

## **Eurocentrism, The Anthropocene and Climate Migration in *Aniara***

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This article tracks European responses to the climate crisis and migration by way of an analysis of the 2018 film *Aniara* (Pella Kågerman and Hugo Lilja), itself an adaptation of the eponymous 1956 epic poem on atomic age anxiety by Swedish Nobel Laureate Harry Martinson. *Aniara*, it will be argued, foregrounds an existential struggle – of a kind routinely faced elsewhere by people across the globe – by forcing its protagonists to adapt to a world where being European does not automatically confer advantage, and where the looming spectre of the Anthropocene has eradicated privileges gained from centuries of colonialist expansion. In updating Martinson's response to the nuclear age to cater for a human-created geological epoch, *Aniara* forces us also to re-examine a narrative of modernity and progress spun by the European Union.

### **SF, Nuclear War and the Anthropocene**

In its portrayal of the evacuation of the Earth following nuclear war and its aftermath, Martinson's epic poem forces readers to confront the anxieties of the atomic age. Kågerman and Lilja's adaptation instead responds to a new communicative situation by depicting the evacuation of a planet laid to waste by anthropogenic activity. Both atomic and anthropogenic apocalypses are not only causally linked but also theoretically in that, despite Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the mounting evidence of climate change, they in part require us to imagine an event that has not yet *happened*. Writing in 1984, Jacques Derrida observed that 'unlike the other wars, which have all been preceded by wars of more or less the same type in human memory [...] nuclear war has no precedent [...] the terrifying reality of the nuclear conflict can only be the signified referent, never the real referent (present or past) of a discourse or a text' (Derrida 1984: 23). 'Reality', for Derrida, is 'constructed by the fable, on the basis of an event that has never happened' (23). A question that Derrida raises is whether the nuclear age is 'an irreducibly new phenomenon' or 'the brutal acceleration of a movement that has always already been at work?' (20–1). This intervention requires us to imagine something that has not happened and which is couched in the language of science fiction: Derrida describes 'a myth, an image, a fiction, a utopia, a rhetorical figure, a fantasy, a phantasm' (23). It questions not only how our political present is shaped, but also the myths that sustain both it and the collective understanding of the past. In a similar vein, while evidence of the Anthropocene is painfully clear, the ultimate event (the point of no return) has yet to come to pass. We can imagine it well enough – its traces hide in plain sight – but the lack of absolute finality leaves space still for

multiple potential futures to be explored. Doing so, however, necessitates a ruthless interrogation of historical processes and progress narratives, for if the endpoint is human extinction, then the myths that sustain western societies are patently unfit for purpose. The Anthropocene, in short, demands an urgent and honest re-evaluation of these same myths.

Rebecca Evans has recently argued that efforts to rename the era of climate change and privilege the descriptor Anthropocene purposefully ‘call up novel narratives predicated specifically on the embedding of an estranging novum into a storyworld that diverges significantly from the known world’ (Evans 2018: 485). Anthropocene, Evans argues, becomes nomenclature, narrative and – drawing on Darko Suvin’s conceptualization of cognitive estrangement – novum. To identify the science-fictionality of the Anthropocene is ‘to recognize that the term introduces a novum that differentiates it from our prior sense of the world, integrates that novum into a future-oriented but historically grounded narrative, and uses that narrative to direct a reexamination of modernity’ (485) or, in other words, the myths that sustain western societies. The Anthropocene’s science-fictionality ‘helps us to think not only about possible futures but also about the particular histories that contribute to those futures’ and produces estrangement by ‘positing the hegemonic and imperialist history of western modernity as itself a fabulation (and a dangerous and inaccurate one at that)’ (485). What I want to suggest here is that such a formulation can be applied to the EU and that *Aniara*, with its haunting depiction of the last humans fleeing a ruined Earth, can help emphasize the connection.

