

'You're ignoring the truth' – Fatih Akin's *Polluting Paradise* (2012) and *Eco-Trauma Cinema*

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The paper provides an analysis of the documentary *Polluting Paradise* (2012) by Fatih Akin within the context of eco-trauma cinema. The movie depicts ecological contamination as a social problem and mutual catastrophe, exactly as the theory of eco-trauma cinema suggests. Through a careful observational mode of filmmaking that characterize *Polluting Paradise*, the mechanisms that are responsible for environmental pollution are being scrutinized. The author argues that the movie combines documentary techniques with melodramatic structures for the sake of the audience's emotional involvement. The article concludes with a reflection on the cinematic rhetoric used by Akin to affect the viewers.

KEYWORDS: Fatih Akin, nature in motion pictures, ecology in motion pictures, environmental protection and motion pictures

Fatih Akin's documentary *Polluting Paradise* (*Der Müll im Garten Eden*, 2012) was shot between 2007 and 2012 in the village of Çamburnu on Turkey's Black Sea coast. The film chronicles the process of building a huge garbage dump and its operation from 2007 in the place where, according to law, it should have never been established. Dreadful decisions made by the officials finally led to ecological disaster and resulted in the emigration of young people from the village.

The movie can be described as an eco-trauma film that employs different (human and non-human) perspectives to visualise and rethink the problem of waste pollution. Eco-trauma cinema is a term examined by Anil Narine, who suggests that we should treat ecological harm as a trauma.^[1] According to the author, it means not only that we can describe this kind of trauma as a society-wide, collective experience, but also that it can be mediated and addressed on screen. In *Polluting Paradise* one of the villagers of Çamburnu who protests against the landfill after it overflows calls the contamination of groundwater an eco-crime. In the essay, I argue that Fatih Akin's documentary employs a variety of narrative techniques (not only essentially documentary devices, but also melodramatic structures) to convey a critical stance

[1] A. Narine, *Introduction. Eco-Trauma Cinema*, [in:] *Eco-Trauma Cinema*, ed. A. Narine, New York – London 2015, p. 2.

towards the traumatizing environmental crisis. He depicts ecological contamination as a social problem and mutual catastrophe, exactly as the theory of eco-trauma cinema suggests. On the one hand, through the careful observational mode of filmmaking that characterize *Polluting Paradise*, the mechanisms that are responsible for environmental pollution are scrutinized. But, on the other hand, the movie does not cease to be highly persuasive; it starkly affects the audience with the images of desolation and self-fulfilling apocalypse. However, as I attempt to demonstrate, the importance and meanings of *Polluting Paradise* extend well beyond the title of the film itself. Quite surprisingly, this movie has not yet been explored in depth in any previous analyses of Fatih Akin's *oeuvre*.

Eco-trauma and eco-crime

Anil Narine offers an instructive and interesting glimpse into the issue of eco-trauma in cinema, which he describes as follows:

Eco-trauma cinema takes three general forms: (1) accounts of people who are traumatized by the natural world, (2) narratives that represent people or social processes which traumatize the environment or its species, and (3) stories that depict the aftermath of ecological catastrophe, often focusing on human trauma and survival endeavours without necessarily dramatizing the initial "event."^[2]

Although the movie was shot from 2007 onwards, when the first protests against the landfill were registered, the dominant narrative of the film is a forthcoming ("to-be traumatic") catastrophe. Fatih Akin employs an observational mode of filmmaking without any voice-over narration (neither verbal nor written) to present the devastating effects of the Çamburnu landfill site. At first, the garbage dump produces an unpleasant, overwhelming odour that provokes protests from the village's population. Then a tear in the landfill geomembrane occurs and lets effluent seep into the ground. Soon, heavy rainfall leads to the dump overflowing, and consequently, waste runs down the hill. As another scholar, E. Ann Kaplan, puts it:

Humanists have had trouble defining collective trauma. From a Freudian and specifically clinical point of view, trauma can only be known by its belated return in symptoms such as nightmares, phobias, hallucinations, panic attacks. No event, then, is inherently traumatic; it only becomes so in its later symptomatic return.^[3]

However, both Kaplan and Narine agree that trauma is a valid term in the context of depicting ecological crisis or environmental devastation. What is more, the former author claims that even future catastrophic events could be traumatic for the audience (for example, in the science fiction genre) and hence she introduces the term *pretraumatic cinema* to address that kind of scenario of global

[2] Ibidem.

