

Spatial representations of ecological vandalism in dystopian science fiction cinema

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between ecological vandalism and spatial representation in dystopian science fiction cinema. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study utilizes Seymour Chatman's narrative analysis framework. The film universe of the study comprises dystopian science fiction works that thematically address the spatial consequences of ecological disasters. From this universe, three films were selected using purposeful sampling based on specific theoretical and content-related criteria. The selected films are: *A Boy and His Dog* (1975), *Waterworld* (1995), and *Snowpiercer* (2013). The analysis indicates that ecological vandalism transforms space into fragmented, mobile, or enclosed structures, and these transformations shape the cinematic narrative through atmosphere, plot structure, and symbolic representations. This study reveals cinema's spatial representation of ecological crises, contributing to ecocritical film studies and offering new insights into the intersection of environment, narrative, and visual culture.

Keywords: Dystopian science fiction, Ecological vandalism, Spatial representation, Cinematic space, Film studies

Extended Abstract

Introduction: The global environmental crisis fundamentally challenges understandings of space as both natural systems and designed environments. Anthropogenic ecological devastation generates pervasive uncertainty regarding human settlement, positioning cinema as a crucial medium for navigating complex scenarios. Science fiction is particularly significant, as it builds speculative worlds that reflect environmental fears while reconstructing spatial representation. Dystopian narratives specifically portray the spatial realities of post-disaster survival, yet academic discourse often overlooks how environmental catastrophes actively reshape cinematic settings. A lack of research exists concerning how anthropogenic destruction, or ecological vandalism, influences the spatial design and visual representation of filmic worlds. Consequently, investigating how environmental collapse operates as a fundamental structural and aesthetic component, rather than a passive background, is essential.

Purpose and scope: This study aims to examine the relationship between ecological vandalism and spatial representation in dystopian science fiction cinema. In this context, it seeks to contribute to interdisciplinary fields such as film studies, architecture, and environmental humanities by offering spatial readings of ecological collapse as portrayed in dystopian visions of the future. In accordance with the research problem and objectives, this study is guided by two principal research questions. These questions aim to explore the relationship between ecological vandalism and spatial representation in dystopian science fiction films, specifically investigating how ecological vandalism transforms space (RQ1) and how the resulting spatial transformations affect the cinematic narrative (RQ2). Through a critical analysis of how ecological destruction is represented in dystopian science fiction cinema, the study reveals the ways in which environmental catastrophes reshape cinematic spatial constructs and narrative structures. By focusing on the interplay between ecological collapse and spatial representation, the research offers both a theoretical and methodological contribution to two key areas: ecocritical approaches to cinema and spatial narrative analysis. The study further

contributes to scholarly discourse by linking environmental awareness with spatial storytelling, thereby offering valuable insights for enriching interdisciplinary academic conversations.

Method: This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing narrative analysis to address the research questions. The analytical framework is based on Seymour Chatman's theory of narrative structure, which distinguishes between story, referring to the underlying plot and spatial context, and discourse, encompassing the manner in which these elements are presented to the audience. The cinematic universe is defined as dystopian science fiction films centered on spatial survival following a global anthropogenic ecological catastrophe. From this universe, three films were selected using purposeful sampling based on four objective criteria: thematic variation (desertification, marinization, glaciation), temporal distribution (the 1970s, 1990s, and 2010s), narrative structure restricted to standalone universes, and significant cultural or commercial prominence. Consequently, the sample comprises *A Boy and His Dog* (1975), *Waterworld* (1995), and *Snowpiercer* (2013). Data collection involved multiple viewing techniques and purposive screenshot capture to compile scene-based observation notes on spatial hierarchy, mise-en-scène, and spatio-temporal organization. The analysis was conducted at the story level, focusing on spatial functions and transformations, and at the discourse level, examining atmosphere construction and cinematographic choices to provide a layered interpretation of ecological space.

Findings and conclusion: Findings demonstrate that ecological vandalism fundamentally reshapes cinematic environments and serves as the central impetus for dystopian narratives. Addressing the first research question, the application of Chatman's dual framework reveals distinct spatial impacts across the narrative levels. At the story level, which governs physical settings and plot mechanics, ecological vandalism acts as a force of morphogenesis. It eliminates familiar architectures to generate fragmented, mobile, or enclosed survival structures. In *A Boy and His Dog*, desertification resulting from nuclear warfare produces a fragmented spatial structure where scorched, functionless surface zones coexist with authoritarian, synthetic underground societies. Conversely, *Waterworld* illustrates a fluid spatial environment where marinization triggered by climate neglect generates mobile settlements across a boundless ocean. In *Snowpiercer*, glaciation caused by radical climate engineering confines human existence to a hermetically sealed, linear ecosystem. Simultaneously, at the discourse level, which dictates visual presentation and atmosphere, these transformed environments evoke a dystopian sublime. The vast, unforgiving expanses of deserts and oceans are cinematographically constructed to embed a profound atmospheric dread directly into the narrative. Regarding the second research question, the analysis demonstrates how these spatial shifts dictate the cinematic narrative across both dimensions. Within the story dimension, the severe material constraints of ruined spaces actively shape character agency, motivations, and survival strategies. Conversely, within the discourse dimension, these environments function as symbolic arenas that align with necrofuturological dread, operating as cinematic manifestations of anticipatory collapse. For instance, the train in *Snowpiercer* functions visually and thematically as a necrofuture, acting simultaneously as a refuge and a mobile tomb. In conclusion, ecological vandalism redefines cinematic space physically, ontologically, functionally, and symbolically. Space shifts from a passive backdrop to an active agent that embodies collapse, shapes character agency, and drives the narrative dynamics. This study reinforces the bridge between environmental awareness and spatial storytelling, contributing to ecocritical film studies and spatial narrative analysis. Future research should explore the affective dimensions of ruined spaces and the intersectionality of ecological consequences with social justice issues, including gender, class, and race.

