After Corona: Rediscovering a Love for the Planet through Climate Fiction and Film

English/Environmental Studies/Visual Studies
Haverford College

Rebecca Chen
Bachelor of Arts Candidate | English
Haverford College Class of 2022
rkchen@haverford.edu
917-929-3275

The Homosapien Emerges from Involuntary Hibernation
By Rebecca Chen

It’s the last day of quarantine for the people of NYC; people slowly emerge from their homes, quiet and wide-eyed. A college-aged woman takes a hesitant step out of her apartment. She squints as the glare of the sun beats down on her pale bluish face. Pools of people are spilling out from the bellies of these buildings like a stream of molasses. Bellies hang slightly over sweatpants, hair is tousled and slightly tangled, and backs bend permanently forward from all the hours of watching Netflix.

NYC has changed. Dandelions the size of heads have busted through gashes in the concrete. Birds build nests in construction cranes. Tree branches have fallen, splintering the windows of the parked cars lining Central Park. Foxes and squirrels run through the street, paying no mind to the gawking humans at a standstill.

The woman spots a long-lost best friend across the street. She raises her hand and opens her mouth to yell, but her voice catches in her throat. All of a sudden, she is overcome with nervousness. Her hot breath feels suffocating beneath her mask. The number of people are overwhelming.

Jolie takes a hesitant step into the street, looking both ways, but not a single car is on the road. She sprints across it just to feel her aching muscles moving.

Course Description

In the news and through conventional teaching practices about climate change, predictions on the effects of increasing CO₂ emissions are often described through infographics disseminated by the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change). These infographics rely on scientific methods and models and often include a lot of uncertainty due to the fact that science can predict but not foretell the future. As a result, scientific predictions feel muddled and distant; 2 degrees of warming fails to paint a salient image of the future.

Perhaps the most pressing frustration surrounding the climate crisis is mankind’s inability to spark cohesive, tangible action. Much of the inaction could be attributed to the fact that discourse surrounding climate change mainly focuses on the scientific and political. Climate
fiction, then, has recently emerged as a response to this frustration. Climate fiction arises mainly as a sub-genre of science fiction. Also called Anthropocene fiction, works produced in this style center on climate issues, and grapple with the idea that humans are a part of, not separate from the environment. Further, Climate fiction asserts that what mankind puts into the atmosphere will continue to impact the environment long after it has been released. Proponents of this new sub-genre, dubbed cli-fi, argue that fiction has the power to inspire empathy in a discourse that has until recently, felt strictly objective. The hope is that cli-fi will inspire action in the same way that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* propelled the abolitionist movement. Unlike non-fiction, fiction has been scientifically shown to increase individual’s scores on an empathy test.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected human civilization in unprecedented ways. Oil prices have tanked, entering negative values. The Venetian waters have cleared. Air pollution in China has dissipated. For the first time in history, the public is noticing how much human activity truly affects the environment. We are truly living in the Anthropocene. Yet, this silver lining comes amidst extreme social distancing, overwhelmed hospitals, and terrible ethical questions, such as in Italy, where doctors have made tough decisions regarding who gets ventilators and who does not.

The emotional consequences of this pandemic may be great, not just for the doctors on the frontlines, but for everyone. Climate fiction, then, may offer a space to process the feelings felt during corona. These works encourage us to investigate how things have changed because of corona and to imagine what life might look like after corona. This syllabus offers a climate fiction collection created with the pandemic in mind.

- Mankind has been overwhelmed by a plague. Snowman, previously known as Jimmy, is potentially the last human on earth. He mourns the loss of his best friend Crake and the beautiful Oryx, an animal they both loved dearly. Snowman navigates a lush wilderness that used to be a great city in his journey to understand the circumstances that created this post-apocalyptic world.

- Biotechnology companies control food access and maintain power through bioterrorism and private armies. Plague and illness are widespread, caused by genetically modified crops and mutant pests. Only in Thailand exist crops that are pure of biotechnology’s influence. These crops resist engineered plagues and thus fail to be overtaken by the biotech companies. The plot follows Anderson Lake, a member of AgriGen, who seeks to find the Thai seedbank that is protecting the country from corporate domination. (Thailand)

- Our main character, Max Brooks, travels around the world to interview survivors of a zombie plague that happened 20 years ago. From these accounts, we learn that the plague began in China, and eventually spread across the globe. Despite military action, governments are ill equipped to fight this new and unknown threat. New York City is an
epicenter of the outbreak. Governments are disorganized, causing widespread panic. The novel serves as a critique of government response and bureaucracy.

