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SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE IN MORTAL ENGINES (2018) FILM: A STUDY OF POSTCOLONIAL ECOCRITICISM

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Abstract

This research aims to uncover the social and environmental issues depicted in *Mortal Engines* (2018) and explore the possible implications the film promotes from the disparity's depiction concerning social and environmental justice. The study utilizes Huggan and Tiffin's Postcolonial ecocriticism and mise-en-scene theory, employing a descriptive-qualitative research method. The data is collected from the characters' dialogue and visual representations highlighting social and environmental injustice. The findings show that: 1) There are significant correlations and interconnectedness between different issues, resulting in social and environmental injustice within the film; 2) This injustice originates from ecological imperialism and is perpetuated by dualistic and binary thinking. These thinking patterns lead to bio-colonization, violence, abuse of power, marginalization, othering, and exploitation, contributing to power imbalances, social injustice, environmental racism, and degradation; 3) The depiction employs mise-en-scene, dialogue, symbols, allegory, visual language, and literary devices, the film effectively engages the audience and promotes social and environmental justice values; 4) The research also uncovers the film's role as an interventionist and counter-hegemony, advocating for social and environmental justice, decolonization, resistance, sustainability, humanity, and historicism.

Keywords: bio-colonization, dualistic thinking, environmental racism, postcolonial ecocriticism, social and environmental justice

Introduction

In the field of social and environmental discourse, the pressing issues of justice for nature and justice for all people are two important dialogues taking place concurrently but frequently happening in different rooms. The interdependence between human existence and the Earth's conditions is often disregarded, mainly due to the influence of the "Western" development paradigm. This paradigm perceives environmental works and socio-human writing as having divergent focuses and interests (Nixon, 2005, p. 235). The integration of these two perspectives presents significant challenges due to the existing disparity between them. However, DeLoughrey, Huggan, and Tiffin challenge the presumption of incompatibility among "Western" scholars by highlighting human and nature's



shared interests and interconnected features. This issue is urgent because this prevailing paradigm often raises further social and environmental problems (DeLoughrey et al., 2011, p. 21). Fortunately, the emergence of the modern social and environmental criticism movement in the early twentieth century has led to a realization that these issues must be addressed together (Buell, 2011). This dual emphasis on human and nature's relationship is summed up in the phrase coined by Huggan and Tiffin (2007, p. 10): "no social justice without environmental justice; and without social justice – for all ecological beings – no justice at all." It was impossible to investigate contemporary colonialism and imperialism without dealing with the extensive ecological destruction that they entail (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015, p. 39). Thus, this research focuses on both social and environmental justice.

The increasing awareness of social and environmental injustice has ignited a greater demand for equitable and sustainable solutions. People have started actively challenging the prevailing "Western" development idea and advocating for social and environmental justice through various media, including film. As powerful artistic creations, films utilize cinematic elements to promote or mediate messages, and effectively explore issues and themes with the audiences. In today's society, movies play a significant role in our daily lives and are widely acknowledged for their capacity to inspire, evoke empathy, elicit sadness, or provoke fear (Bordwell et al., 2017). Films can communicate ideas, disseminate information, and shape social norms (Cloete, 2017). In this case, films possess subtle ideological and propagandistic elements capable of shaping societal perceptions and shaping notions of reality and truth (McQuail, 2010, p. 99). Moreover, mass media, including films, hold significant influence in framing and disseminating information about social and environmental issues (Vivanco, 2002, p. 3). However, ideas and beliefs in films come to life through how characters are shown and their underlying viewpoints. In film studies, these beliefs are also closely tied to the visual components of the film, including how it's shot and how everything appears in a scene called *mise-en-scene* which encompasses (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2008, p. 317). How the camera is placed, the lighting is done, and the choices of costumes and props all work together to subtly share, advocate, or propagate the director's beliefs, message, ideology, or value with the viewers.

Mortal Engines is a thought-provoking film that delves into the issues of social and environmental disparity. The genre of this film is science fiction. The film is set in a post-apocalyptic and dystopian world. It takes place thousands of years after the devastating nuclear war between the American Empire and Greater China in 2116 years that obliterated the surface of the earth. The film depicts a society struggling to survive on a harsh, desolate earth. This film portrays the issues arising from environmental conditions and the efforts of the anti-traction league, led by Shan Guo, to preserve the environment and its resources. They face the Tractionists, represented by the city of London, who seek to exploit their land and community to fulfill the needs of the Traction city.

