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The Value of 'Old' Stories

A Response to Marco Caracciolo's "Negotiating Stories in the Anthropocene"

Marco Caracciolo begins his essay for this issue of *DIEGESIS* by visiting a familiar trope of much environmental humanities work – the call for 'new' narratives that are able to represent the scope and scale of today's environmental crisis. Caracciolo's essay astutely encourages us to press on the assumptions that this call encodes, asking "when does a narrative become new?" His answer – informed by Luc Herman and Bart Vervaeck's theory of narrative and culture and Hubert Zapf's writing on literature's cultural ecology – posits that narratives become novel via their creative engagement with existing stories, genres, and motifs. Caracciolo's essay builds to a crucial argument that narrative *form* is central to novelty and that, as he states, "experimentation with narrative forms and schemata is necessary to deepen story's negotiation of the Anthropocene" and foster possibilities for cultural change.

I am deeply sympathetic to Caracciolo's argument about the importance of narrative form and agree that environmental humanities scholarship would benefit from reading beyond the content of a text to grapple more explicitly with the way that text presents its content to readers.[1] And, like Caracciolo, I want to take a step back and consider the assumptions baked into the focus on 'new' narratives within environmental humanities scholarship. But whereas he queries what we mean by 'new,' or how a text becomes 'new,' I want to ask an even more basic question: why 'new'? What about 'old' narratives? What can we learn from texts that feature familiar stories, genres, and motifs? How might they help us understand better the scope and scale of today's environmental degradation and anthropogenic abuse? How might these narratives, which are generally overlooked by environmental humanities scholars, provide insight about our current moment and how we got here?

My interest in 'old' narratives does not stem from inherent conservatism, nor any allegiance to a literary canon. Instead, it arises from an acknowledgment that narrative holds a privileged position in human cognition. Caracciolo's essay also recognizes this special cognitive status of narrative, particularly in his citation of David Herman's (2003, 163) argument that narrative is a "tool for thinking." I want to expand this engagement with cognitive narrative theory to think more specifically of narratives as cognitive affordances for worldbuilding. I build upon Herman's (2009, 105) oft-cited conceptualization of narratives as "blueprints for

a specific mode of world-creation" to consider the ways in which narrative mentation – that is, the particularly human habit of thinking *with* narrative – fosters important connections between the storyworlds of narratives and the real, non-narrative world in which we live.[2] In other words, I want to make a case for narratives as imaginative tools by which readers (and listeners and viewers) practice and hone their worldbuilding skills. Narrative scholars such as Lisa Zunshine and Suzanne Keen have long argued that narrative interpretation allows readers to flex the cognitive and emotional muscles that can improve the real-life social contract.[3] So too, I suggest, does narrative interpretation enable readers to practice mentally modeling and emotionally inhabiting new worlds. I see this process of worldbuilding and inhabitation as especially important to our understanding of the Anthropocene because this is an epoch in which humans *literally* are building and inhabiting a world that reflects back to us our own assumptions, values, and behaviors. I suggest that, if we want to study the ways in which humans are irrevocably altering the real world in the Anthropocene, one great place to start is the cognitive affordance by which we develop and sharpen our worldbuilding skills.

This leads me to consider the role of 'old' narratives in the proliferation of anthropogenic climate change, especially those that enjoy the widest circulation and most cultural influence. As will become clear in my discussion below, these narratives do not necessarily need to be old in age; taking cues from Caracciolo, my conceptualization of 'old' has more to do with a narrative's recycling of familiar forms than it does with the original date of its production. I ask: what kind of worlds do 'old' narratives encourage readers to imaginatively model and emotionally inhabit? What attitudes, values, and behaviors do the worlds of 'old' narratives encode, both in content and, perhaps even more importantly, in the formal structures upon which narrative worldbuilding relies? What can these narratives, with their familiar representations of humans and our relationship to the world in which we live, tell us about the mechanisms that drive the real-world anthropogenic activity that is causing climate change?

