SUMMARY

Ecofiction.
The sympoiesis perspective

In geochronological terms, the epoch we are living in is referred to as the Holocene (from 11,700 +/- 11,650 years to the present day). However, but for more than two decades another term has also been in use as an unofficial name, but advocated in many scientific circles, namely the *Anthropocene*, which is understood as the period in which humans live and act, exerting a lasting negative impact on the Earth's geological-environmental systems. New ways of characterising and naming the issues described have also emerged, with the emphasis on specific phenomena: *Anthropomeme*, *Capitalocene*, *Oliganthropocene*, *Anthroposcene*, *Anthrobscene* and *Plantationocene*, as well as *(M)Anthropocene* and *Plasticene*, but to date *Anthropocene* remains the foremost and broadest term.

As the "*Anthropocene* generation", we are no longer obliged to think of ourselves in anthropocentric terms, but rather in terms of how the human and non-human (more- and other-then human) inhabitants of the Earth function as a community. Let us also try to think about human and non-human life (or life on this planet in general) not only with regard to the present generations, but also in the long term, covering the distant geological periods of the Earth's history, the present and the future. This approach comes with certain costs: it necessitates a reformulation of the ontological status of humans, of the axiological hierarchy of entities, and it exposes the complex relationships not only between us and other life forms but also between humans living now and those of future generations. The problem is intensified by concerns about the directions of advanced technologies (bionics, bioengineering, artificial intelligence, etc.), the awareness of the lack of coordinated strategies for sustainable development, the deepening of social inequalities structurally shaped by the neoliberal economics of global capitalism, and so on.

Attempts are being made, albeit with little success, to overcome or at least mitigate the destructive effects of human activity on the environment. These attempts take the form of

mobilising politics and business, and strategies are being developed for sustainable development and corporate environmental responsibility. The effect of management understood in this way would be to bring about environmental, multi-species justice.

In formulating pro-environmental strategies, relatively little space is given to the social imagination. The humanistic contribution to governance in the age of the *Anthropocene* is most frequently seen in explaining those current threats to ourselves and to future human and non-human entities that result from irresponsible environmental policies. Understood in this way, the task of the humanities (and also of the social sciences) places the emphasis on analysing and presenting the causes and processes that have led to the climate crisis and the loss of biodiversity. However, this framing does not allow this knowledge to be more actively incorporated into the construction of alternative, precisely pro-environmental attitudes.

The author of *Ecofiction* posits that in order to change this state of affairs, we not only need new scientific, technological, political and economic tools but also some kind of different sensibility and aesthetics. Managing the imagination would involve constructing new models of cognition at the epistemological, ontological, axiological and aesthetic levels. It would also mean looking for the kinds, genres, genre varieties in literature, film, theatre, computer games, and visual arts in which various scenarios of human-non-human justice (or injustice) are most clearly revealed.

The second thesis put forward in this article is that currently the greatest potential for the topic of ecology is revealed in the genre of fiction. The various varieties of fiction should be considered: horror, science fiction and fantasy and their hybrid variants, e.g. New Weird. The book argues for special attention to be paid to speculative science fiction, which addresses themes of ecology and multi-species justice. Committed to presenting alternative images of reality, this strand of fiction provokes readers to rethink humans' place on Earth, our relationship with non-humans and the political-ethical-aesthetic responsibility for the possible (or probable) shapes the future may take. At the same time, these speculations, as products of the times in which they were conceived, reveal writers' and readers' current ideas about the possible, probable or expected direction in which we will (perhaps) move out of anthropocentric thinking and turn our attention, sensibility and aesthetics towards biodiversity.

For these reasons, fantasy, and especially science fiction, has for several decades now occupied an important place in ecocriticism, which is understood as a strand of literary studies that examines how the natural world is represented in literary texts. An analysis of environmentally oriented science fiction literature, films and games can provide a wealth of information about the imagined relationships between humans and non-human life forms, as well as revealing ecological extrapolations of conflict and crisis based on these imaginings. The merits of sci-fi, but more broadly of fantasy in general, have already been indicated by many scholars: Patrick D. Murphy, Ali Sperling, Gerry Canavan, Rebecca Evans, Adeline Johns-Putra, Eric C. Otto, Amitav Ghosh, Donna J. Haraway, Pramod K. Nayar. Despite the differences in the topics and methodologies used for their research, all emphasise that literary (but also cinematic) representations of nature are not only generated by particular cultures, but play an important role in their creation. Thus, if we wish to understand our contemporary relationship to the environment, science fiction literature and film can provide a good starting point.