Keywords: Dystopian science fiction, Ecological vandalism, Spatial representation, Cinematic space, Film studies

INTRODUCTION

The global environmental crisis is fundamentally challenging our understanding of space, both as a natural system and a designed environment. The tangible impacts of Anthropogenic ecological devastation, from accelerated climate change to severe biodiversity loss, have generated a pervasive atmosphere of uncertainty about the future of human settlement. Recent scholarship increasingly characterizes this era as the "Anthropocene," a geological epoch where human actions have become a primary force of ecological destruction, a phenomenon that cinema is uniquely positioned to reflect and critique (Paszkievicz, 2021: 2; Pop, 2020: 227). This collective anxiety provides fertile ground for artistic exploration, with cinema serving as a crucial "eco-critical" medium for navigating these complex scenarios (Şen, 2018: 32). The ecocritical approach systematically examines how cultural products construct and critique the relationship between humanity and the physical environment. Through this analytical lens, an ecological catastrophe is evaluated not merely as a natural accident but as the direct consequence of systemic human intervention. Consequently, the concept of ecological vandalism is situated within this framework as a deliberate and destructive spatial violation. This theoretical connection establishes how environmental ruin is visually and narratively spatialized

in cinema. Within this context, the science fiction genre is particularly significant, as it directly confronts these existential threats by building speculative worlds that not only reflect our environmental fears but also actively reconstruct the very meaning and representation of space itself.

Cinema functions as a narrative medium that simultaneously depicts and reinterprets social, environmental, and technological shifts, providing a vital discursive arena through its focus on moments of crisis. Within this framework, dystopian science fiction cinema brings to life the spatial realities of post-disaster survival, offering accounts of resource depletion, societal breakdown, and marginalized ways of living. Dystopian narratives frequently rely on a scenography of urban ruins and fragmented spaces to depict the consequences of systemic collapse (Gandy, 2024: 11; Walter, 2019: 133). These stories are generally set in speculative worlds marked by profound ecological decay. Within these films, decaying megacities and deserted infrastructures serve as physical symbols of both political authority and environmental apathy (Kılıçarslan, 2007: 53; Farstad, 2021: 69). Despite this visual prominence, existing research tends to treat environmental catastrophes simply as narrative triggers. This perspective overlooks how such disasters do much more than drive the story forward; they actively reshape the cinematic environment and function as integral narrative components (Tan, 2020: 301). There remains a significant lack of research regarding how anthropogenic environmental destruction, or ecological vandalism, influences the architectural design and visual representation of these filmic worlds. This oversight indicates a clear necessity for investigating how environmental collapse operates as a fundamental structural and aesthetic component rather than acting merely as a passive background in dystopian cinema.

This study aims to examine the relationship between ecological vandalism and spatial representation in dystopian science fiction cinema. In this context, it seeks to contribute to interdisciplinary fields such as film studies, architecture, and environmental humanities by offering spatial readings of ecological collapse as portrayed in dystopian visions of the future. In accordance with the research problem and objectives, this study is guided by two principal research questions (RQ1 and RQ2). These questions aim to explore the relationship between ecological vandalism and spatial representation in dystopian science fiction films, with a particular focus on how environmental destruction shapes spatial configurations and how these spatial dynamics influence cinematic narrative structures.

RQ1: How does ecological vandalism transform space?

RQ2: How do the spatial transformations caused by ecological vandalism affect cinematic narrative?

This study examines how ecological destruction is represented in dystopian science fiction cinema, aiming to reveal the ways in which environmental catastrophes reshape cinematic spatial constructs and narrative structures. By focusing on the interplay between ecological collapse and spatial representation, the research offers both a theoretical and methodological contribution to two key areas: ecocritical approaches to cinema and spatial narrative analysis. The study further contributes to scholarly discourse by linking environmental awareness with spatial storytelling, thereby offering valuable insights for enriching interdisciplinary academic conversations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that brings together environmental philosophy, spatial theory, narrative theory, and genre studies. This framework enables a comprehensive understanding of how ecological destruction is constructed, visualized, and spatially articulated within dystopian science fiction cinema. The first component of this framework addresses the concept of ecological vandalism within the broader discourse of the Anthropocene and critiques of capital-driven environmental degradation. Subsequently, dystopian science fiction is positioned as a narrative strategy through which ecological anxiety and sociopolitical critique are mediated. Spatial theory is employed to demonstrate that cinematic space does not function as a passive setting but rather as a narrative and ideological construct shaped through visual and structural codes. Finally, recurring spatial motifs, symbolic environments, and aesthetic conventions are examined as critical tools that render ecological collapse both visible and meaningful. Together, these theoretical components constitute a conceptual basis for analyzing how cinematic space in dystopian narratives functions as both a representational medium and a carrier of ecological discourse.

Ecological Vandalism and the Anthropocene Debates

The environmental crisis, one of the defining issues of the twenty-first century, is increasingly understood as a direct consequence of human activity. Within this context, ecological vandalism must be understood as a conceptual act that transcends simple environmental destruction or accidental disaster. Unlike natural catastrophes, vandalism implies a degree of intentionality, systemic neglect, or a calculated violation of the inherent value and integrity of a space. This conceptualization aligns with the legal and ethical frameworks of ecocide, where environmental ruin is recognized as a profound crime against the collective habitability of the planet (Higgins et al., 2013: 261). When such systemic neglect and spatial violations are aggregated to a global level, they fundamentally alter the Earth's biophysical systems. It is precisely to articulate this unprecedented, planetary scale of humanity's impact that the concept of the Anthropocene emerged, framing it as a geological force shaping the planet's ecosystems (Chakrabarty, 2009: 209).