[3] E.A. Kaplan, *Climate Trauma. Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction*, New Brunswick – New Jersey – London 2016, p. 24.

catastrophes.[4] Therefore, the effluent, the rubbish and the odours that are produced in a garbage dump, as seen in *Polluting Paradise*, can be perceived as symptoms of ongoing ecological contamination which is visible only to some degree. The pollution is absorbed by the Black Sea, but it does not disappear. What really disappears is the exceptionally beautiful Çamburnu coast and that is why an eco-crime is also a crime against beauty.



Il. 1. Stream pollution

According to Narine, ecological harm can be viewed as traumatic not only because of its maleficent effects but also due to the psychological defence mechanisms that it triggers. He asserts that:

[...] it is also undeniable that we disavow our knowledge of climate change and dwindling natural resources in order to function more happily in a global economic context replete with unsustainable practices. [...] we treat ecological harm as a trauma: something acknowledgeable that we work to repress in order to avoid its painful effects.[5]

As a result, there are three possible responses to eco-trauma, which include: the will to combat the traumatic threat (which often proves to be impossible due to its overwhelming magnitude), denial (escape from uncomfortable reality, also in an active way), and giving (or making) productive meaning to/from that trauma.[6] The last impulse is especially problematic, since it can refer not to the actual processes that cause particular damage but rather to any worldview (understood here as a narrative structure designed to impart and control meanings) or stance on nature and its relation to humans. On the other hand, the attempts to make sense of environmental changes and harm are, of course, understandable, as they provide a strategy for coping with these phenomena.

All the events presented in the documentary provoke strong but helpless reactions from the villagers, which are carefully conveyed by the director's cameramen without getting involved in any confrontations. Nevertheless, it is indisputable for the viewers that the landfill has a negative effect on the local community and, of course, on the natural environment of Çamburnu, even if the officials and engineers who are responsible for establishing and constructing the landfill claim otherwise. The people living in the area organize spontaneous protests as they try to stop the dump from operating, but local officials do not deem the ecological harm to be sufficient enough to close the landfill.

[4] Kaplan further explains the temporal dimension of trauma as follows: "This aspect of trauma is demonstrated well by Freud also. In a sense, trauma is for our internal life what catastrophe is externally. Trauma haunts us because of its connection with death, and this link led Freud in 1920 to conceptualize

a death drive, related to pretrauma phenomena. The drive shows the subject's future orientation, a looking toward a future death that is partially, if unconsciously, desired." E.A. Kaplan, op.cit., p. 6.

[5] A. Narine, op.cit., p. 2.

[6] Ibidem, p. 5.



Il. 2. Collapsed effluent tank

ecological disaster affects everyday life in Çamburnu and local agriculture. Apart from the stench already mentioned, the villagers suffer from excrement left behind by animals (as the number of birds, dogs and other species that come to the dump increased enormously), and also pollution of the nearby stream. One of the women living in the village, Nezihan Haşlaman, complains that there are 500 dogs in the area, as well as many wild boars. What is more, tea plantations are being soiled by animal manure and, hence, the crops are poor or even worthless. On the whole, Akın's documentary depicts how fragile the ecosystem is when confronted with irresponsible decisions made by infamous government officers. One may say that among the aftermath of one ecological catastrophe is probably another. In his study, Anil Narine contends that:

Eco-trauma cinema represents the harm we, as humans, inflict upon our natural surroundings, or the injuries we sustain from nature in its unforgiving iterations. The term encompasses both circumstances because these seemingly distinct instances of ecological harm are often related and even symbiotic: The traumas we perpetuate in an ecosystem through pollution and unsustainable resource management inevitably return to harm us.[7]

Disastrous Politics

Anil Narine further explains that: "In fact, it is the nature of people, too often capable of devastating the natural environment and other living things, that comes most sharply into focus when disastrous events unfold." [8] Unfortunately, this is also the case with the Çamburnu garbage dump. As much as the movie is concerned with ecological harm, it is also intended to grasp the political mechanisms that lead to such a disaster. Although *Polluting Paradise* seems to be restrained in its verdict, documentary interviews with people responsible for the landfill in fact discredit them. Their behaviour becomes proof of the dump's harmfulness and indirectly indicates their own guilt for triggering the contamination process.

However, a central role in the attempts to stop the landfill from functioning is ascribed to the local mayor. Ever since the provincial government decided to establish a landfill at a former copper mine, the mayor boldly opposed the project. As he convincingly explains in

[7] Ibidem, p. 9.

[8] Ibidem, p. 12.

front of the camera in his office, the landfill should have never been built on this site, due to legal regulations. But when the mayor refused to sign a required consent form, it was obtained in court. Thus, the mayor can be seen as a figure of environmental justice activism, as described by Cory Shaman.[9] Using Steven Soderbergh's *Erin Brockovich* (2000) and Slawomir Grünberg's *Fenceline: A Company Town Divided* (2002) as examples, the author examines how the issues of evidence and testimony are increasingly relevant to make ecological change and to bring damaged environments into focus despite depraved corporate politics.[10] But, in contrast to the aforementioned feature and documentary films analysed by Shaman, the mayor of Çamburnu opposes higher rank institutional authorities, and ultimately loses in an unequal fight. The footage from the court hearing actually portrays him as an innocent victim of the unlawful system.