Traction City is a society that lives nomadically and relies on mobile cityscapes for survival, adding giant tank wheels under the settlement to roam the globe to fulfil the necessities by exploiting natural resources and hunting smaller towns. The central characters are Magnus Crome and Thaddeus Valentine. Magnus Crome is the Lord Mayor of London, responsible for addressing the city's crises, including energy and food needs. On the other hand, Thaddeus Valentine is

London's head historian and the film's main antagonist. He harbors the ambitious goal of resurrecting MEDUSA, an ancient weapon, to make London become the dominant world power. Due to his huge ambition, Valentine finally betrays and murders Magnus Crome to take control of London. This coup was caused by a different approach to solving London's problems. As a result, under Valentine's leadership, London became more invasive by declaring war on the anti-traction league to seize their territory and natural resources. London's plan is to demolish the anti-traction league's shield wall with MEDUSA to enter Shan Guo, take over, and exploit all the cities inside.

On the other side, Shan Guo, the leading nation-state of the anti-traction league, is a group of people who decide to a sedentary or settled living as opposed to the traction. They live harmoniously with nature without decreasing one another. This way of life is their struggle to save the world, stopping environmental destruction and overexploitation of natural resources. One of the important cities in Shan Guo territory is Batmunkh Gompa, a military base of the anti-traction league strategically positioned behind the Shield Wall. The Shield Wall is a robust steel and stone barrier spanning between two mountains, guarding the sole entry point into Shan Guo. The central characters in the anti-traction league are Ermene Khan, Anna Fang, and Tom Natsworthy. Ermene Khan, the Governor of Batmunkh Gompa, is responsible for keeping Shan Guo safe from outside threats. In addition, Anna Fang is a leading aviator and spy of the anti-traction league who struggles to defend Shan Guo from the London attack. In addition, Tom Natsworthy is the main protagonist of the film. He is also a London historian who is betrayed by Valentine. After being rescued by Anna Fang from being sold as a slave, Tom discovers Shan Guo and becomes an anti-Tractionist. He joins their forces to stop Valentine's evil plan and save the people of Shan Guo and London from the consequences of war and exploitation.

In addition, the clash between the Tractionists and the anti-traction league brings to light social and environmental issues. On the social aspect, the film exposes power dynamics, social injustice, political tyranny, abuse of power, othering, marginalization, and slavery. Simultaneously, the film shows environmental exploitation, revealing the depletion of natural resources, overexploitation, unsustainable lifestyles, polluted and damaged environments, and non-eco-friendly technology. What makes *Mortal Engines* compelling is its indirect depiction of how these issues are interconnected, giving rise to both social and environmental disparity.

The theory of postcolonial ecocriticism offers a valuable lens for analyzing *Mortal Engines* because the theory resonates with the core themes and concerns, presenting a compelling academic framework for understanding its intricate problems. Postcolonial ecocriticism's major idea is to study the connection between humans and nature, acknowledging the importance of both without diminishing either (DeLoughrey et al., 2011, p. 4). This theory specifically looks at how ecocriticism and postcolonialism intersect with and shape how human and nature is represented in literature. Postcolonial ecocriticism is driven by the principles of postcolonial, ecocritics, and postmodern theories, which aim to raise awareness and critique the practices of colonialism, specifically a new form of colonization emerged, known as imperialism, which prioritized the interests of capitalist politics and economics. This approach resulted in environmental degradation, serving as a

manifestation of its colonial agenda. This theory is characterized by its eclectic and interdisciplinary nature, as it draws upon a wide range of disciplines, including philosophy, cultural studies, politics, literary language, social sciences, sociology, feminism, and more (Anggraini, 2019, p. 58). Furthermore, the themes studied are extensive and varied, covering almost every aspect of culture. These include politics, ideology, religion, education, history, anthropology, ethnic, arts, language and literature, as well as practical manifestations such as slavery, occupation, population displacement, language imposition, and various forms of cultural invasion (Bertens, 2017, p. 102).