It is also a matter of thinking/making another world, attempting to fight for it, preparing a place for it – in the way we think, describe, feel and act. Critical analysis does not

disappear from the field of interest, but the turn to speculative thinking and fiction aims above all to undermine existing thought patterns, aporias, to play with words, attitudes, interpretations in order to "make a world" different from the one we have organised (or have been organised for) so far. In this sense, *Ecofiction* directs attention to the future, and seeks to create it through such things as thought experiments and the realisation of dreams of a different, implicitly better world. The ecocritical perspective on fiction presented in this monograph has three main objectives. The first is to make visible the anthropocentric assumptions established in Western culture (and thus also in literature, film and the visual arts), which legitimise the hierarchical structure of various forms of life and control the context of their production. However, as noted above, the author regards it as important to broaden this effort by looking to the future. Reconfiguring the past does not so much serve to address past wrongs, losses and injustices as to mobilise change. The second objective is to analyse fantasy works from the point of view of the interconnectedness of the human and non-human: from the position of evolution, biology, genetics, as well as contemporary human relations with animals, plants, sand and water, and also with objects, things; to examine literary and cinematic images deconstructing the 'ontological purity' of the human and showing the complexity of the naturoculture within which we are contextualised. The third objective is to problematise and transcend humanistic, dualistic, anthropocentric methods of interpreting cultural texts and to create a vocabulary capable of describing the proclaimed world.

I do not think this can be regarded as a new topic or challenge, after all, these issues have been and continue to be addressed thoroughly by researchers in the humanities and social sciences from different cultural backgrounds. The more we experience the consequences of climate change and notice the correlations between the loss of biodiversity and our health, the exploitation of nature and social injustice, etc., the more we feel that the old ways of creating, ordering and describing the world are not quite suited to present and future challenges. We need a new way of thinking about the world and the diverse actants and languages which we use when attempting to describe complex relationships, and shift the emphasis from the pessimistic overtones of the term *Anthropocene* (essentially reinforcing anthropocentric and technocratic narcissism) to more multidimensional and collective ways of explaining a diverse world.

In this regard, I am greatly inspired by Donna Haraway's 2016 monograph *Staying with Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, which promotes the model of 'sympoiesis'. This model encourages us to notice the relationships between diverse organisms, as well as between them and inanimate creations, as a network of multi-faceted relationships that are not of a fixed character, but function with, alongside, in and through each other, mutually creating (but also destroying) the conditions for each other to function. Coalitions, reshuffles and ruptures are variable, dynamic and situated at different levels. Although biologists have reservations about the term (the most common argument being that the concept of *autopoiesis*, which has been in operation for several decades, also implies reactions to the stimuli of a changing environment), Haraway argues that the *Anthropocene*/*Capitalocene* epoch is not a matter of the adaptability, self-reproduction and self-organisation of biological complex systems, but of recognising that we live in multi-level relationships with various living and non-living entities – hence not *auto*, but *symbio*. In the monograph *Ecofiction*, we find many references to the concept of *sympoiesis*, which opens up to the diverse and

multilevel relations (continuities, ruptures, temporary alliances, transitions) between living and non-living entities that form the continuum of naturoculture.

After the first chapter, which describes the specificity of 'fiction thinking' in modern times, we move on to the symbiogenetic and sympoietic descriptions of bodies. Indeed, the chapter *Monstruarium* (*Monstrosity*) is devoted to what is close and immediate – the body, or rather how human and non-human bodies, and the relations between them, are depicted in science fiction. Particular emphasis is put on the complex systems of the movement of matter and energy that form the diverse structures of exposition in hybrid, interspecies organisms. Immersion, introjection, synergy and coexistence are all terms that are effective in characterising these systems of displacement, and (s)creations such as the organic--cybernetic cyborg (as a cinematic hero and political, social and technomedical construct) or the genetically programmed *plantimal* (as in Eduardo Kac's bioart) appear as embodied displays of posthumanist monstrousness.