### **To Create Europe is to Create Peace ...**

As the birthplace of the Enlightenment, western Europe has been both progenitor and chief beneficiary of modernity. As the world’s pre-eminent colonizer and source of the Industrial Revolution, it has been a major contributor to both climate change and the radical inequality it accelerates. In identifying the material causes of ‘the Great Acceleration’, ecologists Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin emphasize that, without colonialism, industrialization would not have been possible on the same scale, for ‘the agricultural commodities from the vast new lands of the Americas allowed Europe to transcend its ecological limits and sustain economic growth’ (Lewis and Maslin 2015: 177). This in turn paved the way for large-scale industrialization that saw European nations surge ahead of their competitors. Crucially, this leap ‘required access to and exploitation of new lands plus a rich source of easily exploitable energy: coal’, meaning that ‘dating the Anthropocene to start about 150 years before the beginning of the Industrial Revolution is consistent with a contemporary understanding of the likely material causes of the Industrial Revolution’ (177). Globalization has

accelerated such processes and, again, to the overwhelming benefit of western Europe. As the historian Bruno Latour writes, 'we have to learn to live with the consequences of what we have unleashed' (Latour 2018: 43).

The EU is something of a science fiction project itself, for European integration was nominally a utopian endeavour undertaken in direct response to the dystopian horrors of Nazism and the advent of the atomic age. The nightmare of totalitarianism expedited this process, with the Allies' victory serving to undermine 'the foundations of all forms of political legitimation that did not – at least verbally, at least in words – subscribe to the universalist spirit of political enlightenment' (Habermas 2001: 46). In envisioning a new mode of politics, the signatories of the Treaty of Rome in 1957 took a leap into the unknown in search of a brighter collective future. Jean Monnet, the French entrepreneur and founding father of the EEC, famously declared, 'to create Europe is to create peace', a historical reading that appears convincing given the relative peace that has persisted in Europe in the intervening decades, especially after the carnage that preceded it. And yet, Monnet's formulation remains problematic, for crucially it rests upon a partial reading of history that overlooks the colonial undercurrents of the European project that have had major anthropogenic ramifications.

Since European integration coincided with the slow death of colonialism in its traditional forms, it would be easy to equate the two; indeed, the EU has actively encouraged such thinking. Nevertheless, while European integration may have stymied the worst excesses of nationalism, its kindling of Euro collectivism provided oxygen to the dying embers of nation-state colonialism. The EEC's early engagement with Africa is exemplary, as Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson have argued. The EEC, they note, elevated 'colonialism to an international and supranational level' by incorporating from the outset the colonial possessions of its six founding member states (Hansen and Jonsson 2017: 6). And yet Europe remains selective in its remembrance of these events. Hansen and Jonsson point to the 2007 EU Africa Summit, an event that led to the Lisbon Declaration, which called for increased EU-Africa cooperation and joint action. The declaration alluded to a 'vital interdependence' between the EU and Africa, and spoke of 'a determination to work together in the global arena on the key political challenges of our time, such as energy and climate change, migration or gender issues' (1). It also glowingly referred to The Treaty of Rome, describing 1957 'as a watershed or as a "year zero" in postcolonial African and European history', and 2007 as the 'year that we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the European integration and the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the independence of Africa' (1). The difficulty is that the Lisbon Declaration 'created the impression that these processes were quite compatible, even mutually interdependent in

harmonious ways' (1) whereas, in reality, the EEC's founding members were motivated by imperialism and keen to retain their African colonies. The French colonies Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Ivory Coast and Senegal would not gain independence until 1960, while Algeria only became independent in 1962 after seven years of war and hundreds of thousands of deaths. Belgium ruled the Democratic Republic of the Congo until 1960, Somalia also remained under Italian trusteeship until 1960, and the Netherlands controlled New Guinea until 1962. Moreover, Britain joined the EEC in 1973 whilst still a colonial power, as did Portugal thirteen years later.

Accordingly, 'the process of European integration was intimately tied to colonialism' (Hansen and Jonsson 2017: 3), with the EEC's founding members codifying their colonial possessions in the Treaty of Rome. The idea of 'Eurafrica' found support amongst the EEC's founding fathers, such as Monnet, Paul-Henri Spaak, Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer and Guy Mollet; it held that 'European integration would come about only through a coordinated exploitation of Africa, and Africa could be efficiently exploited only if European states combined their economic and political capacities' (2). Eurafrica, then, was tailored to allow for 'consolidation of Europe's control of Africa', while circumventing 'accusations by anti-imperial voices of colonial exploitation and explicit white supremacy' (14). Although it gradually went out of fashion, Eurafrica's centrality to early conceptions of European unity is revealing and demonstrates the inadequacy of framing European colonial legacies within national contexts alone. Today, Eurafrica is largely downplayed as a framing device for European integration, a reality that Hanson and Jonsson attribute to most accounts of EU history being 'informed by a strict adherence to a narrow European Cold War analytical framework' (19). A direct corollary of such selective remembrance is that it lets the EU off the hook for Anthropocenic neo-colonial practices that it perpetuates to this day.