While this geological framing captures the scale of the crisis, defining environmental collapse solely in such broad term risks obscuring the specific ideological structures that legitimize spatial ruin. Consequently, to understand the tension between vandalism and other modes of destruction, one must consider the post-political condition, where systemic environmental degradation is often framed as an inevitable byproduct of progress rather than a deliberate act of spatial violation (Swyngedouw, 2013: 10-11). Deepening this political critique, scholars argue that these impacts stem not merely from individual consumption habits, but from the interventionist logic of the global capitalist system. Building on this, Moore (2016) coins the term Capitalocene to argue that the logic of capital accumulation is the primary driver of ecological ruin. From this perspective, the persistent consumption of fossil fuels can be viewed as a form of global vandalism perpetrated by fossil capital against the shared atmospheric space (Malm, 2016: 9). Collectively, these perspectives reframe ecological vandalism not as arbitrary or inevitable harm, but as a calculated and systemic form of destruction aligned with specific ideological and economic interests.

The nature of this calculated destruction becomes particularly clear through the lens of ethical neglect and the violation of spatial integrity. This aligns with the theory of slow violence, which describes a spatialized devastation that is often invisible, delayed, and dispersed across time and space (Nixon, 2011: 2). Such violence is frequently the result of systemic neglect, where the deliberate withdrawal of care or maintenance functions as a tool of environmental degradation, effectively producing toxic geographies that are rendered invisible or out of sight (Davies, 2019: 418). For instance, the cinematic portrayal of an Earth entirely buried under corporate waste in *WALL-E* (Stanton, 2008) serves as a stark visual manifestation of Moore's Capitalocene and the slow violence of unchecked consumption. Despite such cinematic representations, the inherent difficulty of visualizing such dispersed and delayed ruin highlights a broader epistemological challenge: how to comprehend ecological catastrophes that exceed the boundaries of human perception. Addressing this exact problem of imperceptibility, Morton (2013: 1), with his concept of Hyperobjects, posits that vastly distributed phenomena like climate change or radioactive contamination are entities transcending time and space, beyond the grasp of direct individual perception. This framework serves as a conceptual tool for grasping era-defining catastrophes that overwhelm the limited scope of individual or societal consciousness. Morton's perspective implies that aesthetic codes for representing such destruction in cinema can, and perhaps must, be constructed within a post-human framework.

Furthermore, eco-feminist theorists such as Plumwood (2002: 10) highlight that ecological devastation is intrinsically linked not only to economic systems but also to anthropocentric and patriarchal modes of thought. Plumwood's analysis deepens the ideological dimension of ecological vandalism by connecting environmental domination to social hierarchies. Thus, cinematic representations can be seen not merely as depictions of disaster, but as critical examinations that expose the underlying epistemological frameworks that drive it. The aforementioned theoretical approaches establish that the spatial representations forming the focus of this study are not reducible to technical considerations alone. Instead, they are revealed as complex, layered constructs, deeply intertwined with historical discourses, ideological codes, and prevailing levels of ecological consciousness. Through this framework, the theoretical logic underpinning cinematic spatial constructions becomes more legible, enabling a critical and analytical evaluation of how environmental ruin is integrated into the narrative.

Dystopia, Science Fiction, and Ecological Themes in Cinema

Dystopia and science fiction function not merely as speculations about the future but as critical reflections of contemporary socio-political structures, environmental threats, and ideological conflicts. With the growing visibility of the climate crisis, dystopian science fiction films centered on ecological catastrophe are increasingly recognized as intersecting with the emerging subgenre of climate fiction. Rather than replacing the science fiction category, this thematic framework expands it by producing narratives specifically focused on scenarios of environmental collapse (Heise, 2008). Examples such as *Soylent Green* (Fleischer, 1973) and *Interstellar* (Nolan, 2014) clearly illustrate this intersection, in which traditional science fiction tropes are actively used to examine severe ecological anxieties. These narratives, by framing the rupture in the human-nature relationship both aesthetically and structurally, prompt the audience to interrogate their own connection to the contemporary world.

Suvin's (1979) concept of cognitive estrangement posits that science fiction prompts a critical re-evaluation of existing social reality by confronting the audience with an unfamiliar world. Jameson (2005), in turn, reads dystopian narratives as symptomatic of a late capitalist structure that actively forecloses the possibility of imagining a collective future. These genres not only transform the temporal and spatial dimensions of narrative but also ideologically reconstruct the relationship between nature, environment, and humanity (Buell, 2001; Garrard, 2012).

Dystopian science fiction cinema, particularly in its depiction of post-catastrophe worlds and new spatial arrangements, employs space not merely as a functional area, but as a narrative plane bearing the ideological and emotional imprints of the crisis. The genre's potential, in this context, is directly linked to its capacity for processing both individual and collective ecological traumas. Building on this connection to trauma, ecological vandalism within dystopian cinema operates not merely as a background setting but as a primary narrative driver. Kaplan (2015: 33) conceptualizes this dynamic through the notion of pre-traumatic stress syndrome, arguing that dystopian films compel audiences to foresee the traumatic consequences of ongoing ecological neglect. This anticipatory dread is vividly illustrated in films like *The Day After Tomorrow* (Emmerich, 2004), where the rapid onset of a catastrophic ice age spatializes the immediate trauma of climate change, serving as a cautionary projection of environmental apathy. By visualizing the outcomes of such vandalism, dystopian narratives construct a traumatic structure that generates anticipatory fear and forces characters into profound ethical dilemmas, thereby directly shaping the plot trajectory. Furthermore, Brereton (2019: 157) highlights the environmental affordances of cinema, noting that such films forge deep emotional connections regarding ecological loss. In these narratives, ecological vandalism amplifies the tragic depth of the story, serving as the central catalyst that triggers character motivations centered around mourning and survival. Therefore, dystopian cinema acts as a critical bridge between ecological vandalism and spatial narrative, providing the necessary context for examining how environmental collapse guides character experience.

