

Environmental Risk Fiction and Ecocriticism

Sylvia Mayer
University of Bayreuth, Germany
sylvia.mayer@uni-bayreuth.de

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Abstract

Ecocriticism has been at the forefront of introducing risk theory and risk research to literary and cultural studies. The essay surveys this more recent trend in ecocritical scholarship, which began with the new millennium and has focused on the participation of fictional texts in various environmental risk discourses. The study of risk fiction draws our attention to cultural moments of uncertainty, threat, and instability, to risk scenarios both local and planetary—not least the risk scenarios of the Anthropocene in which species consciousness and ‘planetariness’ have become central issues. The essay reviews how key publications have shed light on the cultural and literary historical relevance of environmental risk and on various issues that are central to ecocriticism. It points out how they have sharpened our sense of both the spatial and temporal dimensions of environmental risk and environmental crisis, introduced new categories of ecocritical analysis, contributed to clarifying some of the field’s major conceptual premises, and added a new approach to genre discussions, in particular relating to fiction engaging with global anthropogenic climate change.

Keywords: Risk, environmental risk fiction, ecocritical risk scholarship.

Resumen

La ecocrítica ha estado a la vanguardia de la introducción de la teoría y la investigación sobre el riesgo en los estudios literarios y estudios culturales. Este ensayo analiza esta tendencia reciente en los estudios ecocríticos, que surgió al inicio del milenio y que se ha enfocado en la participación de los textos literarios en diversos discursos sobre el riesgo. El estudio de riesgo nos invita a considerar el papel de los momentos culturales de la incertidumbre, la amenaza, la inestabilidad, incluso los escenarios del riesgo al nivel local y planetario—sin olvidar los escenarios de riesgo del Antropoceno en el que la conciencia de especie y la ‘planetariedad’ se han vuelto centrales. El ensayo repasa la manera en la que algunas publicaciones clave han iluminado la importancia cultural y literaria-histórica del riesgo ambiental y los diversos asuntos centrales a la ecocrítica. Destaca la manera en que han afinado nuestra percepción de las dimensiones espacial y temporal del riesgo ambiental y de la crisis ambiental, introduciendo nuevas categorías de análisis ecocrítico, y contribuyendo a la aclaración de algunas de las principales premisas conceptuales más contundentes de este campo. También muestra cómo ha impulsado un nuevo enfoque al debate sobre el género, sobre todo con respecto a la ficción que trata del cambio climático antropogénico global.

Palabras clave: Riesgo, ficción del riesgo ambiental, estudios ecocríticos del riesgo.

While ecocriticism has always been defined as engaging with environmental ‘crisis,’ the field’s more sustained engagement with environmental ‘risk’ began only with the new millennium. Both concepts, crisis and risk, refer to a situation marked by uncertainty, threat, and instability that reflects and simultaneously asks for sociopolitical,

economic, and cultural changes. The concept of risk, however, provides a more distinctive perspective. It allows us to single out and analyse specific risks that together may cause a sense of overall crisis, and it directs our attention to human decision-making in the (or in “a”) present and to the anticipation and calculation of possible futures that may result from such decision-making and that already have an impact on the respective present. In the case of environmental risks, more often than not, these futures are envisioned as scenarios of threat and catastrophe.

Environmental risks such as the nuclear risk or biochemical risks were central to the development of risk theory and risk research in the social sciences since the late 1960s. Since then, risk research has demonstrated that pervasive risk awareness, both environmental and non-environmental, has increasingly reconfigured societies, politics, and cultures in our period of late modernity. Especially studies in sociology, cultural anthropology, psychology, and political sciences have shown that social, political, and cultural transformations in the second half of the twentieth century have been responses to risk perception, risk assessment, and risk communication. They have turned cultures and societies into what sociologists Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck conceptualized as ‘risk cultures’ and as ‘world risk society’ (for a survey of risk studies in the social sciences see Arnoldi and Burgess). The “accumulation of risks”, Beck argued in 2009, “has an overwhelming presence in our world today” (291). Risks influence subjectivities and personal and collective identity formation as well as interpretations of the present and speculation about the future. Risk scenarios, whether factual or fictional and regardless of the medium in which they come, need to be studied to make sense of a particular cultural moment—not least the risk scenarios of the Anthropocene in which species consciousness and planetariness have become central issues.

Ecocriticism has been at the forefront of introducing risk theory and risk research to literary and cultural studies in general. Studying the participation of fictional and non-fictional texts, of literary, filmic, and other works of art in environmental risk discourses, ecocritical risk scholarship, a lot of it coming from European scholars, has begun to demonstrate their specific relevance for these discourses. Ursula Heise’s work in particular marks the beginning of a more sustained study of environmental and technological risks in the field of ecocriticism. After the publication of early essays (e.g. 2002), her monograph *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008) began to outline how ecocritical studies can contribute to interdisciplinary risk research. Focusing on the complex connectivity of spatial scales in a globalized world, she explored “the deterritorialized environmental vision in the realms of literature and art” and how this vision creates an eco-cosmopolitan stance: a sense of “environmental world citizenship” (10), which draws into the moral universe both the human and the non-human. Her exemplary analyses showed that narrative genres “provide important cultural tools for organizing information about risks into intelligible and meaningful stories” (138), thereby illustrating the important role “that particular metaphors, narrative patterns, or visual representations might play in the formation of risk judgments” (137).

