

PhD Thesis Evaluation Report

PhD candidate: Asia Battiloro

Supervisors: **prof dr hab. Agnieszka Adamowicz-Pośpiech**, Full Professor, Institute of Literary Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Silesia in Katowice; **prof. Riccardo Capoferro**, Associate Professor, Department of European, American and Intercultural Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Sapienza University of Rome

Faculty: joint PhD prepared in: **Faculty of Arts and Humanities**
Department of European, American and Intercultural Studies
International PhD in Studies in English Literatures, Language and Translation
Curriculum in Literary Studies – English Literature and Culture 38th Cycle

Title of PhD thesis: **Epistolary Embodiment(s) in 21st-Century British Climate Change Novels**

Reviewer: **dr hab. Brygida Pudelko, prof. UO**, Institute of Literatures, Faculty of Humanities, University of Opole, Opole, Poland

1. Scientific value of the PhD thesis

a) Originality

The thesis addresses a clearly defined and genuinely original research problem: it investigates the role of epistolary forms in twenty-first-century British climate change novels, examined through the lenses of eco-cognitive narratology, new formalism, and contemporary epistolary theory. The PhD candidate identifies and convincingly substantiates a specific gap in existing scholarship: while eco-narratological and eco-cognitive approaches have extensively explored questions of form, mediation, and reader response, they have largely neglected the narrative and experiential significance of epistolarity in shaping narrative experience and climate-related cognition. The thesis explicitly situates itself at the intersection of climate fiction studies, postclassical and cognitive narratology, and epistolary studies, and proposes to triangulate these fields. The corpus is carefully selected and contributes to the project's originality: David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, Amy Sackville's *The Still Point*, Guinevere Glasfurd's *The Year Without Summer*, and Naomi Alderman's *The Future*. Rather than concentrating on the already institutionalised "canon" of cli-fi (Winterson, McEwan, Gee, Hall, etc.), the author prioritises texts that are both formally innovative – especially in their use of embedded letters, diaries, and digital epistolarity – and comparatively under-researched, notably *The Still Point*, *The Year Without Summer*, and *The Future*.

On the conceptual level, the thesis offers an innovative triangulation of (1) eco-narratology and eco-cognitive narratology, (2) second-generation cognitive approaches (4E



cognition), and (3) contemporary epistolary studies, including the notions of “epistolary illusion” and the so-called “epistolary renaissance” in Anglophone fiction. Particularly valuable is the extension of Karin Kukkonen’s work on letters and embodied cognition in eighteenth-century fiction to the context of twenty-first-century climate narratives, and the re-conceptualisation of the novel as a “cultural technology” that coevolves with media practices and environmental imaginaries.

Overall, the thesis achieves a high degree of originality in its formulation of the research problem, in the composition of the corpus, and in the integration of theoretical fields that are usually treated separately.

b) Scientific quality: scope, methodology, and interpretation

The scientific quality of the thesis is consistently high. The theoretical and contextual chapters display an impressive breadth of reading and a strong command of current trends and approaches in literary studies. The discussion of eco- and econarratology (James, Lehtimäki, Caracciolo, Herman, among others) is thorough and up-to-date, and the PhD candidate correctly highlights the shift from purely thematic/ecocritical readings towards more form-sensitive approaches. The adopted eco-cognitive narratology, indebted to work on 4E cognition (embodied, embedded, enactive, extended) and embodied simulation, is clearly articulated; the thesis explicitly distances itself from frameworks that restrict themselves to embodiment and embeddedness, arguing instead for a conceptualisation of mind as also enactive and extended through media practices and cultural technologies such as the novel.

Equally impressive is the engagement with epistolary theory, from classical studies of the epistolary novel to recent reappraisals in *The Epistolary Renaissance* and cognitive approaches to letters. The PhD candidate makes particularly good use of the notion of “epistolary illusion” and of Kukkonen’s work on letters and 4E cognition to frame epistolarity not as a marginal or archaic device but as a key mechanism of narrative mediation, especially in partially epistolary texts where letters and diaries function as embedded narratives within a broader plot architecture. The thesis clearly articulates how literature, and specifically the novel, can resist climatic determinism and reductionism by restoring relational, situated, and moral dimensions to environmental discourse.

Methodologically, the project is carefully framed within eco-cognitive narratology: storytelling is treated as both a formal and epistemological practice, and narrative form is

h

understood as a mode of ecological thought that registers and translates the distributed cognition required to apprehend climate change.

2. Presentation of the text and methods used

The thesis is clearly and effectively structured. Following multilingual abstracts (in English, Italian, Polish), the Introduction sets out the research context, questions, corpus, and methodology in a concise yet comprehensive manner. Chapter One provides the conceptual and historical foundations (climate change, cli-fi, epistolarity, cognitive and postclassical narratology). Climate fiction is situated within this discursive landscape as a literary response to scientific and media representations of climate change, with a particular emphasis on the novel's capacity to mediate between abstract systems and lived experience. The discussion of eco- and econarratology (James, Lehtimäki, Caracciolo, Herman, among others) is thorough and up-to-date, and the PhD candidate correctly highlights the shift from purely thematic/ecocritical readings towards more form-sensitive approaches. The adopted eco-cognitive narratology, indebted to work on 4E cognition and embodied simulation, is clearly articulated. Equally impressive is the engagement with epistolary theory, from classical studies of the epistolary novel to recent reappraisals in *The Epistolary Renaissance* and cognitive approaches to letters.