Chapter Two deals with relations: in terms of species (between us and other animals), between us as animals, between nature and civilisation (technoscience, biopolitics), between human and plant, micro-organic actants. Many of these relationships are burdened with reification, possession and violence. In this paper, I identify works that are a critical commentary on the violent and object-oriented way in which relationships are constructed between different forms of life. Then, in line with the assumption that the constant reference to hierarchy, appropriation and exploration does not allow us to move beyond the narcissism of anthropocentrism and the *Anthropocene*, attention is turned to those works that address the theme of relationships based on coexistence, which expand the meaning of kinship bonds (*kin*) and promote a vision of the *Chthulucene* that draws on scientific research, speculative thinking and artistic fiction. Expanding such relationships also entails reflecting on their complications, not only in the sense proposed by the affirmative version of posthumanism, but also in the sense of sharing illnesses, of mourning a loss after the death of human and non-human life companions. It is also a story of pandemics and the isolation and demons they engender.

In the third chapter, time and space are brought to the fore. These reflections are directed towards how human life is entangled with geological, environmental and civilisational changes in the short term (e.g. individual as well as the life of *Homo sapiens* as a species) and deep time (the existence of the planet, rocks). We will look at futuristic scenarios from science fiction works written at a time of growing environmental pollution and the escalating climate crisis and ask what vision of the future they offer, if any? These are also questions about representations of unequal access to natural goods, food, fresh air and clean water, and speculations about possible future wars over relatively fertile and toxin-free lands. In this sense, not only time but also place, shrinking living space, plays a significant role in creating images of the future. Is the alternative to leave a destroyed Earth and colonise Mars or drift in space for a few hundred years? What about those who remain on a destroyed Earth? Without other, non-human organisms, is the survival of *Homo sapiens* possible? These are just a few of the many questions asked of works of fantasy in this monograph.

The arrangement of the chapters follows a certain logic based on the categories of *sympoiesis* and *symbiogenesis*. Firstly, as the biologist Lynn Margulis argues, we are not creatures isolated from other forms of life, but holobionts, i.e. ensembles of co-existing and cooperating organisms. In turn, as creatures who produce and process these natural processes, we

enter into a variety of relationships with living and non-living entities, including objects and highly advanced technology, through which we encroach on the next levels of transforming nature.

Secondly, even though various animal and plant species have died out gradually in the past, or suddenly become extinct, human activity is now seen as the most serious cause of this state of affairs. There is no single, common scientific position on how to remedy this situation; ideas are balanced between protecting what can still be protected and the idea of generating biodiversity. Advocates of the second option emphasise that it is not sufficient to gain knowledge of evolutionary processes; it is necessary to look both into the distant past of how life was formed on Earth and into the future. Thus, on the one hand, we have retrospective thinking, covering the most distant periods of the formation of life on Earth, and on the other, thinking about the future, about the world we will leave behind after what is essentially a short human life on Earth (as a mammal species, but also as a human family: generationally transmitted genes and the memory of loved ones).

Thirdly (and this follows from points one and two), it is about the category of time. Thinking about evolution requires an awareness of geological time, of deep time, which goes beyond human, habitual ways of thinking, but seems necessary in order to move from conceptualising human beings in anthropocentric terms to capturing them in terms of symbiogenesis (*symbiogenesis* and *sympoiesis*). Evolutionary thinking allows attention to be paid to the processes of the emergence, differentiation and relationality of various life forms. In turn, this makes us realise that we are not a special point of reference. From this perspective, Earth does not appear as a setting for human and non-human life, but as its source.

The author of the monograph assumes that there is no way that a holistic, yet multi-faceted, diverse and dynamic account of this phenomenon can be encapsulated between the covers of a single book. Rather she follows Timothy Morton's view that the biosphere is a hyperobject and that its extension in time and space is beyond human perception. What seem equally questionable are the attempts to see, think, describe and present all the factors influencing climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution of the Earth, and unequal access to natural resources, as well as both the current and long-term consequences of these phenomena. Specific concepts and related scopes of research: *Anthropomeme*, *Capitalocene*, *Oliganthropocene*, *Anthroposcene*, *Anthrobscene*, *Plantationcene* and *(M)anthropocene* clearly indicate that it is possible to think intersectionally and yet fragmentarily. This is also the case in this monograph. The author does not claim to have carried out a total treatment of these issues, but in the following subsections she points to a dozen or so issues relevant to ecocritical thinking as it reveals itself in literary and cinematic fiction.