It also analyzes how literature may be used to oppose or criticize colonial ideology and practices, especially those concerning social and environmental injustice. In addition, literature possesses the potential to wield political influence and force (Glissant, 1997, p. 151). Through artistic expressions like films, novels, and poetry, it utilizes persuasive methods and mediation to promote the cause of social and environmental justice. However, postcolonial ecocriticism, as an interdisciplinary framework, aligns with this perspective. Huggan and Tiffin, pioneers of this theory, present it as an interventionist discourse that challenges the dominant "Western" development narrative (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015, p. 27; Wenzel, 2011, p. 51).

This theory contests several notions. Firstly, it questions the dualistic thinking that simplifies issues into two opposing sides, such as right versus wrong and strong versus weak, which leads to marginalization and discrimination (Ashcroft et al., 2013, pp. 18–21). Secondly, it critiques the Western practice of bio-colonization, where the development narrative is used to exploit, civilize, and colonize entities for one-sided gains. Lastly, the theory addresses environmental racism, a sociological phenomenon that reflects an ecologically discriminatory attitude toward socially marginalized individuals. (Huggan & Tiffin, 2015, p. 4). Moreover, at its core, this theoretical approach is deeply concerned with the intricate interplay between humans and nature as they coalesce to forge a just society and sustainable environment (Miller, 2012, p. 476). As a result, this framework often involves the analysis of literature across diverse cultural and historical contexts while considering the perspectives of marginalized or colonized communities. This entails exploring how nature is portrayed in literature and how colonial power dynamics influence human interactions with the environment.

The research problem addressed in this study revolves around the intricate portrayal of social and environmental injustice within *Mortal Engines* film. This research used qualitative-descriptive methods, employing postcolonial ecocriticism and mise-en-scene analysis to explore the possible meanings and implications of the film's injustice depiction. As postcolonial ecocriticism is an evolving field of study, the writer focused on applying the relevant theories developed by scholars such as Huggan and Tiffin and necessary mise-en-scene concepts in order to address the research question.

Method

The study utilized Huggan and Tiffin's Postcolonial ecocriticism and mise-en-scene theory. This Research decided to use a qualitative descriptive method as the main research methodology. The qualitative descriptive method is a research method that positions the writer as the main instrument while the data collection

process is done by merging and analyzing deductive data (Sugiyono, 2005). In the qualitative descriptive method, the data collected are in the form of words or pictures, not numbers (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997, p. 5). Nevertheless, qualitative methods can be used when researching a person's life, life experiences, behaviors, emotions, feelings, functioning of organizations, social movements, cultural phenomena, and interrelationships among countries (Corbin & Strauss, 2014, p. 11).

Findings and Discussion

Depiction of Social and Environmental Disparities in Mortal Engines

The conflict between the Tractionists and the Anti-Traction League stems from differing perspectives, with the Tractionists holding a dualistic and anthropocentric view. This perspective places humans as superior beings at the center, considering the surrounding environment inferior and meant to be exploited for human interests. As stated by the narrator at the beginning of the film:

“60 minutes is all it took for the Ancients to bring humanity to the brink of extinction. Those who survived mobilized their settlements to begin life anew upon a poisoned Earth. In the hunt for food and fuel, the weak perished, and the strong grew ever more powerful. Until a new age arose, the Age of the Great Predator Cities of the West.” (Rivers, 2018, 00:00:35)

The opening narration sets the stage for the film's storyline and introduces the traction era. This new era emerged after the devastating Sixty-Minute War. The Sixty Minute War itself is a nuclear warfare event between the American Empire and Greater China that occurred in the year 2116 within the timeline of *Mortal Engines*. The two sides engaged in a full-scale nuclear war, resulting in widespread devastation and severe environmental damage. This catastrophic event also led to the demolition of vast amounts of humans, animals, plants, technology, and knowledge. Additionally, the narrator also talks about how society survived the harsh post-war environment and prevented humanity from extinction; People had to adapt by adopting a nomadic lifestyle and mobilizing their settlements. The narrator's statement signified the binary thinking that occurs in the film, highlighting the presence of the stronger/weaker binarism. However, binary thinking is connected to environmental and social injustice, as it creates a violent hierarchy where one side of the binary always dominates the other (Ashcroft et al., 2013, pp. 18–21). Any activity or state not fitting into this binary will be the subject of repression, exploitation, othering, and marginalization.