Ironically, given its focus on newness and novelty, Caracciolo's discussion of Nathaniel Rich's *Losing Earth* (2019) offers us a strong model of the type of reading that interests me. Caracciolo is critical of Rich's narrative, arguing that its formal allegiance to the conventional structures of the tragic plot and its hero-antagonist split means that the very shape of *Losing Earth* comes up short, failing to challenge readers' understanding of climate change. I agree that there is a disconnect between form and content in Rich's narrative – that *Losing Earth*, by adhering to a familiar genre and its patterns of characterization, does not task its readers with mentally modeling and emotionally inhabiting a storyworld that reflects the idea espoused in the narrative's content that nations and individuals can be both villains *and* victims of anthropogenic climate change. Yet I see this shortcoming as precisely a reason to study texts such as Rich's. The formal failure of *Losing Earth*, or the dissonance between its content and the narrative structures by which readers come to know that content, gives us crucial insight into the attitudes, values, and behaviors that both inform an anthropogenic status

quo and undercut meaningful real-world responses to climate change. More importantly, this form also provides us with a powerful mechanism by which these ideas circulate – even when it delivers a message that claims to express the opposite – thereby allowing us to study how narratives and narrative reading can construct and perpetuate dominant environmental ideologies.

I find a similar model for reading 'old' narratives in Amitav Ghosh's (2017) dismissal of literary realism as a suitable mode of representation for anthropogenic climate change. The novelistic mode has become central to the search for 'new' narratives within environmental humanities work, with scholars such as Adam Trexler and Stephanie LeMenager celebrating the mode for its malleability and potential for renewal. Trexler (2015, 14) argues that climate change has productively disrupted the generic conventions of the novel, such that "literary novels bleed into science fiction; suspense novels have surprising elements of realism; realist depictions of everyday life involuntarily become biting satire." Likewise, LeMenager (2017, 236) privileges the novel as befitting representations of what it is like to live in the Anthropocene because of its investment in the everyday and the trivial, and points to the mode's past success in "trying out and testing material and social relations" as evidence of its flexibility. Ghosh, on the other hand, regards the climate change novel as an oxymoron, arguing that "serious" fiction is unsuited to representing today's altered world. He argues that the climate events that define the Anthropocene are wild, vicious, and extreme and, as such, they pose a major problem for writers of serious fiction, as the very form of the novel in its interest in individual human lives relies upon a certain predictability that conceals the "unheard-of and the improbable" (Ghosh 2017, 27). Climate change events are "too powerful, too grotesque, too dangerous, and too accusatory to be written about in a lyrical, or elegiac, or romantic vein" (ibid., 32f.); the Anthropocene "defies both literary fiction and contemporary common sense" via its "very high degree of improbability" (ibid., 26). Unlike Trexler and LeMenager, Ghosh does not see the novelistic mode as elastic, capable of bleeding together genres or trying out and testing new representations. Instead, he argues that the mode's rigidity dooms it to recycling 'old' literary patterns and structures:

> I have come to recognize that the challenges that climate change poses for the contemporary writer, although specific in some respects, are also products of something broader and older; that they derive ultimately from the grid of literary forms and conventions that came to shape the narrative imagination in precisely that period when the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere was rewriting the destiny of the earth. (Ibid., 7)

The fault does not lie with the writers, Ghosh suggests, but with the form itself. The climate change novel does not exist because it *cannot* exist. In this conceptualization of unpredictable epoch and rigid novel, the novelistic mode does not afford the mental modeling and emotional habitation of a world defined by extreme and unstable change.

At debate here are the parameters and history of the novel as a literary mode: what the category of 'novel' delineates and the rigidity of that category. Scholars

such as Trexler and LeMenager see the novel as capacious and pliable, encompassing realist and speculative texts, while Ghosh's understanding of the mode is much narrower and more inflexible, restricted only to the "serious" fiction of literary realism. While I disagree with Ghosh's collapsing of the categories of 'novel,' 'serious fiction,' and 'realism' – like Trexler and LeMenager, I recognize the potential of many types of novels to represent climate change, including speculative and science fiction – I do take ironic inspiration from his discussion of the "grid of literary forms and conventions" that shape the realist novel and arise at the onset of industrialization. I see the storyworlds that rely on these forms and narrative structures as being linked intimately to the real world that humans have been busy building because they grow out of similar contexts and are informed by similar attitudes, values, and behaviors. I see the realist novel, in other words, as affording readers possibilities for worldbuilding that drive other possibilities for worldbuilding in the real-world – building that is all the more easily realized because readers have practiced it in the safe, offline contexts of narrative interpretation.

