly, by creating different affective experiences. Whereas *Idiocracy* relies on satire, irony, and hyperbole to create an affective dynamic of *distance* that estranges viewers from the irrational behaviour of the Western consumer, *2049*’s serious and gloomy atmosphere invites viewers to *immerse* themselves within the film-world and to experience what it feels like to be confined to a derelict and dying world. While the former provides a critical portrayal of the social and ideological problems of the first world, the latter engages – at least in the case of the San Diego segment – with those forced to live *in* and *as* the waste products of the first world. This shift is important because it makes perceptible the fact that, as Lucy Bell notes in her discussion of waste in ‘empty-belly contexts,’ ‘lived experiences of waste – like lived

experiences of dirt – are vastly different for those who live in waste-ridden slums or collect waste as a mode of survival to those who discard (or recycle) it without further thought’ (2019: 117).

III. Becoming-Waste

The last mode concerns cinematic waste that – unlike the critical portrayals examined above – explicitly works to unsettle more fundamental ontological boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, self and other, body and environment. More than a cinematic backdrop for the failure of consumer society (as in *Idiocracy*) or a manifestation of social inequality (as in *2049*), ‘becoming waste’ connects to spaces of hybridity, i.e. cinematic environments in which the unpredictable morphologies of the nonhuman unfold. Here I turn to Ivakhiv’s third cinematic register – cinema’s biomorphism – which refers to film’s capacity to animate an otherwise passive world through moving images. ‘Biomorphism,’ he writes, ‘is about action, or interaction, itself – not that of subjects or objects, but of the immanent movement of things themselves, which are always in process of becoming and of exchanging the properties of seeing and being seen, taking and being taken, prehending and being prehended’ (2013: 257). Applied to waste, this perspective regards waste as somehow fluid and animate, enmeshed in relations that are in movement, and as challenging epistemologies that perceive reality in terms of more or less permanent categories. It asks us to see waste as a form of *becoming*.

Neill Blomkamp’s science-fiction mockumentary *District 9* exemplifies this association of waste as a marker of movement and medium of transformation. Set in an alternative but present-day South Africa, *District 9* opens with the striking image of a mysterious alien spaceship floating seamlessly above the recognizable cityscape of Johannesburg. The film’s depiction of waste centres on a trashed shantytown that has become inhabited by a species of prawn-like aliens who had to abandon their spaceship due to a mechanical failure. Throughout the film, viewers follow the transformation of protagonist Wikus van der Merwe, who has been hired to remove the alien species from the district, as their refuge has turned into a source of conflict for the local population. During the chaotic, horrifying and often absurd scenes of removal, Van der Merwe is exposed to an alien fluid that sets in motion his Kafkaesque metamorphosis into an alien prawn. Because of this transformation, he finds himself outcast from his former human society, which has turned hostile against him. He makes his escape by hiding in the wasted-

ridden shantytown, where he gradually evolves into an alien prawn, eventually taking up arms in solidarity with the aliens' fight against the multinational company responsible for their removal.

Scholars like Andries Du Troit (2009) have interpreted *District 9* as a social commentary on the nature of racism in post-apartheid South Africa. Central to the film, Du Troit argues, is:

the rendition of the Aliens themselves, who appear like [...] quasi-human cockroaches. They are 'prawns,' they are 'bottom feeders,' they appear to be addicted to giant tins of blue cat food; they live on rubbish dumps, they breed. They are disgusting. And that is the point [...] By presenting the aliens to us, not as attractive, noble creatures, by making them half-human and half insect, the film constantly trips us up by making the racist gaze our gaze. It confronts us with our complicity with racism, by making us identify with the perspective of the racist, inviting us to feel the revulsion of the xenophobe – and then pulling the carpet from under our feet.

For Du Troit, the progressive aspect of *District 9* is precisely the way it exposes the mechanisms of racism and violence. Situated within the history of oppression in South Africa, Du Troit reads the film as an allegory for 'the way in which racist discourse depicts its objects: the way Nazism talked about "the Jew" and Apartheid ideology talked about "Coloureds"' (2009). Another critic, Elzette Steenkamp, has read the film through the lens of speciesism. Paying attention to the transformation of Van der Merwe, she sees the film as an exploration of 'productive imaginings of hybridity in the form of human/animal couplings that serve to destabilize hierarchized binary oppositions, challenging of the kind of anthropocentrism that serves as justification for the human population's continued domination over our animal others' (2014: 151).