Aline Sierp has recently taken up this theme by conducting a fine-grained analysis of documents from meetings of the European Parliament, the Justice and Home Affairs Council and the European Council to show how the EU has actively sought to sideline memories of imperialism and colonialism. Despite being highly active in using memory as a mechanism within the formation of the public sphere, Sierp observes that the EU has been notably slow to engage with its own colonial history. To date, 'all European efforts for transnational historical remembrance have focused almost exclusively on the Holocaust and National Socialism as well as Stalinism', whereas 'the EU remains curiously quiet about the memories of imperialism and colonialism [ensuring that] humanitarian catastrophes, civil wars and border conflicts, state collapses, terror attacks and environmental and climate catastrophes appear to the European public to have

little to do with this history' (Sierp 2020: 688). In fact, selective silence toward civil rights atrocities committed by European colonial powers appears to be an implicit EU strategy, with the collective eager to downplay such remembrance lest it hinder its ongoing economic interests. Doing so also sidesteps any question of reparations: for instance, enabling Germany to evade culpability for the Namibian Genocide, a designation it only accepted in 2016 and, even then, with significant legal qualifications (Starzmann 2020). Such amnesia is common on a national level: witness France passing a law in 2005 that attempted to make it mandatory for high school teachers to account for the positive aspects of colonialism in their teaching (Sierp 2020: 692); or Michael Gove's attempts to eradicate 'postcolonial guilt' from British history curricula.

However, the EU too is not without blame and, as evidence, Sierp points to the final document of the 2014 EU-Africa summit, wherein the Council of the European Union asserted that 'the conflicts between African countries are for the most part overcome and that the abuse and cruelty of European colonialism is of course not forgotten, but put to one side in order to leave room for new forms of cooperation' (691). Such cooperation is seldom undertaken on an equal footing, however (see Rodney 1972), which again has clear Anthropocenic consequences. The EU continues to exploit the native resources of the Global South through resource extraction and unequal bilateral trade agreements that contribute deleteriously to climate change trends which disproportionately affect these same nations, while admitting as few of their inhabitants as is politically acceptable. In this vein, the EU's strong record on climate change must be seen in the context of its exportation of pollution to the very lands that it once colonized (see, for example, Cole 2017; Katz 2019; Tidey 2019). Such selective amnesia is nothing new, given that key dates in the European collective imaginary are indelibly marred by colonial atrocities, most notoriously 8 May 1945, when French forces marked VE Day by beginning the slaughter of thousands of Algerians on the streets of Sétif and Guelma (Benatouil 2020). What remains a shadow history in European terms is seared indelibly into the Algerian national consciousness; it is poignantly telling that a high-point in European co-operation (nations coming together to defeat Hitler) coincided with a gruesome demonstration of European cruelty in North Africa. We should not lose sight of these facts no matter how often we hear Monnet's aphorism, nor should we be blindsided by the EU being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012, at a time when its relentless pursuance of austerity was having devastating impacts on its own citizenry. If the EU is unable to come to terms with its colonial past, it is difficult to see how it can fully admit the unsustainability of actions that assail its present and will come to define its future. *Aniara* makes this lesson clear.

## **Aniara and the Language of Nuclear Despair**

The publication/release dates of Martinson's poem and Kågerman and Lilja's film are in many ways opportune, the former being released in 1956, a year before the signing of the Treaty of Rome, and the latter in 2018, when Brexit negotiations reached a crescendo and Eurosceptic parties were in power elsewhere within the EU. A relatively rare example of European space-based sf cinema, *Aniara* makes explicit Evans's thesis by foregrounding an existential crisis that stems from the unsustainability of selective remembrances of the past. *Aniara*, in short, shatters European exceptionalism by presenting a future that requires us to rethink the past that got us there. As such, it is faithful to the spirit of its source text that reads above all as a plea for humankind to change course. In the words of the 1974 Nobel commission that awarded both Martinson and his fellow Swede Eyvind Johnson, both texts speak directly to 'our fears and our questions as to where we are heading' (The Nobel Prize).

