

Alexa Weik von Mossner

Imagining Ecological Futures: Science, Risk, and Citizenship in Narratives of Global Environmental Change

This research project examines the emotional and cognitive appeal of fictional and non-fictional narratives, which imagine possible future consequences of the risks associated with global environmental change scenarios. Understanding the implications of local and global ecological risk requires not only knowledge and awareness, but also imagination. The wide distribution of scientific insights can certainly help raise awareness among the general public and has done so in the past decades. However, as social science scholars David Lewis, Dennis Rogers, and Michael Woolcock have recently argued with respect to “The Fiction of Development” (2008), imaginary narratives communicate knowledge in ways that are different, but often just as important and valuable as scientific or scholarly studies.

I propose that narratives imagining future scenarios of global environmental change are of similarly great significance to the cultural discourse on ecological risk. They are important because they transform abstract scientific knowledge and perceived risk into stories about specific places and particular people, and are both accessible to the general public, as well as emotionally engaging. Drawing on recent work in neuroscience, environmental psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and a number of ecocritical studies, I use a cognitive approach to analyze a selection of such narratives in contemporary literature, film, and television. I am interested in how these cultural texts engage their readers and viewers emotionally and cognitively, how they employ concepts of ecological risk and ethics, and what forms of environmental citizenship they promote.

Ecological problems are not only technical or physical; they are also social and psychological in origin, and have accumulated because of the beliefs and worldviews humans have acted on in the past and continue to act on. Growing awareness of human-caused environmental problems leads to (often unacknowledged) psychological conflict. In a way, the production and consumption of cultural texts can be understood as a coping strategy of both producers and consumers. Over thousands of years, humans have transformed their experiences, hopes, and fears into stories; and looking closely at the diverse and culturally specific ways in which we currently tell each other stories about global environmental change helps us better understand the two-way dynamic between perceived ecological risks of global change and their expression in fictional and non-fiction narratives.