History of the novel scholarship is useful context here. In his seminal discussion of eighteenth-century British fiction in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), Ian Watt defines the novel as a literary mode steeped in realism; realism, he argues, is the "defining characteristic which differentiates the work of early eighteenth-century novelists from previous fictions" (Watt 2006, 463). Furthermore, he suggests that the mode depends upon the presence of two aspects of narrative technique: "characterization, and presentation of background" (ibid., 468). The novel, he writes, "is surely distinguished from other genres and from previous forms of fiction by the amount of attention it habitually accords both to the individualisation of its characters and the detailed presentation of their environment." He understands writers such as Daniel Defoe as producing narratives that subordinate plot "to the pattern of the autobiographical memoir," thus defiantly asserting "the primacy of individual experience in the novel" (ibid., 466). He also sees these writers as breaking from the tradition in tragedy, comedy, and romance to depict place as "general and vague," instead "visualizing the whole of […] [their] narrative as though it occurred in an actual physical environment" (ibid., 473). Watt argues that the realist novel, in sum, "allows a more immediate imitation of individual experience set in its temporal and spatial environment than other literary forms" (ibid., 477f.).

What interests me about Watt's discussion of the eighteenth-century British realist novel is the implicit assumptions upon which this characterization and presentation of background rely. These narrative forms suggest that humans are autonomous individuals and that individual human lives are of primary interest. They also suggest that those interesting human lives are set in stable backgrounds of particularized times and places. To phrase this slightly differently, the realist novel as conceived by Watt affords that readers mentally model and emotionally inhabit a specific type of world – one in which humans and human drama are in the foreground, set apart from a solid and recognizable background in which those characters function. Similar assumptions about the importance

of individual human lives and the stability of their environmental contexts, of course, are also foundational to the Anthropocene. This overlap does not surprise me nor does it Ghosh, given the timeline of the epoch and the sociocultural and historical context in which Watt argues the realist novel originates. The Anthropocene is produced in the same set of conditions in which Watt argues the realist novel arises: early secularism, scientific enlightenment, empiricism, capitalism, materialism, national consolidation, and the rise of the middle class. After all, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) – Watt's pick for the first novel – originates in the same social, cultural, historical, and environmental contexts as James Watt's steam engine.[4]

Indeed, these assumptions and their relevance to the Anthropocene help to illuminate realist novels as affording the mental modeling and emotional inhabitation of a particular world steeped in human supremacy. We might even suggest that the circulation of these ideas in popular eighteenth-century British novels facilitates a particular type of real-life worldbuilding by encouraging readers to practice building that world in the safe context of narrative interpretation. The novel thus doesn't just reflect the social and material contexts that produce the Anthropocene but offers a model for human action and behavior in an imagined world that in turn helps to produce a real world rewritten by human activity. My understanding of realist novels as affording a particular type of worldbuilding suggests that *all* realist novels – even those that refuse to admit the unpredictable nature of our changing world or the causes of that change, or are formally incapable of doing so – contain environmentally relevant knowledge. This environmental insight is not present in the text's content, but in the implicit, unnarrated assumptions that inform its narrative structures and forms. By widening out discussions of the Anthropocene to include these 'old' narratives, we find the means to analyze representations of the values that have produced climate change in the real world and the mechanisms by which they circulate. We also begin to see the realist novel not as ill-suited to representing climate change because of its reliance on predictability and its concealment of the improbable, as Ghosh suggests, but as a rich record of an imagination of a specific way of living in the world that so takes human autonomy, anthropocentrism, and environmental stability for granted that it is unwilling or unable to narrate anything but.

For a third example of the environmental insight that 'old' narratives can encode, I want to turn to perhaps the most popular narratives of this moment: those of the Hollywood mega-franchise. The latest installments of the *Avengers* series are an obvious place to begin, as they are clearly steeped in the discourse of the Anthropocene. In *Avengers. Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers. Endgame* (2019), the full suite of Marvel superheroes must battle evil Thanos, who seeks to eviscerate half of the universe's humanoid population to reestablish ecological balance. In the earlier film, Thanos explains his motivation to his adopted daughter Gamora, whom he saved from an environmentally crippled planet as a young child before wiping out half of that planet's inhabitants: "You were going to bed hungry, scrounging for scraps. Your planet was on the brink of collapse," he tells her. Now, with that planet's population halved, "the children born have

known nothing but full bellies and clear skies." Thanos makes a direct association between overpopulation and ecological collapse, thus placing environmental concern at the heart of the films. "This universe is finite, its resources finite," he explains: "If life is left unchecked, life will cease to exist. It needs correction." (Russo / Russo 2018, 1:06:37-1:07:12). Thanos completes his mission at the end of *Infinity War*, and in the process eviscerates heroes such as Spiderman, Black Panther, and Doctor Strange. The film ends with the poignantly pastoral image of Thanos peacefully watching the sun set over a bucolic farm.