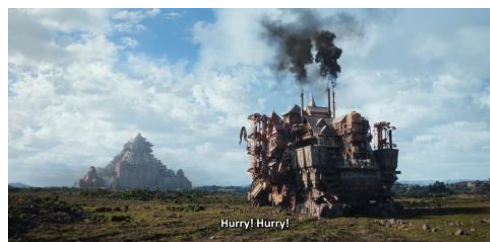


Figure 1. London City chasing Salzhaken City to exploit them

The figure above depicts a scene where London is chasing Salzhaken City, a small traction city focusing on harvesting salt to trade in the traction market. This chasing symbolizes predator/prey and strong/weak dualistic binarism. In this case, London is the Predator and Salzhaken City is the prey. Firstly, the scene takes place in the Hunting Ground, a desolate setting devoid of greenery, highlighting the scarcity of natural resources. Secondly, the scene's composition follows the rule of thirds technique, dividing it into two contrasting parts. Using a frog-eye low-angle technique further emphasizes the binary nature of the situation: strong/weak, predator/prey, colonizer/colonized. The foreground shows Salzhaken City as the weak prey, while London stands in the background as the powerful predator. Magnus' question reinforces this contrast, "What have we got?" (Rivers, 2018, 00:04:48), resembling a predator searching for prey. Magnus Crome as the Lord Mayor of London thinks power is everything, and the more powerful one has the right to oppress the weak. Valentine then answers "Small Bavarian mining town, powered by C-20 land engines. Usual store of brick, coal and iron and 75 tons of salt" (Rivers, 2018, 00:04:50). Valentine and Crome statements signify that both of them see Salzhaken City merely as a commodity or prey for London. In addition, postcolonial ecocriticism, rooted in the spirit of postmodernism, the discourse of colonialism in this theory goes beyond the explicit focus on the colonization of specific nations or peoples. Instead, it recognizes colonization as a broader phenomenon inherent to modernism, characterized by the imposition of a singular truth, uniformity, and universality across various domains, including knowledge, culture, and identity (Anggraini, 2019, p. 57). In this context, the findings above represent the universalistic efforts to legitimize and establish the hegemony of colonial practices by more powerful entities over weaker ones.



Figure 2. Damaged landscape caused by Traction City

The scene above portrays the damaged landscape caused by the traction city running over it with its gigantic tank wheels. The scene depicts the destruction of trees, plants, and land, pollution of soil and water, death of flora and fauna, and the formation of unhealthy pools in the *Mortal Engines* world. To highlight the extent of the environmental damage, the director utilizes an extreme long shot and a bird's eye angle, providing a clear view of the devastated natural surroundings. The rule of thirds framing technique is also employed, emphasizing the long stretch of land ravaged by the traction city symbolizing how big the impact is to the environmental degradation. The long stretch symbolizes a deep wound, aiming to evoke in the audience a sense of reflection and awareness that every human action is interconnected with the state of the environment. Figure 2 stands as a testament to the urge humans to no longer be indifferent to their surroundings and that there is a direct link between colonialist actions toward nature and humanity. The devastation

inflicted upon colonized territories parallels the destruction of societies and has blurred the line between the destruction of physical and human environments (Ashcroft et al., 2013, p. viii). The term "post" in postcolonial is often understood to refer to the "time after" colonialism. However, postcolonialism is not limited to the study of literature in the postcolonial era or the era of independence. Its scope is much broader, encompassing all aspects related to colonialism. Rather than simply denoting a chronological sequence, the term "post" should be interpreted as "transcending" or "going beyond." Therefore, postcolonial (including its development theory) is a multidimensional field of study that extends beyond colonialism itself. It examines various issues that are connected to or influenced by colonialism, even if they may initially appear separate from it (Nurhadi, 2007, p. 2).