The poem trades in the language of nuclear despair and describes the catastrophic fate that befalls a group of European refugees who flee a scorched Earth in search of a new life on Mars. Composed of 103 cantos, *Aniara* opens with a description of the evacuation of the Earth, the unnamed narrator describing spacecraft 'sluicing refugees to lift-off zones / for urgent excursions to the tundrasphere' (Canto 1, lines 7–8). The ship that carries the passengers (the eponymous *Aniara*) goes disastrously and permanently off course after it nearly strikes a meteor called *Hondo* (tellingly the traditional name for *Honshū*, the largest Japanese island, upon which Hiroshima is situated). Shorn of its purpose, the *Aniara* drifts aimlessly for years, despite increasingly desperate attempts to steer it back on course. Amongst the 8000 passengers is our narrator, who is employed as a Mimarobe (MR) or operator of the ship's 'Mima', a HAL-like super-computer that soothes passengers with bucolic images of the Earth before it succumbed to nuclear devastation. Unlike HAL, however, the Mima seems entirely benevolent, MR describing it as 'a patient seeker, lucid and plain-dealing, / a filter of truth, with no stains of her own' (Canto 9, lines 24–5). Unsurprisingly, the Mima is a hugely popular attraction for the stranded passengers and becomes a surrogate deity of sorts:

And while we voyage on toward certain death  
in spaces without land and without coasts,  
the mima gains the power to soothe all souls  
and settle them to quiet and composure  
before the final hour that man must always  
meet at last, wherever it be lodged. (Canto 6, lines 51–6)

Perhaps just as unsurprisingly, the same passengers find a way to destroy it. Already suffering from the effects of chronic overuse, in Canto 26, the Mima relays images

of the final destruction of the Earth, an event that traumatizes it beyond repair. Unlike the passengers, who are doomed to wait out their lives floating listlessly in space, the Mima expires within seven days, MR making clear who is to blame:

There is protection from near everything,  
from fire and damages by storm and frost,  
oh, add whichever blows may come to mind.  
But there is no protection from mankind. (Canto 26, lines 40–3)

Martinson's descriptions of the Mima call to mind the origins of atomic warfare and the Manhattan Project, imagining it as something both created by humans and ultimately beyond their control. Tellingly, he links its final moments to a nuclear explosion, when the Mima broadcasts a message from someone called the Detonee who bears witness to its 'detonation':

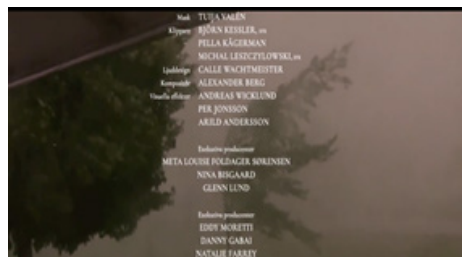
Upon life's outcry time does increase speed,  
prolongs the very second when you burst.  
How terror blasts inward,  
how horror blasts outward.  
How grim it always is, one's detonation. (Canto 29, lines 19–23)

Although the nuclear threat that Derrida describes as being without precedent has been supplanted by the Anthropocene (which, like sf, recalibrates our prior sense of the world), the efficacy of Martinson's vision is borne out by its continued – even heightened – relevance to the present day, as demonstrated by the 2018 film adaptation.

## Deckchairs on the Titanic

Kägerman and Lilja's *Aniara* begins with a montage of extreme weather playing out over the opening credits, images that include flooding, tornadoes snapping wind turbines, dust clouds and wildfires.

Ominous music plays as we cut to a shot of people being evacuated from the Earth's surface to the Aniara. Whereas Martinson's MR is male, here we follow



Emelie Garbers in the role as she stares impassively at the destroyed planet below, before passing through customs and boarding the *Aniara*. Prominent in the background is an advertisement for a bank (slogan: 'we love Mars'), while a close-up of a deck plan reveals that the ship houses a food court, shopping malls, bowling alleys, champagne bar and spa. These early establishing shots foreground a sense of luxury that jars with the images of devastating ecological crisis that preceded them and establish a theme of business as usual. Like the humans in Pixar's *Wall-E* (2008), passengers can gorge themselves stupid as they hurtle across the galaxy and perhaps encounter the ship's mascot, a suitably nondescript giant corporate bird with a maniacal grin frozen across its lifeless face. In sum, the ship is a mausoleum to a capitalist system that has left one world in ruins and is now turning toward another.