Does it mean that Fatih Akin's documentary is biased in favouring only one particular perspective, namely that of Çamburnu residents? The director self-consciously and without any commentary alternates between the two opposing sites to portray how the people responsible for the landfill explain the environmental costs of its (poor) functioning. Yet, in spite of the director's restrained mode of filmmaking, they discredit themselves as reliable professionals through their opinions and body language. The unnamed engineers and officers either avoid answering the questions (even those asked by children) or claim that the failures of the dump are the result of heavy rainfall. In their opinion, the landfill was designed and managed properly and only external conditions cause temporary environmental pollution. One of the engineers accuses a local photographer who documents the overflowing of a black effluent to the ground, saying: "You're ignoring the truth"! For him, the truth is that the rain is to blame for the pollution. Yet apparently the man unwittingly acknowledges that it is the wrong answer, as he has objections to being filmed. Another engineer avoids looking into the camera when he gives an explanation for the crashes at the landfill. Consequently, to the viewer, there is really no doubt about who is telling and who is ignoring the truth.

What is more, such statements made by the executives of the landfill are in line with a diagnosis given by Cory Shaman, who claims that "in order to complete the logic of environmental justice advocacy, local experience must yield material evidence of environmental damage that correlates with human illness." [11] Otherwise, representatives of power – corporate or state – will maintain that a particular industrial complex

[9] C. Shaman, *Testimonial Structures in Environmental Justice Films*, [in:] *Framing the World. Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film*, ed. P. Willoquet-Maricondi, Charlottesville – London 2010, pp. 83–100.

[10] Cory Shaman notes that: "Both films are cautionary in their exploration of such visibility in the multiple and contradictory forces involved in develo-

ping authoritative knowledge, mobilizing EJ [environmental justice – A.D.] actors toward political action, and effectively communicating to those who hold the power to make substantive change – what I am calling testimonial structures of the EJ movement." C. Shaman, *op.cit.*, p. 84.

[11] *Ibidem*, p. 95.



Il. 3. Garbage collection continues after the contamination of ground water

see that after a blockade of the access road to the dump, which caused a tense confrontation between the protesters and landfill personnel, the garbage collection continues. All the cynical and (unconsciously) self-accusatory officials that appear in the documentary use that kind of argument, which form a sort of fuzzy logic, as described by Shaman.

causes harm neither to people nor to the environment. This attitude is, of course, mean and cynical, but it should come as no surprise, given that it is an effective mechanism to avoid liability. Shaman notes that: "Such a deadlock is precisely the strategy of the industry to pit competing claims against each other in order to produce reasonable doubt regarding industry-related illness and environmental degradation." [12] Similarly, in *Polluting Paradise* we can

Compounded Modes of Narration

In the last part of the article, I want to focus on the narrative and audiovisual aesthetics of Fatih Akin's documentary. I argue that, somewhat paradoxically, the movie combines documentary techniques with melodramatic structures for the sake of the audience's emotional involvement. Narrative tropes used in Akin's documentary bring to mind Linda Williams' comments on melodrama:

[...] melodrama is structured upon the "dual recognition" of how things are and how they should be. In melodrama there is a moral, wish-fulfilling impulse towards the achievement of justice that [...] appeal as the powerless yet virtuous seek to return to the "innocence" of their origins.[13]

Since, in Williams' terms, "what counts in melodrama is the feeling of righteousness, achieved through the sufferings of the innocent," [14] Akin's movie corresponds to this paradigm. Notably, not only the mayor is an innocent victim of obvious injustice, but also many other people of Çamburnu have come to harm due to the running of the landfill, which is too close to the residential areas. Also, the narration in the last part of the film is centred on people's lost connection to the land. Regardless of their reaction to the ongoing crisis, they all seem to be traumatized. The best example of that fact is the man who is glad to have lost his smell; moreover, he considers it a reward from God for a good life. However, he contends that he still loves his birthplace and could not possibly live elsewhere. Such problems do not disturb young people, who just want to leave Çamburnu at the first opportunity. Finally, as is typical for Fatih Akin's cinema, significant meanings and emotions are expressed by the music score. Here the emotions of grief and desolation are underscored by a mournful song performed by the male villagers of Çamburnu. In addition to this, there are also

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 94.

