



# Cinematic Waesthetics: An Investigation of the Aesthetics of Waste in Contemporary Film and Television

PhD. Dissertation by Nicolai Skiveren



AARHUS UNIVERSITY

# CINEMATIC WAESTHETICS: AN INVESTIGATION OF THE AEST- HETICS OF WASTE IN CONTEM- PORARY FILM AND TELEVISION

**This PhD dissertation investigates the depiction of waste in contemporary film and television. By foregrounding the varied aesthetics of waste – what I term ‘waes-thetics’ – the study charts the representation of waste in contemporary cinema and discusses the capacity of such representations to change the way we relate to waste today. The aim of the dissertation is to contribute new knowledge about visual media’s role in shaping our perception of the contemporary ecological crisis.**

## **Why waste?**

Waste matters. It is an unavoidable part of the world we inhabit. Whether it be the food we consume or the societies we build, waste is always involved in some form or another. As human beings, we experience its presence every day. Waste compels feelings of disgust, anger, and guilt. It urges us to get rid of it and keep it out of sight, a duty that is always accompanied by an uncanny reminder that it is sure to return. And yet, dealing with waste mostly seems to us a waste of time. Waste is often seen as epiphenomenal – something inert, dead, and pliable that we as humans can discard without further consequences. When it comes to waste, the ‘out of sight, out of mind’-mentality has usually been the name of the game.

## **The research question**

This dissertation is about the ways in which films can change this attitude to waste. Films can visually recall and remind us of what we discard. Films can make us sensitive to relationships

we were not aware of, and they can retrain our gaze to notice what was previously invisible. By exploring films that engage the subject of waste, the project investigates a number of understudied research questions, including: How do contemporary films represent waste? What can film tell us that numbers and graphs cannot? What role do feelings of powerlessness, anger, and empathy play in relation to our understanding and willingness to act upon global environmental issues?

### **The filmic representation of waste**

Engaging a diverse corpus of films, the dissertation traces the representation of waste across the contemporary media landscape – from science fiction films that present dystopian futures in which Earth has been transformed into a global dump to ecodocumentaries featuring passionate activists, who urge us to change our ways. Studying such films, the project engages with some of our era's most crucial questions: How does the environmental crisis affect different communities differently? Who has the option (and the right to) discard and who is forced to live in (and off) the waste of others? How do we – as human beings – come to terms with living in an era where processes such as anthropogenic climate change and ocean pollution appear increasingly beyond our control?

### **Conclusion**

With the window of opportunity for effective climate action rapidly closing in, the question of how media products can move us to action has never been more relevant. In response to this question, the dissertation presents five case studies that together demonstrate some of the most central narratives that we, as a society, tell ourselves about the crisis we are facing. Here, the dissertation points specifically to the potential of film and other media to make visible phenomena that are either underrepresented or difficult to relate to – whether it be radioactive fallout, poverty, or plastic pollution. Thus, the dissertation argues that film and other media represent an important resource for understanding better the problems of the contemporary ecological crisis and – to a certain extent – moving us to act upon such insights.

## Facts about the empirical basis of the dissertation

- Globally, 2.01 billion tons of solid municipal waste are produced annually. This number is expected to increase to 3.40 billion tons in 2050.
- Only 33% of all waste globally is handled in ways that is environmentally responsible.
- Waste contributes to anthropogenic climate change as well as the pollution of air, water, and soil.
- Waste pollution holds countless negative consequences for human, nonhuman animals, and ecosystems across the world.

## About Nicolai Skiveren

Nicolai Skiveren is a PhD candidate and research assistant at the School of Communication and Culture (Aarhus University). His research explores the representation of environmental issues in film, television, and literature. Skiveren's work has been published in the peer-reviewed journal *Ekphrasis*, and he has several forthcoming publications, including a chapter in an anthology with University of Minnesota Press.



## Time and Place for the defence

Friday, 18 November 2022, at 13:15 CET  
Aarhus University  
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