This theoretical background demonstrates that the spatial representations central to this study are not mere aesthetic preferences. Rather, they reveal a multi-layered construct in which dystopian cinema actively reconstructs the human-nature relationship, merges environmental anxieties with political narratives, and allows space to serve as a primary vehicle for ecological discourse.

The Use and Representation of Space in Cinema

Apart from being recognized as a powerhouse of mass media and art, cinema, whose etymological roots trace back to the Lumière Brothers' Cinématographe, functions as an essential medium for the production and reimagining of architectural forms (Türkmen, 2024: 110). Both architecture and cinema are characterized by shared visual and narrative properties, with each discipline acting as a mirror to the social configurations of its respective era. For instance, the deliberate architectural contrast utilized to communicate socio-economic inequalities in *Parasite* (Bong, 2019), the brutalist vertical hierarchy reflecting systemic collapse in *High-Rise* (Wheatley, 2016), and the alienating, hyper-modernist environments conveying social detachment in *Playtime* (Tati, 1967) collectively exemplify how physical spatial design is employed to visually articulate these social structures. However, the most vital point of convergence between these two fields is the concept of space. While architectural practice is centered on the design of tangible environments and human interaction, the

cinematic medium utilizes fictional space to build atmospheric depth and support the storytelling (Kılıçaslan & Türkmen, 2024: 201).

In this light, cinematic space should be viewed not as a passive setting but as an intricate, layered construct where narrative themes and character arcs find their significance. These spatial complexities have long drawn the interest of various scholars. For instance, Chatman (1978) divided the narrative structure into the two fundamental components of story and discourse, arguing that the arrangement of space within a film is deeply functional rather than purely aesthetic. Such a theoretical lens is crucial for grasping the specific ways that cinema organizes the dimensions of time and space.

Building on such structural approaches to narrative, Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the production of space posits that space is not merely a perceived reality but a construct produced through social relations, ideologies, and cultural codes. Soja (1996) extends this approach, proposing with his concept of thirdspace a multi-layered spatial ontology that encompasses both experiential and imagined spaces. These perspectives reveal how cinematic spaces are ideologically shaped, both in terms of their physical design and their narrative significance (Bruno, 2002; Stam, 2000). Classic examples such as the vertical class stratification visualized through the towering skyscrapers and subterranean factories in *Metropolis* (Lang, 1927), or the neon-lit, decaying urban sprawl of *Blade Runner* (Scott, 1982), demonstrate how cinematic environments actively produce and reflect socio-economic hierarchies rather than merely hosting the narrative.

This theoretical perspective, which frames space as an ideological vehicle in cinematic narrative, holds particular importance in narratives depicting environmental devastation. Indeed, the spaces in such dystopian films are not merely locations where events unfold, but are themselves narrative elements that bear the remnants of catastrophe, simultaneously containing both past and future. To theoretically ground how ecological vandalism actively transforms this cinematic environment, it is crucial to examine the shift from functional space to critical landscape. Stefanopoulou (2021: 39) conceptualizes this transformation through rhetorical environmentalism, suggesting that ecological crisis strips the cinematic space of its traditional functionality. Through the lens of ecological vandalism, the space is reconfigured into an ecocritical rhetorical device; the ruined landscape itself becomes the primary mode of critique. This physical transformation is deeply intertwined with the collapse of social structures. Podgajna (2016: 53) analyzes this dynamic through the fragmentation of socio-political indicators, demonstrating how ecological collapse vandalizes and dismantles intellectual and bureaucratic architectures. Consequently, the hierarchical order of space is violently disrupted, reducing the built environment to a "waste land" that physically mirrors systemic decay.

Furthermore, the impact of this vandalism extends beyond the physical setting into the very structure of the film. Bobaru (2025: 140) introduces the notion of formal ecology, arguing that the cinematic narrative and form operate as an ecology in their own right. Within this framework, ecological vandalism actively dictates the cinematic form, influencing spatial perception and visual composition to displace the anthropocentric focus and create a post-human spatial reality.

This theoretical background demonstrates that space in cinema is not confined to a purely functional role. Rather, it is constructed as a medium of representation within the narrative, one that contains layers such as historical memory, ideological structures, and environmental trauma. By integrating these spatial and narrative theories, the study establishes a cohesive analytical lens. This framework provides a systematic approach to investigating how ecological vandalism alters the physical morphology of the built environment and how these resulting spatial configurations generate new layers of cinematic meaning, thereby offering profound theoretical depth to the subsequent spatial analysis.

METHOD

The present study employed a qualitative research design to address the research questions, using narrative analysis. The analytical framework adopted in this study was structured based on Seymour Chatman's (1978) seminal theory of narrative structure. According to Chatman (1978: 19), a narrative consists of two fundamental components: story (*histoire*) and discourse (*discours*). The story represents the substantive content of the narrative, specifically the "what", encompassing the chronological chain of events (actions and

happenings) and the “existents,” which include the characters and the specific physical settings or environments where the action occurs (Meunier, 2022: 252; Pier, 2003: 73). In the context of this study, the story dimension dictates the functional realities and morphological conditions of the ecologically devastated built environment. Conversely, the discourse represents the expressive plane of the narrative, specifically the “how”, defining the specific cinematic mechanisms through which this content is communicated to the viewer (Webb & Mallon, 2007: 370). For spatial analysis, the discourse dimension involves stylistic and structural choices, including framing, camera angles, and visual composition, which collectively construct the atmosphere and shape the emotional reception of the space (Wolf, 2011: 6). This dual framework provides a comprehensive theoretical mechanism for analyzing both the physical transformation of space within the fictional world and the ideological meanings generated by its visual presentation.