The problem with the film's environmental message, of course, is that it is articulated by the villain. Thanos's project frames environmentalism in terms of population control, thus equating ecological concern with fascism. Indeed, critics have lambasted the film's 'environmental' content; Michael Svoboda (2018, n.p.), writing for *Yale Climate Connections*, argues that the film "tacitly delivers this toxic message: environmentalism = mass murder." Svoboda is especially irate that the narrative pays no attention to other methods of environmental repair that are woven into the fabric of the film's storyworld, including the models of sustainable living provided by communities in Asgard and Wakanda, or the empowerment of women that is fundamental to characters such as Black Widow, Captain Marvel, or Wakanda's female warriors, the Dora Milaje. Svoboda's critique culminates in the potent point that the film's environmental wrong-headedness is alarming because its underlying message "is not limited to the movies" but has "circulated at different times, with varying degrees of virulence, among conservative climate dismissives" (ibid., n.p.). The film's content, he argues, plays into right-wing understandings of environmentalists as killjoys at best, eco-fascists at worst. He writes that the film loudly suggests that "good people, true Americans, must band together to fight the murderous environmentalists" (ibid., n.p.).

I agree with Svoboda's critique of the dangerous content of *Infinity War*. But I see an even larger environmental problem in the broader, formal context of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). *Infinity War* and *Endgame* are but two installments in a Hollywood machine that began with the 2008 release of *Iron Man*. Since then, Marvel Studios has released twenty-two additional films in three strategic phases that flesh out Iron Man's world via narratives that focus on characters such as the Hulk, Thor, Doctor Strange, Spiderman, Captain America, Ant Man, and Black Panther. The eight additional films of phase four currently in the pipeline either provide more context for existing MCU characters such as Black Widow or introduce entirely new sets of characters, including martial arts superhero Shang-Chi and the Eternals, an immortal alien race. Each new narrative installment pushes out the parameters of the original Iron Man storyworld, such that the scope and population of this world grows with each new text. Importantly, this expansion is not limited to cinema alone; in addition to the films, the MCU also spills out into network television shows such as *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013) and *Daredevil* (2015), tie-in comics and video games, direct-to-video short films, and the faux news program and viral marketing campaign *WHIH Newsfront* (2015-2016). The effect of this narrative mushrooming is to

create the sense of a horizonless world – a limitless universe that can sustain infinite stories and character combinations. The broader form in which the storyworld of *Infinity War* is set, in other words, strongly belies Thanos' concern with the finiteness of resources. This universe is not on the verge of collapse, but in full expansion mode. Left unchecked it will not destroy itself but continue to swell and spread.

The MCU is but one example of a larger trend of the Hollywood mega-franchise – a group of texts that also includes series such as *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and the *DC* Extended Universe. Narrative theorists provide us with useful insight into this trend, with scholars such as Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon (2014, 1) noting that "pop culture has accustomed us to narratives that refuse to leave the stage, returning repeatedly for another round of applause and for another pot of gold." Ryan and Thon suggest that the multimodal narratives of today's Hollywood pop culture are particularly appealing to audiences because they play on the cognitive processes of worldbuilding. Each installment of these transmedia franchises, they argue, "spins a story that provides instant immersion, because the recipient is spared the cognitive effort of building a world and its inhabitants from a largely blank slate. The world is already in place when the recipient takes […] [their] first step in it, once again" (ibid., 1). Ryan and Thon argue that these narratives are popular in part because they allow interpreters to hone their worldbuilding skills. Instead of tasking interpreters with building a storyworld from scratch, each new text affords the refinement and expansion of a familiar storyworld, thus allowing interpreters to make their mental models increasingly detailed and broad. It is not the plots of individual texts that attract fans, Ryan and Thon argue, but the new branches of a storyworld that provide "new pleasures" (ibid., 19). Ryan (2015) bluntly states that "transmedia storytelling is the most important narrative mode of our time" (1), and that the phenomenon is so reliant on world expansion that it "should rather be called transmedia *world-building*" (ibid., 4f.; italics in the original).