It may be more precise to refer to it as a sarcophagus, a word repeated by Martinson throughout the poem. The quotation, 'In our immense sarcophagus we lay / as on into the empty seas we passed' (Canto 103, lines 9–10), was featured prominently in the film's promotion. The connection was made explicit during a 'sarcophagus screening' of *Aniara* at the Gothenburg Film Festival, when eight lucky volunteers were shut into custom-made caskets outfitted with screens, speakers and air vents; an event that festival director Jonas Holmberg suggested was meant to 'enhance the bleak themes of the movie's late-era capitalism dystopian setting' (Schonter 2019). On-screen, seemingly every effort is made to act as though capitalism did not in fact destroy the world: the end may have already happened, but the *Aniara*'s passengers seem hell-bent on replicating the capitalist models that precipitated the apocalypse. Like actors rehearsing for a cancelled play, they pass the time happily consuming, before disaster strikes and the ship is thrown off course. They largely ignore the Mima up to this point, but when anxiety, uncertainty and eventually despair set in, it soon becomes a major attraction. As with previous resources, however, the passengers soon exhaust the Mima – which, the film makes clear, gathers its images from the collective consciousness of its users. The discrepancy between



the idyllic nature scenes that the Mima projects (as MR explains: 'she transports us back to Earth as it once was') and its increased cognisance of reality causes a sensory overload that short-circuits the system. A new-found awareness of the Anthropocene changes its understanding of everything that went before, consistent with Evans's assertion that the Anthropocene upends any sense of normality that we ascribe to our world. Unlike the docile passengers, the Mima is unwilling to keep returning to old images, to failed ways of shaping existence. The absurdity of doing so is implied throughout, yet the impact of *Aniara*'s familiar critique is enhanced by the directors' singular aesthetic choices.

Despite the sf premise, *Aniara* works hard to maintain an odd sense of realism, indeed a level of aesthetic verisimilitude is hardwired into the film's formal mechanics. Sophie Winqvist, the cinematographer, privileges tight framing throughout, creating a documentary feel accentuated by shaky hand-held cameras. Additionally, *Aniara*'s set designers use real-life conference centres and shopping malls to create a visually humdrum 'no-set sci-fi', in keeping with the directors' aim to 'have a very different aesthetic than the poem but be true to its spirit' ('Concept Design and Research').



While such aesthetic choices were no doubt influenced by budgetary restraints (this is after all an independent art-house production), they service Kågerman and Lilja's desire 'to make a film that felt ordinary – mundane, even' ('Concept Design and Research'). Except for intermittent exterior shots of the spacecraft, the film could just as easily be set on a cruise-ship, and to this end it shouldn't surprise us that the directors wished to recreate the feel of cruise-ships that traverse the Baltic Sea between Sweden and Finland. The effect is purposefully jarring and, as viewers, we are left wondering: Why is space so dull? How can people remain so calm? How can they possibly care about shopping when the Earth has literally been destroyed?! The film's formal strategies underscore that we are all on *Aniara* and can only distract ourselves for so long before the devastating reality becomes plain. Shot through with neologisms and heavy on often arcane description, Martinson's work doesn't

readily lend itself to adaptation, even if such a process were desirable. By instead rendering it mundane, Kågerman and Lilja familiarize the unfamiliar in keeping with Evans's contestation that climate change 'depicts the strangeness of the stories that modernity has told (about) itself, estranging us from where we thought we lived by announcing our actual location in an unfamiliar world – "the Anthropocene"' (Evans 2018: 485). Aesthetics, however, form only part of the equation and to delve deeper into the film's substitution of Anthropocenic concerns for nuclear ones, we need to examine its adherence to and departures from Martinson's text. Doing so can grant a fuller understanding of the film's relevance to the EU, progress narratives and selective historical remembrance.