The cinematic universe of this study is defined as dystopian science fiction films centered on spatial survival following a global anthropogenic ecological catastrophe. From this universe, three films were selected using purposeful sampling based on four objective criteria: thematic variation (desertification, marinization, glaciation), temporal distribution (the 1970s, 1990s, and 2010s), narrative structure (standalone universes rather than extensive franchises like the Mad Max series), and significant cultural or commercial prominence (e.g., global box office success, massive production scales, and prestigious recognitions such as Hugo or Academy Award nominations). Consequently, the final sample comprises *A Boy and His Dog* (Jones, 1975), selected for its cult status and Hugo Award; *Waterworld* (Reynolds, 1995), noted for its massive production scale and Academy Award nomination; and *Snowpiercer* (Bong, 2013), distinguished by its global box office success. This structured approach ensures distinct and culturally impactful spatial representations for the comparative analysis.

The selected films were analyzed using a multiple viewing technique, focusing on scenes that directly or indirectly reflect spatial representations. Each film was examined in terms of the function of space, its transformational dynamics, and its role in atmosphere construction. Accordingly, scene-based observation notes were compiled, documenting key visual and narrative elements such as spatial hierarchy, mise-en-scène, and spatio-temporal organization. To support the visual analysis, a purposive screenshot capture method was applied, deliberately selecting frames that explicitly demonstrate the spatial and architectural consequences of the ecological catastrophes, which were then archived as a visual dataset. This approach allowed for a more precise and reproducible interpretation of spatial structures. Furthermore, a range of secondary materials, such as scholarly articles, interviews, and production notes, were reviewed to add a layer of contextual richness to the overall evaluation.

The analysis was conducted using Seymour Chatman’s (1978) dual-layered narrative structure theory, which distinguishes between the dimensions of story and discourse. At the story level, the analysis focused on the function of space within the plot, modes of spatial transformation, and the reconstruction of the built environment. At the discourse level, meaning-making processes were examined through the visual representation of space, atmosphere construction, and cinematographic choices. This analytical approach enabled a layered interpretation of spatial representation, addressing not only narrative content but also formal and aesthetic devices that shape the audience’s perception of ecological space.

SYNOPSIS OF SELECTED FILMS

This section offers brief synopses of the three dystopian science fiction films selected as the sample of this study, with the aim of establishing conceptual clarity and narrative context for the subsequent analysis. These synopses highlight the central ecological disaster, the narrative structure, and the spatial settings of each film, which are essential to understanding how ecological collapse is spatialized and represented through cinematic storytelling. The chosen cinematic works represent varied ecological catastrophes, including desertification, marinization, and glaciation, which are examined through the lens of different historical periods and creative directorial visions. The promotional posters included in Table 1 reflect each film’s thematic and spatial atmosphere, emphasizing their ecological focus and narrative form. These visuals function as paratexts that support spatial storytelling through symbolic and compositional cues.

Table 1. Promotional posters of the selected films

<i>A Boy and His Dog</i>	<i>Waterworld</i>	<i>Snowpiercer</i>

A Boy and His Dog is one of the early examples of post-apocalyptic dystopian cinema, set in the year 2024 after a nuclear war has rendered most of the Earth's surface uninhabitable. The film presents a fragmented spatial structure in which chaotic and violent surface zones coexist with authoritarian underground societies. Desertification is portrayed not merely as a visual backdrop but as a narrative condition that disrupts social organization and survival dynamics. By examining the vertical spatial dichotomy that exists between the scorched land above and the synthetic organization below, the film investigates the specific ways in which ecological devastation redefines inhabited spaces and various mechanisms of control (Winters, 2024).

Waterworld is set in a distant future in which global warming has melted the polar ice caps, submerging all landmasses. In this ocean-covered world, human settlements are organized as floating structures, and the narrative revolves around conflicts shaped by resource scarcity and territorial uncertainty. The film constructs a fluid spatial environment in which marinization redefines the concepts of habitability, mobility, and spatial belonging. This aquatic dystopia portrays the erosion of terrestrial stability both physically and socially, representing ecological crisis as a force that dissolves established norms (Tatna, 2023).

Snowpiercer takes place in a world overtaken by a new ice age, triggered by the failure of a climate engineering intervention. The remnants of humanity survive aboard a constantly moving train that circles the Earth, strictly divided along class lines. Glaciation functions as both a spatial setting and a narrative catalyst, forcing civilization into a closed, linear ecosystem. The interior of the train is organized as a microcosm in which each carriage represents a distinct socio-spatial zone. The film critiques ecological destruction not merely as an environmental issue but also as a condition deeply entangled with spatialized inequality (Lee & Manicasteri, 2018).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The narrative architectures of the three selected dystopian science fiction films are visually illustrated through scenes categorized into three spatial dimensions: Environment, Exterior, and Interior. These categories enable a detailed analysis of how ecological collapse is not only thematically foregrounded but also spatially articulated within the cinematic narrative. The selected scenes demonstrate how environmental devastation reshapes the functionality, aesthetics, and socio-political layers of space. In each film, these spatial dimensions directly influence characters' mobility, sense of spatial belonging, and survival strategies.