[13] L. Williams, *Melodrama Revised*, [in:] *Refiguring American Film Genres. History and Theory*,

ed. N. Browne, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 1998, p. 48.

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 62.

two scenes of musical performance: one by a female singer, Şevval Sam, and the second by the Turkish rock band maNga. But it is the lyrics of a protest folk song that most fully epitomises the message of Fatih Akin's eco-trauma documentary:

*The heads of our government led us a merry dance
But they didn't reckon with us
Çamburnu is a lovely place and we come from there,
Those dishonourable men have buried us under a mountain of rubbish*

*Our heads of government sat around the table and decided
Those empty-headed numbskulls sat around the table and decided
They didn't give a damn about our lovely clean water
Çamburnu is a lovely place and we come from there*

As is clearly visible, this is the song of grief ("they didn't reckon with us") and anger ("those dishonourable men," "those empty-headed numbskulls"). A lot of aforementioned scenes in Akin's documentary lead up to such an emotional response from the audience. These scenes are particularly imbued with melodramatic tropes and feelings, but they are combined with less expressive sequences. This, in turn, leads us to the question concerning the documentary mode of storytelling employed in *Polluting Paradise*. In my view, the cinematic representation of Çamburnu garbage dump follows the narrative pattern described by Sigfried Kracauer as a "found story."^[15] According to this approach to the issue of narrative techniques, the relationship between pro-filmic reality and the story is intact or, as Kracauer says, does not destroy "the flow of life." The author remarks that:

The term "found story" covers all stories found in the material of actual physical reality. When you have watched for long enough the surface of a river or a lake you will detect certain patterns in the water which may have been produced by a breeze or some eddy. Found stories are in the nature of such patterns. Being discovered rather than contrived, they are inseparable from film animated by documentary intentions.^[16]

Among standard documentary techniques, such as interviews and monologues, *Polluting Paradise* uses a series of static shots to portray everyday life in Çamburnu, as well as the nature that surrounds it (in one of such a series, for example, we can see flying birds, falling snow, young people eating tangerines, etc.). Events preceding the final collapse of the effluent tank, that is, the construction of a dam which is to prevent the rubbish from overflowing again, are depicted in a stylistically similar fashion. What is more, Akin introduces a specific rhythm to the series of 23 static shots, namely one of every three of them presents a working wastewater tank that stores contaminated liquids until the sound of explosion finally informs us about its destruction. Although the collapse of the building was not recorded by the camera,

[15] S. Kracauer, *Theory of Film. The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Princeton 1997, pp. 245–246.

[16] *Ibidem*.



Il. 4. Paradise-like imagery at the beginning of the movie

story” kind of shots explicitly develops an alienating effect, which is undoubtedly an element of the director’s criticism of ill-fated intervention in the natural environment.

Another important feature of the film’s narrative instance is the extensive use of visual and social contrasts. Two main visual metaphors which constitute the movie’s artistic imagery are paradise and hell. It is not only implied by the original title of the movie (*Der Müll im Garten Eden*), which literally means *The rubbish in the garden of Eden*, but it is also readily apparent already in the opening sequence, which establishes the crucial opposition between green farmlands of tea and stark landscape of the landfill. After a few static shots presenting a stunning view of the natural “living” garden, the camera pans slowly down to reveal a single plastic bag lying on the ground. This image is followed by short footage of anti-dump demonstration after which follows another set of dynamic travelling and dissolving shots of the Çamburnu coast at a great distance. Once again, the images of heavenly tea plantations are replaced by a dreadful view of a rubbish dump along with flying crows and ravens. The following scenes are replete with motifs of a “dead” garden of refuse, like lorries throwing away trash, stray dogs eating food scraps, and, especially, the apocalyptic images of black effluent contaminating surface water. Interestingly, David Ingram observes a similar theme in American feature (eco-)films. The author contends that:

Environmental movies visualize the destructive effects on the environment of corporate capitalist greed in images of industrial technology as impersonal and unemotional. In particular, the noisy, brightly coloured bulldozer features as an impersonal and artificial destroyer of beautiful natural landscapes and traditional communities [...].^[17]

Another kind of contrast is built on the juxtaposition of villagers’ virtually pre-modern activities and dehumanised machine work performed at the dumping site. The director obviously sympathizes with the people of Çamburnu whose traditional lifestyle has been brutally disturbed. The last part of the documentary that comes after the collapse of the effluent tank is one big accusation against human responsi-

[17] D. Ingram, *Green Screen. Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema*, Exeter 2010, p. 3.

bility for the local ecological catastrophe. Nature reveals its vulnerability as the images of dead animals appear on screen. The viewers are left with the feeling of helplessness, but they should be also convinced that it is us all who are traumatized by the eco-crime.

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