

Is that a future we want?: An ecofeminist exploration of images of the future in contemporary film

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Abstract

Contemporary film images of the future are usually made within the hegemonic world of the Hollywood¹ film industry. This paper will argue that these films, with their global reach, are contributing to the dominant single view of the future. A view that limits the future to a Western high-tech, white, heterosexual, patriarchal, militaristic, dark blandness where a small number of the rich and powerful men are in control; it is a view that misses out on the lushness of human and biological diversity and the joyful messiness of plurality and truly democratic systems of shared power. Using Causal Layered Analysis as a methodological framework, and ecofeminism to ask questions, this paper explores images of the future in a small number of contemporary films, with specific attention to images of the ecological future in depictions of landscape, food, and animals as well as women's roles in society as an indicator of social justice and equality.

Ecofeminism provides a theoretical base from which to identify areas of domination of women, human Others, non-human Others, and the Earth. Ecofeminism combined with Futures Studies provides direction on alternative ways to envision futures—futures that celebrate and protect local human and biological diversity as well as a recognition of common values based on requirements for peace, shelter, food, water, basic material well-being, and cultural expression. © 2007 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The sheer difficulty of imagining future sustainability different from the present is one of our greatest problems as a society. (Elise Boulding, [1, p. 90])

There is no avoiding the reality that the dominant images of the future today are bleak futures of entropy, violence, and despair [2] or naïve projections of Western scientific/high-tech optimism. For many people, images of the future come to them in the form of American films, either in theatres or in the expanding range of television. In films about the future, the Earth is usually in a state of ecological breakdown, where mega-cities dominate, and there is vast disparity amongst the haves and have-nots. These films may not be seen by everyone in the world but nevertheless their reach is large and deep. Therefore, analysis and critique of

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¹References to 'Hollywood' are of the hegemonic filmmaking industry in California—I recognise that there are many filmmakers in California who are working within the system, and on the periphery of industry, who struggle to make films that do not reflect hegemonic Hollywood values.

contemporary film is a worthwhile attempt to contribute to an understanding of what the hegemonic images of the future are doing to our ability to envision ecologically sound and socially just futures.

Ziauddin Sardar [3, p. 1] writes, “The future is being colonised and futures studies has become an instrument in that colonisation.” Futures studies, like future-based film production, is largely American, male, white, and assumes a uniformly heterosexual, traditional-family focused, often singular vision of the future. According to Ivana Milojevic [4, p. 62], “the domination of the masculinist images of the future has now reached a new peak. These images are accepted by globalising popular media, by local and global policy-planners and even by many liberal futurists.” Film images are created within an industry where cultural pluralism is expected to defer to the Western “creation of a single, world culture, based on the current ever-increasing expansion of Anglo-American culture, social norms and ethics and, last but not least, ways of doing business” [5, p. 163]. Film production today is indeed an example what Johan Galtung [6] refers to as ‘Americanisation’ because it is US cultural and economic domination under the name of globalisation. The majority of films seen in the world today are produced by the Hollywood machine, Bollywood’s prodigious production notwithstanding, and it is rare to find a film based in the future that is not American, contributing to the “belief that America is the locus not just for futures studies but for the future itself” [3, p. 13].

There are other ways forward, however; they are paths based on peace, ecological, and cultural diversity, localism, and where women’s visions for the future, as well as those of the non-West, are fully considered and acted upon. As Eleonora Masini [7, p. 43] writes “It is crucial that the visions approach to futures studies stop being an evasion and start to be recognised as a force by those who are bearers of the vision.” The visioning of our futures is far too important to be left solely in the hands of the Hollywood studios.

2. Ecofeminism

Ecofeminist² theory provides a base from which to analyse images of the future as well as illuminates alternative pathways towards the future. Ecofeminism brings to an exploration a hopefulness for a new ecology-based relationship between nature and culture, “in which mind and nature, heart and reason, join forces to transform the internal and external systems of domination that threaten the existence of life on earth” [9, p. 366]. The theory can be used to critique present systems as well as provide visions for a better future based on goals of ecological health, peace, and social justice.

Ecofeminist theory recognises the intersections in the patriarchal³ domination and oppression of women and nature.⁴ As women have been devalued, so has nature. As women have been physically harmed, so have animals, trees, and water. As women have been silenced, so has nature. Ecofeminism begins the journey towards a world where domination over Others is no longer a reality.

Ecofeminism also recognises other intersections of systems of domination (sexism, racism, classism, ageism, heterosexism, ableism, ethnocentrism, anti-Semitism, colonialism, speciesism and naturism) but begins with feminist analysis based on women’s issues [10,11]. It strives to overcome oppressive dominations in a holistic fashion “arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature,” [11, p. 1].

Patriarchy, as a system of domination, has created a dualistic structure that has relegated women and nature as subordinate to men and culture (the built or designed landscape in the case of films about the future). This

²The term “Ecofeminism” (eco-féminisme) is generally acknowledged to be coined by François d’Eaubonne in France, in 1974. Ecofeminism has since become an international collection of theories, which share a critique of the dualisms found in the dominant paradigm that construct aligned identities for women and nature “through a process of historical association, psychosocial development, and marginalization from androcentric culture” [8, p. 81].

³Patriarchy is understood in this paper as “the systematic domination of women by men through the *institutions* (including policies, practices, offices, positions, roles), *behaviors*, and *ways of thinking* (conceptual frameworks), which assign higher value, privilege and power to men (or to what historically is male-gender identified) than to what is given to women (or to what historically is female-gender defined.” [10, p. 64, my emphasis].

⁴‘Nature’ is generally referred to be ecofeminist as including non-human animals, plants, and non-human aspects of ecosystems. But I will refer to ‘non-human’ nature as well as a way to underscore that humans are part of nature and ecosystems.

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