The selected scenes from *A Boy and His Dog* portray a fragmented spatial structure shaped by a post-nuclear apocalypse. The environmental scenes illustrate a scorched and barren terrain characterized by cracked earth and desolate landscapes, which serve to visually articulate the far-reaching aftermath of ecological catastrophe. The Exterior scenes focus on transitional zones such as makeshift shelters and ruined infrastructure, which function as threshold spaces of vulnerability and survival. In contrast, the Interior scenes highlight underground

or enclosed environments where remnants of organized society or scavenged living quarters persist. These spaces embody mechanisms of control, repression, and adaptation within a world fractured by ecological and moral collapse (Table 2).

Table 2. Spatial structure of *A Boy and His Dog*

Environment	 [00:02:01]	 [00:06:45]	 [00:06:49]
Exterior	 [00:52:34]	 [00:07:33]	 [00:14:46]
Interior	 [00:36:43]	 [00:09:00]	 [00:25:43]

According to the findings obtained through the narrative analysis, *A Boy and His Dog* presents a dystopian spatial condition shaped by desertification resulting from nuclear warfare and uncontrolled resource exploitation. The scorched land and fragmented built environment render space functionless, disordered, and insecure. At the story level, characters inhabit both underground shelters and fragile surface structures, reflecting a layered spatial transformation in the aftermath of ecological collapse. The interplay between these two environments, defined by the contrast between the paradoxically secure yet subjugating underground and the precarious, defenseless surface, fundamentally configures the spatial trajectory of the narrative. From a narratological perspective, this vertical spatial divide functions as the primary structural catalyst for the plot. The continuous physical necessity to navigate between these opposing zones structurally dictates the narrative progression. Consequently, this spatial friction generates the core narrative conflict, directly shaping the thematic development of survival versus subjugation. At the discourse level, the visual juxtaposition of vast, unregulated barren landscapes with enclosed, claustrophobic interiors enhances the film’s atmospheric emphasis on threat, solitude, and spatial uncertainty. The construction of an “existential space” within this subterranean society internalizes the external ecological trauma, utilizing the artificiality of the mise en scene as a psychological refuge (Pallasmaa, 2001). This contrast reinforces the notion that ecological devastation not only alters the physical landscape but also produces psychological and social conditions of alienation and instability, ultimately turning space into a site of existential conflict (Table 3).










Table 3. Narrative analysis of *A Boy and His Dog*

Ecological Vandalism	Ecological Catastrophe
Nuclear warfare and uncontrolled resource consumption	Desertification (Loss of land’s biological productivity)
Story Level (Content)	Discourse Level (Expression)
Parched, deteriorated lands and subterranean shelters construct a spatial framework that conveys the collapse of civilization, the fragmentation of order, and the necessity of survival.	The vast, ungoverned depiction of scorched terrain, paired with the enclosed and repressive design of underground interiors, reinforces an atmosphere of isolation and existential threat.

The selected frames from *Waterworld* represent a liquid dystopia in which the Earth has been submerged due to polar ice melt triggered by global warming. The Environment scenes foreground the boundless ocean, symbolizing the erasure of terrestrial reference points and the overwhelming scale of planetary collapse. Within the exterior sequences, the visualization of boat surfaces, floating settlements, and eroding maritime ruins provides

a spatial interface that negotiates the relationship between humanity and the inundated world, thereby organizing the structures of both communal engagement and social friction. The Interior scenes capture confined and multifunctional spaces that range from makeshift domestic zones to mechanical compartments. These scenes emphasize the tension between degradation and resilience, illustrating how mobility and adaptability redefine habitation under extreme ecological conditions (Table 4).

Table 4. Spatial structure of *Waterworld*

Environment	 [00:01:23]	 [00:15:40]	 [00:10:02]
Exterior	 [00:08:10]	 [00:05:12]	 [01:48:34]
Interior	 [00:02:51]	 [01:46:15]	 [00:20:15]










In *Waterworld*, the ecological collapse triggered by global warming and climate-neglectful policies manifests as marinization, resulting in the complete submergence of land. This spatial condition renders the world directionless, fragile, and transient. At the story level, the characters navigate life aboard floating structures, constantly moving across an expansive ocean in search of solid ground. This ceaseless condition of movement defines the characters' existential reality and situates the central narrative friction within a spatial framework, wherein land emerges as an objective that holds both material and allegorical significance. Rather than serving as a passive backdrop, this fluid spatial condition operates as the central mechanism propelling the story. The absolute absence of terrestrial stability structurally dictates the narrative progression. Thus, the spatial void itself produces the underlying narrative tension, ultimately driving the thematic development of adaptation within a directionless world. At the discourse level, the repeated visual portrayal of endless water surfaces constructs an atmosphere dominated by uncertainty, isolation, and disorientation. The juxtaposition of improvised marine settlements against an infinite, placeless backdrop reinforces a sense of vulnerability and existential instability. From the perspective of forensic architecture, these scavenged structures act as material "witnesses" to the planetary collapse, providing formal evidence of the systemic neglect that led to the Earth's submersion (Weizman, 2012). Such a "salvage aesthetic" illustrates what Cairns and Jacobs (2014) describe as the "perverse" life of architecture, where ecological vandalism has accelerated the death of built forms. In this context, space is not merely a setting but a shifting and unstable force that actively shapes the narrative's thematic core and the characters' psychological condition (Table 5).

Table 5. Narrative analysis of *Waterworld*

Ecological Vandalism	Ecological Catastrophe
Global warming and climate-neglectful policies	Marinization (Submergence of landmasses under water)
Story Level (Content)	Discourse Level (Expression)
A world submerged in water and scattered with floating settlements spatially frames the plot's core conflict, where the search for land becomes the narrative's central axis of tension and survival.	The repetitive portrayal of endless water surfaces heightens spatial uncertainty, while makeshift structures evoke vulnerability and helplessness, reinforcing the fragility of this aquatic dystopia.