Although the concept of waste remains largely unmentioned in both Steenkamp's and Du Troit's analyses, it is worth noting the two-fold role it plays regarding the speciesist/racist gaze they describe. On the one hand, the waste that surrounds the prawn-like aliens contributes to the perception of the alien *other*, as someone or *something* that does not belong in society. Waste can be read as a symbol – much like in *2049* – of how the aliens are othered by the hegemonic social order of the film's diegetic world. On the other hand, the filmic wastescape can also be seen to function as the primary, affirmative site for reconfiguring this very gaze. We may helpfully think of how Van der Merwe's bodily and ethical transformation coalesces – both

conceptually and physically – with the waste that makes up the backdrop for his human-prawn metamorphosis. The cinematic waste comes to signify something more than a landscape of environmental degradation or the social status of the subjects that inhabit it. Waste indicates a form of *becoming* that transcends the symbolic and the physical, as it forms an environment that affords radical forms hybridity and change. Though the waste-ridden shantytown might at first seem a rough and unwelcoming sight, its biomorphic nature renders it ‘a vast space for ethical action’ (Ivakhiv 2013: 196) – a setting that (at least in the case of this film) culminates in what one might describe, using the words of Donna Haraway, as a space of ‘making-kin’ (2016: 99-103).

Changes in perceptual and ethical sensibilities are, however, not the only outcome of Van der Merwe’s bodily transformation. The film’s visuals also perform significant *affective* work (see Nel 2012; Van Veuren 2012). Johanet Kriel (2015) proposes the term ‘aberrant images’ to describe ‘the affective instances of body horror’, as seen in the many close-ups of Van der Merwe peeling off his human flesh, fingernails, and teeth. These scenes, Kriel argues, evoke ‘a sense of aversion or revulsion’ and, in doing so, the film draws on the aesthetic tradition of the grotesque and the socio-psychological notion of the abject. ‘[T]he grotesque,’ he writes, ‘threatens those biological and ontological categories which human beings apply to make sense of the world [...] the grotesque makes the known world strange’ (2015: 23). From an ecocritical perspective, the idea that grotesque images hold the potential to disturb our established modes of perception is not irrelevant because it means that films such as *District 9* can serve to destabilize otherwise given anthropocentric modes of perception. Though Kriel does not reflect explicitly on the ecocritical purchase of his analysis, it nevertheless becomes increasingly tangible when he considers the film in relation to the abject, a term he draws from the post-structuralist philosopher Julia Kristeva (1980), to refer to experiences of horror induced by situations in which our preconceived notions of subject and object become indistinguishable. We experience the abject, along with Van der Merwe, as he bears witness to his own body turning into waste, with his human limbs gradually becoming secreted in the form of mucous and rotten flesh. Ultimately, these disturbing images of Van der Merwe becoming waste ‘reminds us that we, the beholder of the abject, are ourselves not only changeable but in fact constantly decaying’ (Kriel 2015: 24). Waste, when experienced as abject, thus emphasizes the two-way relationship that

makes up the ‘mutual constitution of human subject [...] and discarded waste matter’ (Hawkins 2006: 2-3).

Waste’s affective capacity is illustrative of its ability to unsettle fundamental philosophical, perceptual, and ethical distinctions. Waste holds this affordance because it is as much a process as a fixed entity. Waste represents a mutability or formlessness that marks – both figuratively and physically – the possibility of change. Crucially, as Ivakhiv observes: ‘[i]n change is crisis, opportunity, and creative transformation’ (253). The same goes for waste and its affects. As a grotesque entity, it unsettles established ontologies. As an agent of abject experience, it destabilizes binary distinctions between self and other, body and environment, subject and object. Considered in these terms, what *District 9* shows us is that waste and wasting can be less about the old, the derelict, and the discarded and more about the possibility of the new.

Science Fiction and Anthropocene Waste

I began this article asking why our cinematic visions of the future almost always include some form of waste. One answer is that the waste motif allows filmmakers to reflect on several of the pressing socio-ecological issues that define the world we live in today. ‘Whether nuclear fallout or carbon dioxide,’ Myra Hird writes, ‘waste has become *the* signifier of the Anthropocene’ (2020). Contemporary SF film bears testimony to this assertion. In *Idiocracy*, waste is used to construct a film-world defined by ecological crisis. The film’s future-present forms a critique of the mindless overconsumption that defines contemporary capitalism as well as the passivity and neglect fostered by its associated culture industries. In *Blade Runner 2049*, waste draws out the marginalizing mechanisms of modernization. By providing a glimpse into what it feels like to inhabit the space where the material discards of society accumulate, the film makes ‘visible the realities of exploited labour and the ongoing processes of devaluing of some lives (deemed less than human) over others for socioeconomic reasons’ (Vint 2020: 32). In *District 9*, waste forms both the backdrop and the medium for the material and perceptual transformations of the body, as viewers are presented with images of bodies in decay, bodies that turn violent, and bodies that intermingle with more-than-human forces. As a liminal object, waste becomes the marker of hybridity, challenging established anthropocentric modes of cognition by signalling the conditions for the possibility of change. Together, these three modes – the wasted worlds, the

wasted lives, and becoming-waste – provide a suggestive image of how forms part of the SF film genre.