### **Twin Crises: A Very European Disaster**

Just as its aesthetics encourage familiarity, *Aniara*'s underlying political critique owes much to the contemporary political contexts from which it emerged. Kågerman and Lilja started writing the screenplay in 2014, as the EU struggled to cope with twin financial and migration crises, both of which were keenly felt in their native Sweden and have echoes in their adaptation of *Aniara* (Crouch 2015). In moving from a telling to a showing mode, the film necessitates a shift from first-person narrator to a third-person perspective. An offshoot of this change is that a loss of sustained interiority is compensated for with a closer look at some key characters such as Isagel (Bianca Cruzeiro), one of the ship's pilots and MR's lover, and Chefone (Arvin Kananian), the ship's captain.

In a minor but significant departure from Martinson's poem, the *Aniara* is knocked off-course by space debris as opposed to a meteor, a reminder of Anthropocentric activity that shifts the cause of the crisis from cosmic intervention to human recklessness. Chefone, a more measured character than his monstrous if peripheral counterpart in Martinson's poem, reacts by ordering his crew to dump the ship's nuclear fuel, a move that staves off meltdown but ensures that the vessel can no longer be steered. The captain, whom Kågerman and Lilja reimagine as a facsimile of every bland technocratic leader, addresses the crisis at a public meeting, steadily asserting that passengers should remain calm even though they have been 'knocked off-course and cannot turn back'. Much to his audience's consternation, he states that the planned three-week journey will now take 'no longer than two years', and assures them that they 'will of course be compensated upon arrival'. In measured tones, he gaslights his audience by adding that things are going well generally, before stressing the need for compliance and co-operation. These sentiments echo the EU's handling of the Eurozone crisis that began in 2010, and it is here that the relevance of *Aniara* within the new communicative situation of twenty-first-century Europe becomes clear. A floating cathedral of consumption where

'capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable' (Fisher 2009: 12), the *Aniara* was doing fine so long as there were further worlds to conquer. Cut adrift in outer space and untethered from its material resources, it is plunged into existential crisis: where now and to what end?

As the conversation shifts toward resource management, Chefone stresses the need to place trust in the system and to practice collective sacrifice. Austerity, in other words. Furthermore, the timeframe for redemption keeps shifting as the reverberations from the initial shock echo through the craft in perpetuity. The instability of the system means that crisis will be the new normal and passengers' lives will be placed in suspended animation, not unlike the lost generation of European citizens who endured EU-imposed austerity as unregulated markets spiralled out of control. Chefone evokes George Papandreou, Mario Monti, Enda Kenny, Mariano Rajoy or Carlos Coelho as he insists that with collective sacrifice a recovery is imminent. Kågerman and Lilja, however, elect to maintain a formal distance from him, a strategy that emphasizes the hollowness of his pronouncements. Tellingly, they cut directly from his plea for calm at the public meeting to a shot of MR cradling a screaming woman, the first of many that will flock to the *Mima*. They turn to parody in the very next scene, when a receptionist blithely informs a crowd of irate passengers that, although she has no updates on their predicament, she can offer them a complimentary snack courtesy of management: a gesture that shows how out of touch Chefone is and one that reiterates his inability to think beyond the transactional.

As the hugely divisive arguments over the structuring of financial support for member nations dealing with COVID-19 make clear, the EU remains in a continuing cycle of economic crisis. Its persistent inability to provide a cohesive response to migration meanwhile – one highlighted by the humanitarian crisis of 2015 – is similarly destined to continue in perpetuity. That year, in marked distinction from other EU leaders, Angela Merkel opened Germany's borders to a million plus refugees fleeing conflict in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. In all probability, as water becomes scarcer and droughts and famines increasingly common, the figure of the climate refugee will dominate European discourses and make such numbers appear miniscule. Here the intersection between migration and climate crises becomes explicit and brings the Anthropocene into view. Such migration crises will increase exponentially so long as the EU exploits the global south and then absolves itself of responsibility. Again, *Aniara* is relevant here, for it decentres Europe and denudes it of its privileges by depicting Europeans being forced to flee a devastated homeland. Martinson writes of demoralized 'processed emigrants' awaiting departure (Canto 1, line 38), and recounts how 'all these emigrants / are realizing that what once had been / has been and gone' (Canto 6, lines 47–9) and how 'many emigrants were