The analysis of these visual stills from *Snowpiercer* maps out a spatialized narrative set within a hermetically sealed ecosystem, specifically a high-speed train that traverses a glaciated world following a catastrophic failure in climate engineering. The Environment scenes depict an uninhabitable, glaciated exterior visible only through the train’s windows, emphasizing the inaccessibility and hostility of the outside world. The Exterior scenes focus on the train’s outer shell and transitional technical areas, symbolizing the impermeable divide between interior survival and exterior extinction. The Interior scenes guide the viewer through the train’s class-stratified compartments, ranging from labor-intensive sectors to leisure zones and centers of power. This linear spatial journey critically engages with issues of hierarchy, control, and systemic inequality within a post-ecological order (Table 6).

Table 6. Spatial structure of *Snowpiercer*

Environment			
	[01:55:28]	[00:35:52]	[01:16:46]
Exterior			
	[00:43:15]	[01:16:59]	[00:35:58]
Interior			
	[00:12:50]	[01:18:48]	[01:16:10]

In *Snowpiercer*, glaciation caused by radical climate engineering renders the external world entirely uninhabitable, positioning the train as the only viable closed system for human survival. This extreme condition transforms space into a confined, regulated, and highly hierarchical structure. At the story level, the train’s continuous movement traps the narrative within a narrow physical environment, embedding the idea that life can persist only within a controlled and linear system. Spatial restriction becomes a narrative constraint that defines both action and survival. At the discourse level, the train’s class-divided compartments are emphasized through corridors, thresholds, and visually repetitive spatial transitions. These design elements reinforce themes of oppression, tension, and structural inequality. The cinematic use of enclosed, sequential interiors accentuates the spatial manifestation of social order, turning the train itself into a metaphor for systemic control and ecological desperation. This linear ecosystem exemplifies the use of infrastructure as a political instrument of control, where access to vital resources is strictly dictated by the technical fabric of the space (Gandy, 2014). In this narrative, space becomes a mechanism of both survival and subjugation (Table 7).

Table 7. Narrative analysis of *Snowpiercer*

Ecological Vandalism	Ecological Catastrophe
Radical intervention through climate engineering	Glaciation (Encapsulation of land beneath ice layers)
Story Level (Content)	Discourse Level (Expression)
The frozen world and the spatial design of the train render continued human existence possible only within a confined route, making the narrative progression highly dependent on spatial constraints.	The train’s limited, class-divided structure, reinforced by narrow framings and repetitive corridors, foregrounds an atmosphere of oppression, tension, and social segregation throughout the film.

The outcomes of this analysis demonstrate that the spatial and narrative configurations of the three investigated films, *A Boy and His Dog*, *Waterworld*, and *Snowpiercer*, reveal how diverse modes of ecological vandalism fundamentally reshape cinematic environments. These findings suggest that human-driven environmental

degradation acts as the central impetus for dystopian narratives. Each film centers on a specific ecological crisis, consisting of desertification, marinization, and glaciation, which collectively serve as the foundation for the plot. Ultimately, these disasters transcend mere physical alteration of the landscape, as they radically reconstruct the operational boundaries, functional dynamics, and overall atmosphere of the narrative space.

The first research question (RQ1: How does ecological vandalism transform space?) is answered through the finding that ecological vandalism transforms space into fragmented, mobile, or enclosed structures. These spatial shifts represent a radical morphogenesis, directly paralleling Bulu and Kavut (2021), as familiar architectural forms are violently eliminated to prompt the emergence of new spatial structures adapted to harsh environmental conditions. In *A Boy and His Dog*, the desertification caused by nuclear war produces a fragmented spatial morphology between the surface and the uncanny underground shelters. In *Waterworld*, the marinization resulting from climate negligence generates makeshift atolls and constantly shifting, fluid, floating settlements. In *Snowpiercer*, glaciation confines life to a self-contained, strictly hierarchical system within the train, isolated from the outside world. Furthermore, the spatialization of these catastrophes directly visualizes Morton's (2013) concept of hyperobjects within the cinematic narrative. The radioactive wasteland, the boundless marinization, and the planetary glaciation are not merely localized disasters; they represent vastly distributed ecological phenomena that transcend traditional temporal boundaries. By transforming these imperceptible hyperobjects into tangible cinematic spaces, the films force the narrative to navigate an overwhelming, era-defining crisis, effectively grounding abstract environmental philosophy in physical spatial design.

The impact of these transformed spaces is closely related to Brereton's (2005) concept of ecological sublime moments. However, rather than utopian sublimity, the studied films offer a dystopian sublime. The endless, unforgiving vastness of the desert in *A Boy and His Dog*, the uncanny, boundless expanse of the ocean in *Waterworld*, and the freezing silence of an ice-covered world in *Snowpiercer* evoke awe while embedding a profound atmospheric and thematic tension directly into the cinematic discourse. Cubitt (2005) investigates how ecological anxieties are mediated through popular media, and within the analyzed films, this mediation is profoundly spatial. Space becomes the primary site and medium for expressing critiques about the consequences of ecological vandalism, acting as a powerful visual mediation of concerns like nuclear warfare, uncontrolled climate change, and failed geoengineering.