These modes are not mutually exclusive or exhaustive; there are plenty of SF films that deviate from, shift between, or combine these three modes, leaving the affective, perceptual, and semantic potential of cinematic waesthetics open-ended. *2049*, for instance, does not only employ waste to establish hierarchies between its characters. Waste also contributes to its construction of a future in which eco-systems have collapsed, and it makes up the backdrop for the film’s central philosophical question of what counts as human and what does not. Further studies could explore how the three modes might resonate across a broader corpus of films as well. The wasted world of *Idiocracy*, for instance, brings to mind other iconic cinematic wastelands, such as the planetary landfill featured in Andrew Stanton’s SF-animation *WALL-E* (2008) or the barren wastelands seen in the gas-punk film-series of *Mad Max* (1979), both of which employ waste to form geomorphic worlds of ecocritical import. Likewise, the human waste seen in *2049* highlights the ties between modernization and marginalization, as in the earth-bound factory workers in *Elysium* (2013) or the banished dogs featured in *Isle of Dogs* (2018). Finally, the notion of becoming-waste, exemplified above by *District 9*, associates waste with the monstrous and the abject, as also seen in earlier eco-horror films such as *Godzilla* (1954) and *The Toxic Avenger* (1984), as well as later additions such as *Eight Legged Freaks* (2002) and *The Host* (2006).

In exploring these three modes from an ecocritical perspective, I have shown how each of these films speaks to environmental issues. However, while SF can make us question the destructive practices and structures that drive the world toward increasing environmental and social crisis, the genre can also do the opposite. The films examined here are no exception. Each of these films has the tendency to aestheticize waste in ways that risk leaving it ‘divested of its confrontational quality’ (Boscagli 2014: 223). If the visual depiction of environmental destruction itself becomes a commodity that can be consumed without any confrontational and affective import, then it inevitably puts into question its ability to estrange viewers from the tendencies that drive such destruction. But despite these uncertainties, what remains clear is that cinematic waste has become a dominant phenomenon in contemporary SF film. Like cli-fi films, the different forms of waste that we encounter in SF cinema is expressive of an historical point at which anthropogenic activity has led to the uncomfortable realization that ‘our planet is full’

(Bauman 2004: 3). Though Bauman did not intend his statement to be ‘a statement in physical or even human geography [...] but to the ways and means of its inhabitants’ (3), it seems that the former meaning – about two decades later – might finally have caught up. What these films suggest is that in the age of human terraforming, it is not only the eerie reality of anthropogenic climate change that has made its way into the cultural imaginary. Rather, these visions of the future are also haunted by the copious amounts of waste that have become part and parcel of contemporary life across the globe. Films are active in the sense that their images reverberate within the extra-cinematic world, changing its pace, depending on the dispositions of those it meets. However, they are also mirrors of the historical moments that produce them, and what the SF of waste shows us is that, despite our efforts to keep the lingering byproducts of human activity out of sight, they never disappear entirely.

Notes

¹ I deliberately employ the term ‘more-than-human’ here to avoid the dualistic (and often anthropocentric) connotations commonly tied to terms such as ‘nature’ and ‘culture’.

² For a detailed analysis of the cli-fi genre and its development, see Svoboda (2016).

³ Another influential work on this is Michael Thompson’s *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (1979).

⁴ By emphasizing the agency of nonhuman matter, Hawkins’ work on waste anticipates the recent critical theorization on the impact of matter and materiality (see. e.g. Alaimo and Hekman 2007; Bennett 2010; Alaimo 2010, 2016; Braidotti 2019). Though I occasionally draw inspiration from this enticing new field of theory, it is beyond the scope of this article to account for the field in its own right. For an introduction, see Coole and Frost (2010).

⁵ Christiansen’s focus on background is here analogous to Farah Mendlesohn’s so-called ‘double-bluff of sf’ (2003: 4-5), which refers to the use of narrative as a vehicle to explore the world of the text. Mendlesohn, however, is less focused on the notions of affect and atmosphere as it pertains to the definition of genre.

⁶ For a detailed analysis of the distinct cinematographic style and narrative settings of *2049* as they relate to the concept of the Anthropocene, see Hamblin and O’Connell (2020).

⁷ According to Nour Dados and Raewyn Connell (2012), the term global south ‘refers broadly to the regions of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. It is one of a family of terms, including “Third World” and “Periphery,” that denote regions outside Europe and North America, mostly (though not all) low-income and often politically or culturally marginalized. The use of the phrase Global South marks a shift from a central focus on development or cultural difference toward an emphasis on geopolitical relations of power’ (12).

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