Butler, Octavia E. *Parable of the Sower.* (1993)
- It's 2025 in California, and small communities have built huge walls to protect themselves from desperate addicts. Lauren Olamina, an 18-year-old who’s community is infiltrated by these addicts, possesses a trait of “hyperempathy”. She can acutely feel other people’s pain. She sets off on a journey along dangerous coastal highways up north. (African-American)

- In a world suffering from environmental issues and disease by the name of the tiger flu, this book focuses on two women. One is named Kirilow, who lives in a community of women called the Grist Sisters. The Grist sisters reproduce by transplanting organs from Kirilow’s lover (who can regrow organs) into clones birthed by another member of the community. When the tiger flu infiltrates the Grist Sisters, Peristrophe dies, and Kirilow must look for another person who can regrow organs. She eventually finds Kora, who fits the bill. However, Kora is unwilling to leave her own family, who is suffering from their own set of problems. (Queer, Asian, indigenous, female)

- A worldwide epidemic called Shen Fever, originating from Shenzen, China, overtakes New York City. The metropolis becomes a ghost town, and Candace Chen, an office employee of a publishing company in Times Square, lives through it all. (Chinese American, New York)

Mandel, Emily St. John. *Station Eleven.* (2014)
- 20 years after the flu pandemic destroys civilization as we know it, a troupe of actors and musicians called The Traveling Symphony work to keep art and humanity alive. However, when they arrive in St. Deborah by the Water, they meet a violent prophet who threatens their existence. (Female)

- Pulitzer Prize winning *The Road* outlines the story of a father and son as they journey across an America devoid of life. The father is ill and knows he will die. The two of them travel south towards the sea in order to escape the cold of the winter. Along the way, they face starvation, encounter victims of cannibalism, and find other individuals struggling to survive.

- This short story outlines Prince Prospero’s attempt to avoid the Red Death, a dangerous plague. One day, he hosts a masquerade ball within his abbey. One guest is disguised as a Red Death victim. As the party continues, unexpected tragedy befalls the abbey.

A civilization is struck by an epidemic that causes all citizens to go blind. The story centers on a doctor, his wife, and his patients as they undergo quarantine in an asylum. Only the doctor’s wife escapes the blindness causing disease. When the group is released, the wife leads her husband and his patients to the doctor’s house, where they attempt to find a new normalcy. (Portuguese)

- 39 years ago, a group known as the Army of the Twelve Monkeys released a virus that killed almost all of humanity. Now, in year 2035, James Cole, a prisoner living underneath what used to be Philadelphia, is chosen to be sent back in time to find the original virus.

Marker, Chris. *La Jetée*. (1962)
- This French 30-minute short film was the inspiration for the Hollywood blockbuster *12 Monkeys*. It is shot almost completely in still photos, and follows a prisoner living in a post-nuclear era, who travels back in time in order to find his long-lost love. (French)

- Set in Korea, a dangerous creature infected with an unknown virus kills many people. In response, the American military quarantine all individuals who have had contact with the monster, including main character Gang-du. Gang-du soon learns that his daughter, Hyun-seo, was taken by the monster into the sewer, and that she is trapped. Gang-du escapes quarantine on a quest to save his daughter. (Korea)

- Workaholic businessman Seok-woo and his daughter Su-an, board a train to Busan to meet Su-an’s mother. Soon after, a zombie boards the train, and begins to infect other passengers. In a quest for survival, the father-daughter duo encounters other individuals trying to survive. Some are altruistic, while others only work for themselves. (Korea)

Soderbergh, Steven. *Contagion*. (2011)
- A virus pandemic called MEV-1 spreads across the world, causing social upheaval. Shot in a “hyperlink style”, the film highlights how modern globalization affects the spread of disease. Inspired by the 2002-2004 SARS outbreak and the 2009 flu pandemic, the film is notable for its unusual scientific accuracy in terms of its explanation of viruses and vaccines.

- The dead are being awoken as zombies hungry for human flesh. While rural communities remain safe, cities are most affected. The story centers in Philadelphia, where TV studio employees, Stephen Andrews and Francine Parker, steal a helicopter and escape to a shopping mall. The movie provides a criticism of modern consumer society. (Philadelphia)
Schultz, Trey Edward. *It Comes at Night.* (2017)
- Two families shelter in a secluded home deep in the woods as a pandemic dismantles societies around the world. The horror film follows these families as distrust and suspicion shatter the fragile bonds created between the families, resulting in tragedy and death.

Personal Reflection - Find something you created during the pandemic to share with the class. (It can be a photo, a journal entry, a note, or even a text) Ideally, you should know the day it was created. Write a one-page reflection describing your chosen creation and contextualize it in terms of broader events. What were the news headlines that day? How was the stock market? Weather? Trending hashtags? Popular songs? Get creative! Next, describe your personal experience during the pandemic as a whole. How do you imagine your experience differs from others? (2-3 pp)
- Optional reading if you are looking for some inspiration: *College Made Them Feel Equal. The Virus Exposed How Unequal Their Lives Are.* By Nicholas Casey. 

A Post-Corona Short Story - Imagine your own post-pandemic world. Remember a time where you felt the effects of COVID-19 most acutely, and then fictionalize the events. Exaggerate. Change the setting. Heighten the emotions. (3-4 pp)

Response Paper - Choose one of the required texts or films from this course and perform a close reading of a scene. Make sure to highlight a theme brought up from the material and relate it to the COVID-19 pandemic. Possible themes include, but are not limited to: isolation, trust and mistrust, government and control, race and gender, family, and urban life.

Comparative Response Paper - Choose one film and one text and compare the way these works approach the ideas of plague and pandemic. How do they portray government? How do they portray race and gender? How do their societies respond to plague, and how do these responses differ? How do relationships evolve and dissolve in these moments of stress?