In the second decade of the 21st century, ecocritical risk scholarship, predominantly in English, but also in German, has considerably grown. In addition to

individual essay publications, the following monographs and collections of essays have made it increasingly visible: Heise, *Nach der Natur* (2010), Sylvia Mayer/Alexa Weik von Mossner (edited by), *The Anticipation of Catastrophe* (2014), Antonia Mehnert, *Climate Change Fictions* (2016), Heise, *Imagining Extinction* (2016), and Weik von Mossner, *Affective Ecologies* (2017). Together with Canadian ecocritic Molly Wallace's *Risk Criticism* (2016), which draws on nuclear criticism and proposes a wide-ranging "precautionary reading practice" (20), these publications have to date shed light on the cultural and literary historical relevance of environmental risk and on various issues that are central to ecocriticism. They have sharpened our sense of both the spatial and temporal dimensions of environmental risk and environmental crisis, introduced new categories of ecocritical analysis, contributed to clarifying some of the field's major conceptual premises, and added a new approach to genre discussions, in particular relating to fiction engaging with global anthropogenic climate change.

Through her focus on risk, Heise gave various impulses to ecocritical work, first and foremost a focus on spatiality. She showed that place has to be understood as deterritorialized and that environmental ethical positions must be developed from a globalized or planetary perspective. Such a focus on the spatiality of risk is also crucial in the essays contributed by Antonia Mehnert and Anna Thiemann to the volume *The Anticipation of Catastrophe*, in which they pick up the concept of "riskscape" as analytical tool (see also Mehnert 2016). This concept emerged in the late 1980s. Over the last decade, it has been further developed by cultural geographers Detlef Müller-Mahn, Jonathan Everts, and Christiane Stephan. They regard risks as "temporalspatial phenomena that relate risk, space and practice," linking "the material dimension of potential physical threats, the discursive dimension of how people perceive, communicate and envision risks, and the dimension of agency, i.e., how people produce risks and manage to live with them" (197). The concept has been increasingly employed in further ecocritical study (see Mayer, "From an Ethics of Proximity," and "Oil Fiction as Risk Fiction"; Tabur).

In an essay published in the collection *Literatur als Wagnis/Literature as a Risk*, Evi Zemanek (2013) develops theoretical and aesthetic arguments by employing the category of risk. In particular, she draws attention to a 'consensus' that underlies ecocritical work: on a metafictional level, risk fiction reveals a type of ecological thinking that acknowledges the complex interdependencies between civilization and nature; it also overcomes any anthropocentric stance; and it reveals the cultural constructedness of concepts of nature (see also Catani in the same volume). Weik von Mossner's *Affective Ecologies* introduces an ecocritical cognitive approach to narrative emotion, engaging with the affective dimensions of U.S. climate risk literature and film in one of the study's chapters. The study of risk fiction thus contributes to opening a whole new field for ecocritical study.

Several studies have focused on the aesthetics of risk fiction and on genre analysis and categorization. Here, the complex risk of global anthropogenic climate change and its possible ecological, sociopolitical, economic and cultural future implications have proven of particular interest. Scholars explored the aesthetics of risk scenarios in both climate

change literature and film: in cli-fi novels (Goodbody, Mayer, “‘Dwelling in Crisis’,” Weik von Mossner, “Facing,” “Hope,” “Troubling Spaces,” “Vulnerable Lives,” Zemanek, “A Dirty Hero’s Fight”); in young adult climate fiction (Weik von Mossner, “Facing,” “Troubling Spaces,” “The Stuff of Fear”); in poetry (Gerhardt); and in film (Weik von Mossner, “Facing,” “Troubling Spaces,” “Science Fiction,” *Affective Ecologies*). In terms of genre, employment of the category of risk allowed for moving beyond a focus on future catastrophe or disaster. Drawing on Beck’s definition of risk as “the anticipation of catastrophe,” Mayer proposed a distinction between climate risk narratives of anticipation and climate risk narratives of catastrophe, the former referring to climate fiction that explores the complexity and diversity of individual and collective risk experiences worldwide in our present cultural moment (“Explorations,” “Klimawandelroman,” “Risk Narratives,” “World Risk Society,” “Science,” “Literarische Umwelt-Risikonarrative”). While both types of climate risk narrative employ the dystopian mode—thereby corroborating many of the points Eva Horn develops in *Die Zukunft als Katastrophe/The Future as Catastrophe* (2014/2018)—especially the first type does not exclusively rely on this mode of writing. Mayer’s work is in part a result of a research project on the study of contemporary North American environmental and technological risk fiction at the University of Bayreuth, Germany, funded by the German Research Council (2015-2019).

Other types of risk have attracted less scholarly attention, but promise to yield significant further insights, most prominently the nuclear risk, which is not only of high relevance in Wallace’s study, but also in several essays (Thiemann, Weik von Mossner, “The Stuff of Fear”). Another field in which a focus on risk will generate important knowledge is the field of the energy humanities. The inextricable relationship between energy history, cultural history, and literary history becomes manifest also in fictional texts. Oil fiction, for instance, can also be described as risk fiction, since petromodernity requires thinking in terms of risk (cf. Mayer, “Oil Fiction as Risk Fiction”).

The scholarship summarized here has focused on Anglophone and German environmental risk narratives and risk fiction. It would be a highly valuable project to find out whether there is ecocritical risk scholarship in—and focusing on (!)—other languages. A multi-lingual research cooperation would not only complement the work surveyed here, but help to re-position it in a transnational context. Ecocritical risk scholarship provides important contributions to interdisciplinary risk theory and risk research. Showing how environmental risk fiction in particular communicates experiences of uncertainty, instability, and transformation makes the experience of the world risk society concrete and emotionally significant, and it provides essential knowledge that complements the knowledge communicated by the still better-known risk scenarios developed by the social and natural sciences.

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