That the transmedia storytelling of the MCU is driven by constant and pervasive worldbuilding is immediately evident in the macro-structure of its numerous installments and the diversity of media by which viewers and readers consume them. Strikingly, worldbuilding is also the mechanism by which the Avengers ultimately defeat Thanos. In *Endgame*, Tony Stark (Iron Man) devises a time travel device which allows the Avengers to reset their timeline and intercede in Thanos's mission before he can complete it. The reset expands the MCU by producing another timeline, thus also conveniently resuscitating the beloved superheroes who die in the original timeline. The films thus doubly debunk Thanos's concern for the finiteness of the universe's resources – once in the heroes' rejection of the villain's murderous environmentalism and a second time in the ease with which they return to a more complete and rightful universe, planet Earth included.

I see a particularly disturbing set of attitudes, values, and behaviors laced into the MCU, and *Infinity War* and *Endgame* in particular. As Svoboda argues, the film's content affiliates ecological concern with extreme, violent activism and

dismisses recognition of the finiteness of natural resources as the ravings of a mad tyrant. Yet we see this rejection of finiteness represented even more profoundly in the macro- and micro-structures of the familiar narrative forms of the superhero film. The ceaseless expansion of the MCU belies the environmental realities of the real-world in which viewers and readers consume these narratives. Indeed, the films actively suggest the opposite; working together, the narratives of this franchise afford the building of a world that literally does not end and that persistently provides a stable context in which human (or humanoid) characters can battle over their disagreements. Worse still, they afford the building and inhabitation of a world in which the brilliance and bravery of a few great and privileged heroes can return us easily to an earlier moment in history, before things became tough and the people we love started to die. They offer their audiences a model of action and behavior that enacts the same unsustainable assumptions of human centrality and exceptionalism and limitless resources that drive the Anthropocene.

I also see the infiniteness of the MCU and similar Hollywood transmedia franchises as exposing another dangerous anthropocentric assumption about the persistence and continuing vitality of the human species. There is a familiar trend in mega-franchise narratives such as *Avengers. Endgame* (2019), *Star Trek* (2009), and *Battlestar Galactica* (2009) of resetting or rebooting a timeline that has become unfavorable. In the case of *Endgame*, this rebooting revives dead characters; in the case of *Star Trek*, a new timeline allows the universe of Captain Kirk and Spock to proceed as if the past thirty years of narrative installments had never happened. Kirk and Spock, as if by magic, return to their younger and more energetic selves, free to live out an entirely new set of adventures.

One way to understand this representation of regeneration is to view it in terms of a broader, real-world context of heightened extinction. In *The Sixth Extinction* (2014), Elizabeth Kolbert explains that the anthropogenic climate change that defines our current moment is ending life on our planet at an extreme rate. Upon discovering underground reserves of energy, she writes, humans began to change the architecture of the atmosphere and the climate of the oceans: "some plants and animals adjust by moving. […] But a great many—at first hundreds, then thousands, and finally perhaps millions—find themselves marooned. Extinction rates soar, and the texture of life changes" (ibid., 2). Her book meticulously documents the end of various species and concludes by asking what might become of the species pulling the levers of extinction. She raises two possibilities: either human ingenuity will prevail to save us, or "we, too, will eventually be undone" by our radical alteration of the planet (ibid., 267). Our time, in other words, also stands to come to an end. Bill McKibben's (2019) recent work is among a slate of environmental texts that echo this focus on extinction.[5] Subtitled *Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?*, *Falter* directly connects the shrinking resources of planet earth with the dwindling future prospects of our kind: "*the size of the board on which we're playing the game is going to get considerably smaller*," he writes, "and this may be the single most remarkable fact of our time on earth" (ibid., 56; italics in the original). As he bluntly states on the

book's opening page, "between ecological destruction and technological hubris, the human experiment is now in question" (ibid., 1).