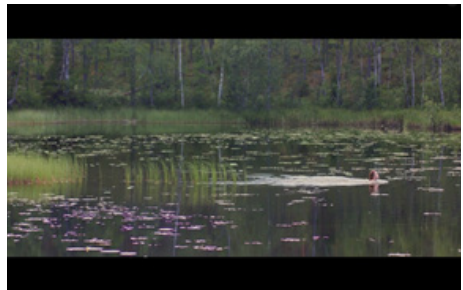
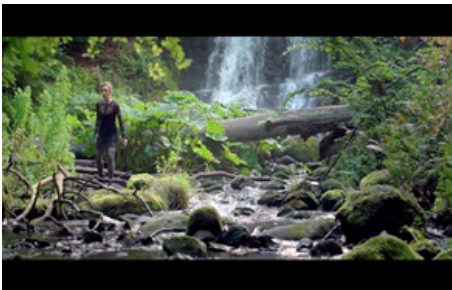
stomped to bits' (Canto 29, line 11) following the Mima's implosion. Equally, his descriptions of refugees fleeing the Earth in terror take on new relevance for contemporary audiences, since 'stories also evolve by adaptation and are not immutable over time'; they 'adapt just as they are adapted' (Hutcheon 2006: 31). While Kågerman and Lilja have (plausibly) cited financial restraints as the reason that *Aniara* had never previously been adapted to film, it remains true that its central premise appears more relevant now than at any time since the height of the nuclear arms race. Considering, for example, the many tragedies that have befallen migrants attempting to reach Europe by crossing the Mediterranean, the potent symbolism of a ship full of refugees languishing hopelessly between land masses should be clear. In its abject failure, moreover, the fate of the *Aniara* provides a stern corrective to a long-standing tendency in sf to equate space exploration with European civilizing missions. As Peter Fitting writes, the moment of first contact is 'familiar to us from anthropological investigation and historical accounts; one which, consciously or not, re-enacts the encounters of the European "discovery" of the New World' (Fitting 2000: 127).

Instead, the usual right-wing European anxieties about migration and scarcity are present in *Aniara*, but subverted, with the film inviting Europeans to imagine what would happen if they were forced to flee. Adrift in space with no discernible exterior to define itself against, the *Aniara* figuratively and literally evokes a singular problem that Mark Fisher identifies with neoliberalism, namely, that after 'having all-too successfully incorporated externality, how can it function without an outside it can colonize and appropriate?' (Fisher 2009: 12). By the tenth anniversary of the ship's departure, the bulk of the crew's passengers have died. During a speech to mark the occasion, the by now autocratic Chefone compares the *Aniara*'s journey to the discovery of the ancient cities of Punt and Tyre, to Viking voyages to North America, and Vasco da Gama's discovery of a sea route to Asia, neatly recalling European colonization of the Middle East, Africa, North America and Asia in the process. In the hollow, pitiable ceremony that follows, he presents MR with a medal but, as he speaks, we see from her perspective his bandaged wrists, which have been recently slit. MR wordlessly accepts the medal and returns to her room, before the camera cuts to static shots of dirty water dripping in a tap and an emptying bag of algae dripping on the floor, images that serve the narrative purpose of suggesting that their time is almost up while emphasizing how estranged nature has now become.

### **The Mima, Progress and Selective Remembrance**

As early as Year 3, it is obvious that there will be no salvation for the *Aniara*. When MR broaches her concerns, Chefone assures her that he will 'go public with the situation' once passengers get accustomed to eating algae, an early indicator

that resources are becoming scarce. Bland intercom announcements promising shoppers extra credit for working in the ship's algae and water purification plants soon follow. Despite Chefone's continual reassurances that the *Aniara* will get back on course, MR's roommate, an astronomer (Anneli Martini), rubbishes the notion. In a scene that draws directly from Canto 13 of Martinson's poem, the astronomer tells MR that 'it's all so peripheral, what we are doing. It's so futile, so meaningless'. To illustrate her point, she draws an analogy between a bubble in a glass and the vastness of space, telling MR: 'The bubble moves through the glass infinitely slowly. We move forward in the same way. Even if we drift at an incredible speed, it's as if we were standing perfectly still. That's us: a little bubble in the glass of Godhead'. The reality check overwhelms MR and she rushes to the Mima to gain some respite, but it is here that the first cracks in the system appear. Her initially pleasant VR experience of swimming in a rural lake is shattered when the birds she spots flying overhead disintegrate in mid-air and fall into the water.