However, the people of Salzhaken were unaware that they would be trapped in a form of control and exploitation. The city of London uses the sign that says "London welcomes you" to manipulate and dominate them. This manipulation is a subtle process where the powerful party gains the trust of the weaker one and convinces them to submit and follow the dominant narrative (Piliang & Jaelani, 2018a, p. 99), in this case, to "turn in their old tech." It is done so subtly that the weaker party does not even realize it. This manipulation often starts by giving the weaker party what they want (Thwaites et al., 2018, p. 246). In the case of the Salzhaken refugees captured by London, they wanted to be welcomed by London. The sign's intention is to create a favorable first impression for visitors and convince them that London is a safe and pleasant place to call home. However, the writer has discovered relevant data that supports that statement which showed in Thaddeus Valentine's utterance:

"Oi! What's going on? Take this gentleman to the medics. I want that man on a charge. That should never have happened; you all deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. You will be given food, shelter, and employment. A chance to build a future, make a new life." (Rivers, 2018, 00:18:39)

The context of this statement is when a fight broke out between guards and a citizen from Salzhaken who was caught with a weapon. The guards resorted to violent repression, beating the resident. In response to the conflict, Mr. Valentine swiftly intervened, separating the two parties and restoring calm among the crowd. However, there were intriguing remarks made by Valentine during the incident that shed light on the hegemony of London. This can be observed in the figure presented below:



Figure 3. Thaddeus Valentine in the middle of the crowd

Thaddeus Valentine's speech may seem ordinary, but it is actually a clever manipulation. Since hegemony means gaining domination by consent (Ashcroft et al., 2013, p. 106), in the scene above, he speaks in a way that resonates with the people of Salzhaken. He is offering what they wanted first, promising them that they will be given food, a place to stay, a job, and a chance for them to have a better future and start a new life. All while assuring them that they will be treated with dignity and respect. Valentine's acting and performance show that he understands that getting people's consent cannot be achieved through force or violence. That is why he quickly stopped the violent acts of the guards. Additionally, hegemony is when a group of people naturally accepts the control of the dominant party without realizing it. Until unconsciously, they were under the control of the dominant party. Then, they see it as a normal part of their lives and follow it willingly, including their actions, thoughts, and beliefs (Piliang & Jaelani, 2018b, p. 100). This will be further clarified in the following discussion.

Hegemony is fundamentally the power of the ruling class to persuade other social classes that their interests are the interests of all (Ashcroft et al., 2013, p. 106). In Figure 3 above, the *mise-en-scène* is used by positioning Mr Valentine in the center of the frame, at the foreground side or closer to the camera. At the same time, other supporting characters, the Salzhaken citizens, are placed in the background. This arrangement directs our focus to the main character. Moreover, figure expression and movement are also crucial aspects of *mise-en-scène*, along with setting and costume. They contribute to the narrative and thematic unity of a film. Figure expression involves facial expressions and posture, while figure movement encompasses actions and gestures performed by actors (Lathrop & Sutton, 2014, p. 3). Together, these elements bring characters to life and enhance the overall coherence of the film. Therefore, by observing the characters' actions or figure behavior, it is evident that there is a change of mood and facial expression of Salzhaken residents that can be seen in the scene above. In the scene showing the condition before Valentine gives his speech, the tone and the mood are intense; the residents look afraid, worried, intimidated, and panicked. However, as seen in the background, the residents' expressions changed after he delivered his speech. They look delighted, smiling, calm, clapping, and cheering with happy faces in response to Valentine's speech. This response shows and signifies that Valentine has successfully gained the approval and support of the people subjected to colonialism, as they willingly embrace the dominant narrative. However, as the movie progresses, it becomes evident that the consent obtained through this hegemonic process becomes a source of exploitation and contributes to social and environmental injustice for the people of Salzhaken.



