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Cli-Fi Cinema: An Epideictic Rhetoric of Blame

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**RQ1: “WHAT” – Is Cli-Fi, or climate fiction, doing **rhetorically**?**
- The science fiction genre has been a popular vehicle for examining the pressing social tensions of our times.
- Cli-Fi, a close descendant of sci-fi, has exploded in popularity within the last decade.
- On one side of science fiction, we see the utopian fantasy, which offers an ideal and dream-like future; on the other we see the dystopian fantasy, which imagines a world in its most nightmarish pitch.
- In recent years, dystopian fictions have surpassed utopian fictions in presence and popularity, situating dystopia as “the now dominant” mode of science fiction. Dystopia derives its name from the Greek term “dys topos,” which means a bad place or an undesirable society.

**A Theory of Dystopia as Epideictic Blame**

**RQ2: “HOW” – Is Cli-Fi able to use “blame” as a tool for addressing climate change guilt?**
- Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* conceived of the epideictic speaking occasion as ceremonial, with the purpose of praising or blaming.
- Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s *The New Rhetoric* later expanded the genre to include a conception of epideictic rhetoric as a communally-bonding agent.
- Cli-Fi is a form of fiction that embraces the socially important issue of climate change and attaches specific “attitudinal equipment” for addressing it, on a psychic and potentially policy-based level.
- Cli-Fi, in that it develops out of a dystopic setting, imitates its epideictic message from a place of BLAME.

**Epideictic Appeal to ETHOS – Scientific Credibility/Authority**
- Scientific Characters - (Epideictic “Seers” in films)
- Scientific Consulting for film’s production
- Scientific Protagonists
- Climate fiction in films offers the vision of a nightmarish possible future, gesturing its audience in a direction, so that they may be provided with hope through an attitude or strategy that may equip them to navigate a looming dystopia.

**Kenneth Burke’s Guilt Redemption Cycle**

**RQ3: “WHY” – is Cli-Fi so popular, and why do we enjoy it?**
- It provides us the symbolic means for addressing and assuaging our guilt about the issues surrounding climate change.
- In identifying the guilt/redeemption concepts embedded in the problem and solution in those cli-fi films, we are then able to evaluate the political implications of their messages.
- These films provide us an avenue to psychically play out the problems and solutions for climate change. Thus the guilt-redemption cycle enables us to better cope with an uncertain future.
- According to Burke, guilt can be assuaged through:
  - Sacrifice via Scapgoating (Victimage)
  - Mortification
  - Transcendence
- Rhetoric of Rebirth
  - Redemption is never a permanent state.
  - New forms of guilt will emerge and need expiation.
  - Thus, the guilt-redemption cycle begins anew.

**Application: Burkean “Equipment”**

**Artfact 1: The Day The Earth Stood Still (2008)**
- As conveyed in the movie poster for the 2008 remake of *The Day The Earth Stood Still* (TDTESS), Klaatu (Keanu Reeves) the alien invader, has his eye set on the well-being of Earth.
- While the original 1951 TDTESS addresses the Nuclear Age fear, 2008’s TDTESS revolves around issues of climate change.
- *The Day The Earth Stood Still* blames human actions and inventions (techno-industrial military complex) as the problem (source of guilt), or cause, of climate change.

**Artfact 2: Interstellar**
- As Interstellar’s poster depicts, earth has been devastated by a contemporary “Dust Bowl,” resulting in mass depopulation and soil degradation. Cooper (the film’s engineer-turned-farmer, protagonist) is shown gazing up to the stars beside his daughter Murph. This illustrates the film’s ultimate climate change solution, which is essentially to not deal with it, but, rather, to find a new planet, like we were always “meant to.”

**Key Findings**

The Day The Earth Stood Still:
- The film provides an equipment or attitude for resolving the problem of climate change guilt.
- TDTESS provides an Eco-Marxist Attitude or Equipment as its SOLUTION for climate change.
- The film also provides its audience the guilt/redemption mechanisms of Scapgoating, and Mortification to symbolically resolve climate change guilt.
- Interstellar:
  - In the end, technology and human ingenuity are offered as the saviors for the future of humankind, allowing us to abandon a ruined earth for a new and more advanced home in the cosmos. Interstellar advances an ideology that aligns with Neoliberal Environmentalism, which posits Industry and free market as the answer to climate change.
  - Interstellar provides a Neoliberal Environmentalist Attitude or Equipment as its SOLUTION for climate change.
- The film also provides its audience the guilt/redemption mechanisms of Scapgoating, and Transcendence to symbolically resolve climate change guilt.

**References**