Environmental humanities scholars have called for 'new' narratives and tools that grapple with this new reality of extinction. Lamenting the "cognitive apathy" of twenty-first-century humans and our propensity for "self-extinction, or the capacity for us to destroy what makes us human," Claire Colebrook (2013) calls for a mode of reading that "*frees itself from folding the earth's surface around human survival*" (51, 60; italics in the original). To aid this project, she seeks out texts that engage directly with the "timelines […] points of view [… and] rhythms" of the nonhuman (ibid., 60). Yet I suggest that we have much to learn from the 'old' narrative forms of regeneration and expansion in the Hollywood mega-franchise that *do* fold the earth around human survival. When we read the pattern of revival and rebooting in films such as *Avengers: Endgame* and *Star Trek* within this context of extinction and the precarious future of the human species, we can see the establishment of new timelines in these texts as a formal mechanism of denial – as a structural device that ensures the continued vitality of the human, contexts be damned. These narratives suggest that, should things go wrong, we simply reboot. They afford the mental modeling and emotional inhabitation of world in which death and annihilation are not *real* concerns, as characters will inevitably reappear, sometimes even as more vital and vibrant versions of themselves. The resources of the universe do not shrink but expand, allowing the human game to play on. Our future, at least in these narratives, looks bright and assured, and the narrative forms of these texts afford interpreters a strong imaginative model of building this promising future that denies real-world environmental realities.

As with the origins of the realist novel, we can make provocative and insightful links between the narrative forms of the Hollywood mega-franchise and the specific sociohistorical and ecological conditions of its production. Ryan (2015, 5) notes that, in practice, much transmedia storytelling "usually starts bottom-up, by exploiting the commercial success of narrative originally conceived as autonomous, often a novel." But the intensely structured and scaffolded design of the MCU and its various phases of expansion suggests a different model – one geared from the outset to generate maximum corporate profit by building fan investment with frequent and continual expansions of a storyworld. In *Media Franchising* (2013), Derek Johnson stresses the intense commercial pressures that drive the expansion of transmedia storyworlds such as that of the MCU. He notes that the seeds of the MCU began in the 1960s and '70s, when Marvel Comics differentiated itself from DC by fostering continuity across its full catalog: "By constructing a shared Marvel Universe across all of its titles," he writes, "Marvel produced a participatory world that encouraged loyal readership and multiplied consumption" (ibid., 74). This history, and the astounding global success of films in each stage of the MCU expansion, directly connect these narratives to the same hyper-capitalist contexts that drive anthropogenic climate change. Indeed, as we can link the realist novel's particular forms of characterization and setting to implicit assumptions of human supremacy, so can we read

the ceaseless expansion of the Hollywood mega-franchise as a clear reflection of the attitudes, values, and behaviors that inform and underlie the Anthropocene and today's culture of climate change denialism. By studying these forms and the ways in which they afford a particular type of worldbuilding, we better appreciate how the 'old' and familiar narrative forms that currently dominate Hollywood blockbuster entertainment and its offshoots encourage viewers to practice specific cognitive and imaginative skills of worldbuilding. This work produces imagined worlds that are endlessly renewable and infinitely supportive of human conflict, activity, and drama, which in turn aids a remaking of the real-world that ignores the finiteness of resources and the precarity of many species, including humans. By grappling with the forms of these 'old' texts, we can understand better how humans build the real-world in the Anthropocene.

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[1] I make similar arguments elsewhere, most notably in *The Storyworld Accord: Econarratology and Postcolonial Narratives* (2015) and my contributions to *Environment and Narrative: New Directions in Econarratology* (2020). My arguments focus on the environmental usefulness of econarratology, or a mode of reading that "studies the storyworlds that readers simulate and transport themselves to when reading narratives, the correlations between such textual, imaginative worlds and the physical, extratextual world, and the potential of the reading process to foster awareness and understanding for different environmental imaginations and experiences" (James 2015, xv).
[2] In making this argument, I also draw upon Terrance Cave's *Thinking With Literature: Towards A Cognitive Criticism* (2016).
[3] Cf. *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (2006) and *Empathy and the Novel* (2007), respectively.
[4] While geologists are still debating the start date of the Anthropocene, when Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer first introduced the term in the May 2000 issue of the *Global Change Newsletter* they suggested that the new epoch began in the latter part of the eighteenth century: "although we are aware that alternative proposals can be made […] we choose this date because during the past two centuries, the global effects of human activities have become noticeable" (ibid., 17). In particular, they draw attention to James Watt's invention of the steam engine in 1784 as driving the growth in atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide and methane during the Industrial Revolution that are now preserved in glacial ice cores.
[5] For additional discussions of human extinction, cf. especially Alan Weisman's *The World Without Us* (2008) and David Wallace-Wells' *The Uninhabitable Earth* (2019).