Figure 4. London tier identity card

Like gender and race, the concept of class intersects and interacts with the cultural and environmental consequences of colonial domination (Ashcroft et al., 2013, p. 33). This interaction can give rise to environmental racism, where certain social classes are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation and pollution. This issue can be seen in Figure 4 which displays the character Katherine Valentine holding an identity card. The scene takes place in the Tottenham Court Station where access is only allowed for class 2 citizens and above. In the scene mentioned earlier, the use of mise-en-scene is worth noting as it enhances the film's narrative. The cinematographer employs close-up shots and applies the rule of thirds framing technique. By positioning the camera close to the object, in this case, Katherine's identity card, the audience's attention is directed toward it. The identity card holds more significance than meets the eye. Through this visual technique, the cinematographer intends to convey crucial information about the models of class-divided groups in *Mortal Engines* setting. Specifically, the London City social class system is divided into tiers, creating a class system where the wealthy and privileged patricians live at the top of the city with its luxurious infrastructures. In contrast, the lower castes are relegated to the lower levels, surrounded by the pollution and noise of the city's massive engines.

For instance, the "Tier One" label on Katherine's identity card indicates her high social status as the daughter of Mr. Valentine. This carefully filmed scene helps viewers understand the distinction between different social classes in the city. This creates a clear divide between the haves and the have-nots, with low-class citizens like Tom Natsworthy as third-tier citizens being treated discriminately. This social stratification within London also highlights the issue of environmental racism, as those in lower classes are not only denied access to certain facilities but are also subjected to harsher living conditions and limited access to resources. Because class played a crucial role in colonialism, it influenced how the colonizers viewed and treated different groups of people, often referred to as "natives" (Ashcroft et al., 2013, p. 33). This class distinction also started to affect the colonized individuals themselves, as they began adopting the language and ideas of the colonizers to describe the changes happening in their societies.



Figure 5. Slavery auction in the Hunting Ground society

The composition of the scene in Figure 5 is carefully crafted to convey the message effectively. The cinematographer uses a mise-en-scene technique by employing a wide-angle camera and a wide depth of field, allowing the audience to see the entire scene clearly. Additionally, the composition is structured in three layers: foreground, middle-ground, and background. In the foreground, the focus is on the bidders and buyers. Their appearance and costume, with decent clothing and healthy bodies, signify their privileged status and diverse origins. The blocking of

the scene directs the audience's attention toward the character in the center of the frame. In contrast, the background portrays the enslaved individuals in shabby clothes, with skinny and unhealthy appearances. They are shown tied and caged, emphasizing their dehumanization. This portrayal signifies the notion that enslaved people are treated as uncultured “others”, similar to animals, and subjected to unfair treatment that can be sold as commodities. Despite this, the blocking and use of props still draw attention to the central subject. The middle ground is the focal point of the scene, where two characters stand amidst the crowd. On the left is the skinny enslaved individual being auctioned, while on the right is the fat auctioneer. The auctioneer's actions, pointing out a high bidder for the enslaved person, symbolize crookedness and “the bad guys.” This scene serves as a powerful reminder of the harsh realities addressed by postcolonial ecocriticism. It highlights the interconnectedness between the exploitation of natural resources and the oppression of marginalized communities. The exploitation and discrimination faced by marginalized communities due to the monopolization and conquest of natural resources by the larger society are evident in this scene. It exemplifies how environmental exploitation can lead to the exploitation of human beings as well. Therefore, to achieve social and environmental justice, it is crucial to ban the institution of slavery and its trade, which has now been replaced by a form of employment known as indentured labor (Ashcroft et al., 2013, p. 196).

Conclusion

Based on the comprehensive findings and analysis of the data presented above, it is evident that there exists a complex interplay of attachment, causality, and interdependence between social and environmental issues. These issues are deeply rooted in subjective dualistic, binary, and universalistic thinking, shaping attitudes and behaviors. As a result, phenomena such as colonialism, environmental racism, power abuse, slavery, exploitation, marginalization, and repression emerge, perpetuating a cycle of injustice and further exacerbating the destruction of nature and the environment. However, these forms of social and environmental disparities or injustice are depicted through various means: 1) Narrative elements such as character, dialogue, and action; 2) Mise-en-scene techniques such as settings, the camera works, camera angle, costume, makeup, and property; 2) Symbol and allegory. In addition, this interconnectedness forms a feedback loop whereby the deteriorating state of the environment reinforces the prevalence of dualistic thinking in society and vice versa. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize that these issues are intricately intertwined and cannot be addressed in isolation. A holistic perspective is necessary to comprehend and address the underlying causes and effects of social and environmental injustice, paving the way for comprehensive solutions and systemic change to make social and environmental justice come true.

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