MR's distress is heightened by the scene's knowing debt to John Everett Millais's 1852 portrait of William Shakespeare's Ophelia, moments before her death. In *Ophelia*, Millais afforded minute attention to the natural world. In keeping with John Ruskin's maxim that artists should 'go to nature in all singleness of heart' (Ruskin 1843: 416), Millais painted on location, granting the landscape equal importance to his human subject. Partially submerged beside a riverbank at once verdant and decaying, Ophelia has purple flowers around her neck and is in the process of being reclaimed by nature. Reading Ophelia's body as worm food, Randall Martin argues that re-imagining 'Millais's continually adapted image of Ophelia as riparian detritus represents the kind of dark ecological turn [...] necessary for environmentalism to move beyond Romantic aesthetics of nature' (Martin 2015: 152). Such a reading accentuates the interdependence of humankind and nature during a period when the Industrial Revolution had simultaneously reinforced Europe's global dominance and accelerated the onset of the Anthropocene. By moving beyond the awe of

the Romantic sublime, Millais's painting illustrates the 'natural world's seeming "indifference" to our feelings as bereaved creatures of memory' and instead 'invites us to relativize our proper grief within a metabiotic perspective' (152).



The images of nature projected by the Mima are similarly varied: dead leaves crunch underfoot as MR makes her way through lush green trees to the water, where purple flowers float in the foreground as she enters. However, the effect cannot be sustained and the Mima, growing ever more cognisant of the discrepancy between image and reality, crashes under the weight of the deceit. Overburdened by knowledge of Earth's obliteration and the severance of humankind from nature, the Mima presents images of fire before self-destructing, a turn of events for which MR is unfairly blamed and imprisoned. Crucially, the Mima's self-destruction comes about after it is no longer able to sustain a narrative of progress. In other words, the lies that the passengers tell themselves about their history are no longer sustainable. Shakespeare's description of Ophelia seeking comfort in familiar songs and being somehow unaware of or indifferent toward her impending death seems especially apt:

Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,  
As one incapable of her own distress,  
Or like a creature native and indued  
Unto that element; but long it could not be  
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,  
Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay  
To muddy death. (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, IV.7: lines 177–83)

Death soon follows in *Aniara* too. Cults form and suicide rates soar, and although there are moments of relief such as MR's brief time with her son, the film ends in bittersweet fashion. Following the shots of the dripping tap and algae, the film cuts to a brief depiction of Year 24, wherein an aged MR and a handful of fellow survivors sit amidst the ruins of the *Aniara*, and then to Year 5,981,407, where the *Aniara* passes a luminescent star, presumably Vega, one of the brightest in the

night sky. On closer inspection, the star reveals itself in bright greens and blues, resembling a planet much like Earth. There are no humans present, yet the music that closes the scene out and spans the end credits is surprisingly upbeat.

During interviews, Kågerman and Lilja spoke of consciously making the ending more optimistic than Martinson's poem, which concludes with a description of corpses circled round the dead deity Mima. The image of the verdant new planet suggests that another world is possible, that other models can be found. Crucially, it is only when the Mima relays the true causes of the Anthropocene (causes that jar with selective remembrance) that the system fragments. Similarly, despite the EU's self-congratulatory narratives, a reckoning is due, one that necessitates unpacking the Enlightenment values and eurocentric assumptions that underpin its very mission. Today that mission reveals itself through a pursuance of simultaneous expansion and exclusion that doubles down on 'Fortress Europe', and extends colonial-era economic imbalances hidden in plain sight within the Treaty of Rome. This in turn accelerates material consequences that are no longer sustainable. The spectre of the Anthropocene, which posits the 'hegemonic and imperialist history of western modernity is itself a fabulation' (Evans 2018: 485), necessitates an urgent need for a new model. Such a reckoning, *Aniara* suggests, is long overdue.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>While European sf cinema has enjoyed a considerable resurgence since the turn of the century, space-based European sf is something of a niche market. Exceptions include the Finnish sf spoof *Iron Sky* (2012), the Irish/British co-production *The Last Days on Mars* (2013) and Claire Denis's *High Life* (2018). A further, rather curious example is the short film *Ambition* (2014), which stars Aiden Gillen and was part-funded by the European Space Agency.

<sup>2</sup> Millais's painting was also referenced in the prologue to another Scandinavian sf film, Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011), which juxtaposes the garish opulence of a bourgeois Swedish wedding feast with the literal end of the world.

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