The second research question (RQ2: How do the spatial transformations caused by ecological vandalism affect cinematic narrative?) is answered through the finding that these spatial transformations shape cinematic narrative through atmosphere, plot structure, and symbolic representation. These findings strongly align with Ivakhiv's (2013) assertion that cinematic environments function as active ecologies intertwining the material, the social, and the perceptual. Within the selected films, the material devastation of the landscape directly dictates social hierarchies and generates a profound perceptual atmosphere that limits character agency. Transformed spaces in these films, specifically the claustrophobic and hierarchical wagons of *Snowpiercer*, the boundless and ever-threatening ocean of *Waterworld*, and the bleak and violent wasteland of *A Boy and His Dog*, generate an atmosphere that dictates character experiences, motivations, and constraints. The narrative largely unfolds through struggles for survival, meaning, and escape in these challenging and resource-scarce environments. The works of Willoquet-Maricondi (2010) and Parham (2015) emphasize the potential of film to convey ecological values, and this potential is realized in dystopian science fiction, particularly through spatial representations. The transformed spaces shape narrative development, ensuring that water and rare land become vital symbols in *Waterworld*, or the train in *Snowpiercer* becomes a metaphor for class injustice. Space itself becomes a symbolic narrative arena where ecological collapse and its consequences are structurally embodied.

Canavan (2021) explores how science fiction produced in the Anthropocene era reflects the tension between utopian possibilities and a pessimism termed necrofuturological dread. According to Canavan, this dread is embodied in necrofutures, which function as anticipatory premeditations of a coming collapse. From this perspective, the spatial transformations in the three films analyzed, encompassing desertification, marinization, and glaciation, serve as cinematic manifestations of this necrofuturological dread. For instance, the train in *Snowpiercer* simultaneously serves as a refuge and a mobile tomb, thereby reflecting the paradoxical tension between survival and apocalypse that characterizes the cultural products of the Anthropocene. In summary,

the findings of this research demonstrate how ecological vandalism in dystopian science fiction films transforms space not only physically, but also functionally, atmospherically, and symbolically, whereby these shifts become a central dynamic of the cinematic narrative. Space shifts from a passive backdrop to an active narrative element that embodies ecological collapse, shapes character agency, and conveys the thematic concerns of the film.

CONCLUSION

This study fundamentally aimed to investigate the intricate relationship between ecological vandalism and spatial representation in dystopian science fiction cinema and to elucidate how this relationship shapes the cinematic narrative. A core objective was to understand how human-induced environmental destruction, transcending its role as a mere theme or backdrop, actively transforms the spatial fabric of films and how these transformations become embedded at the heart of narrative dynamics.

The significance of this research lies in its theoretical and methodological contributions to interdisciplinary fields such as ecocritical film studies and spatial narrative analysis. By conducting a detailed analysis of the transformative effects of ecological vandalism on cinematic space and the narrative functions of these spaces (through the examples of *A Boy and His Dog*, *Waterworld*, and *Snowpiercer*), this study has reinforced the bridge between environmental awareness and spatial storytelling. Consequently, it has deepened our understanding of how cinema imagines and critiques ecological crises and potential futures. The research has demonstrated that space, far from being a passive stage, becomes an active agent that embodies ecological collapse and its societal repercussions, generating meaning and driving the narrative.

Beyond the specific data detailed in the findings, a key interpretation emerging from this study is that ecological vandalism redefines cinematic space not only physically but also ontologically. The transformation of space into fragmented, mobile, or enclosed structures reflects deeper existential conditions such as instability, rootlessness, forced adaptation, and often, heightened social control or anomie. Disasters like desertification, marinization, or glaciation disrupt the fundamental relationships characters have with their world; space ceases to be a secure haven or a familiar environment, instead becoming an arena of constant struggle, negotiation, and survival. This, in turn, profoundly affects not only the plot of the cinematic narrative but also the psychology, motivations, and moral choices of the characters. Thus, ecologically devastated space exists in a dialectical relationship with the narrative, functioning as both its cause and consequence.

The limitations of this study offer significant opportunities for future research. The current focus on visual structure and spatial representation could be expanded by integrating diverse methodologies (e.g., reception studies, ethnographic analyses) or alternative theoretical lenses (such as psychoanalytic, post-colonial, or ecocritical readings) to explore audience reception and socio-cultural contexts. Expanding the sample beyond three films to include non-Western dystopian cinema could reveal cultural variations in the spatial representation of ecological vandalism. Furthermore, accessing primary sources like director commentaries or production design notes would offer deeper insights into spatial design intentions. Building on these expansions, future research could explore the affective dimensions of transformed spaces, examining how uncanny or claustrophobic environments influence the audience's emotional reception of ecological messages. Furthermore, to expand upon the "discourse" dimension of Chatman's narrative theory utilized in this study, incorporating the formal and conceptual analysis framework proposed by Ryan and Lenos (2012) into subsequent research would provide a robust methodological tool for systematically decoding the cinematographic organization of these spaces. Investigating spatial representations of resistance and ecological restoration would provide a vital counter-perspective. While dystopian narratives depict collapse, further studies could explore how they also visualize alternative community forms or spatial practices that defy devastation.

Moreover, the intersectionality of the spatial consequences of ecological vandalism with other social justice issues, including gender, class, and race, awaits further investigation. The spatial reflections of class stratification, prominent in *Snowpiercer*, could serve as a starting point for analyzing how different social inequalities intertwine with ecological crises and manifest spatially in other dystopian films. Finally, an

analysis of the soundscapes of these devastated spaces could move beyond visual representation to offer new horizons in understanding the atmosphere and narrative impact of environmental collapse. Such multi-layered and interdisciplinary approaches will aid in a more comprehensive understanding of the complex and vital relationship cinema establishes with the ecological crisis, one of the most pressing issues of our time.

Author's Contribution

The author contributed 100% to the study.

Competing Interests

There is no potential conflict of interest.

Ethics Committee Declaration

Ethics committee approval is not required for this study.

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Figure References

- Table 1:** Jones, L. Q. (Director). (1975). *A Boy and His Dog* [Film]. LQ/JAF Productions; Reynolds, K. (Director). (1995). *Waterworld* [Film]. Universal Pictures; Bong, J. (Director). (2013). *Snowpiercer* [Film]. CJ Entertainment.
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