Chapters Two to Five each offer a focused case study of one novel, and the final Conclusion synthesises the findings and reflects on their broader implications for econarratology and climate humanities. The thesis also contains an extensive bibliography. The progression from general theoretical discussion to detailed analyses is logical and well indicated. Each chapter opens with a clear statement of purpose and closes with a summary that prepares the ground for the subsequent chapter. All the interpretations remain firmly anchored in primary texts and consistently return to the central questions concerning mediation, embodiment, and climate complexity. The interpretive chapters apply this methodological framework in a consistent and convincing manner:

- *Cloud Atlas* is read as an “emergent” climate narrative whose nested structure, temporal layering, and heterogeneous media (journal, letters, report, memoir, oral testimony) model the non-linear, cumulative, and multiscalar dimensions of ecological crisis, even though climate change is not an explicit theme. Across its six interwoven narratives, *Cloud Atlas* transforms the novel's formal history into a meditation on historical recurrence and ecological entanglement.

Ben

- *The Still Point* is interpreted as a climate narrative where crisis is registered as an atmospheric background condition; its bifocal structure (Arctic expedition vs. contemporary domestic space) and the protagonist's immersion in letters and diaries are used to analyse "epistolary illusion" and the gradual reorientation from imperial and romantic imaginaries towards ecological awareness. With respect to the spatial opposition, the novel continually oscillates between the Arctic landscapes recorded in Edward's diary and the domestic interiors of Julia's twenty-first-century life, staging a sharp contrast between the sublime extremity of polar exploration and the sensuous familiarity of the English home (171). *The Still Point* draws on modernist aesthetics, particularly their temporal fragmentation and introspective focus, to translate ecological awareness into "atmospheric phenomenology", where perception and environment become mutually constitutive.
- *The Year Without Summer* is shown to construct a "constellation of places and voices" around the Tambora eruption, using lost letters, fictional archives, visual sketches, sermons, and multiple focalisations to stage climate crisis as lived history and to foreground climate injustice and uneven geographies. Across its six narrative strands, *The Year Without Summer* offers not only a geographically dispersed account of the 1815–1816 Tambora climate crisis but also a formally varied one. Rather than presenting a single, linear narrative, Glasfurd constructs a mosaic of perspectives that, read together, evoke the planetary scale of the eruption's effects (266). The six narratives depict climate change as uneven in its effects, deferred in time, and mediated through intersecting networks of communication.
- *The Future* is analysed as a near-future narrative in which digital epistolarity (online forums, social media posts, viral video "letters") reworks apocalyptic and utopian traditions; the thesis's notion of "apocalypse-dependent green utopianism" (281) is theoretically grounded and well supported by textual evidence. In the novel, where ecological collapse, technological control, and digital communication intersect, Alderman engages with apocalyptic and utopian traditions to explore how contemporary culture imagines both catastrophe and renewal.

The language of the thesis is fluent, precise, and stylistically appropriate for academic context. The PhD candidate handles complex theoretical vocabulary with ease and maintains a high level of terminological consistency (e.g. multiscalar, multispatial, multitemporal, epistolary illusion, embodied simulation, distributed cognition).

2.2 Adequacy and correctness of methods

Ru

The methodological framework – eco-cognitive narratology combined with new formalist attention to form and with contemporary epistolary theory – is both well-chosen and carefully implemented. Eco-cognitive narratology provides the overarching perspective through which narrative form is understood as a site of ecological cognition, as a site of ecological cognition and as a means of translating climate complexity into embodied, affective experience. New formalism underwrites the insistence that narrative form is historically and culturally embedded rather than autonomous, which allows the PhD candidate to link the novels' compositional structures (polyphony, fragmentation, atmospheric description, digital dispersion) to broader social, historical, and media ecologies. Epistolary theory, including concepts such as “epistolary illusion” and letters as embedded narratives, is systematically used to analyse how epistolary sections interact with the larger probabilistic design of each novel. The PhD candidate demonstrates a clear grasp of the implications and limits of these frameworks. She explicitly recognises, for instance, that her eco-cognitive approach does not include empirical reception studies and that the focus is on the “implied reader” and the affordances of narrative form rather than on real readers' responses.

In the whole, the methodological choices are fully adequate to the research aims and are applied with rigour and consistency.

3. General evaluation

3.1 Overall contribution and degree of scholarly maturity

The thesis makes a substantial contribution to three interrelated domains:

1. Climate change fiction / cli-fi studies – by demonstrating how climate change can be narrativised not only as content but as a formal problem, and by showing how hybrid, recursive, and multi-scalar narrative structures translate climate systems' complexity, nonlinearity, and emergent patterns into literary form.
2. Eco- and econarratology – by extending existing work on climate narratives with a sustained analysis of epistolary mediation as a key mechanism for distributed and relational cognition, thereby reinforcing the idea that narrative form itself functions as ecological thinking.
3. Epistolary studies – by repositioning letters, diaries, and digital communication at the centre of climate fiction's representational strategies, and by tracing a line from eighteenth-century epistolary forms (via Kukkonen) to twenty-first-century epistolary and partially epistolary novels engaged with climate crisis.

The thesis convincingly argues that contemporary climate novels “reactivate the novel’s historical function as a site of epistemological experimentation and moral imagination” (viii) and that literary form participates actively in shaping cultural cognition of climate crisis, rather than passively reflecting environmental change. This is a strong and well-substantiated claim that gives the work clear significance beyond its immediate textual corpus.

Strengths:

- A sophisticated and coherent theoretical framework that successfully integrates complex strands of contemporary theory.
- A well-chosen corpus that allows for both diachronic and formal comparison across different historical settings and media ecologies.
- Analytically rich and methodologically consistent close readings that directly address the research questions.
- Clear, rigorous academic prose and an effective structure that guides the reader through complex material.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Epistolary Embodiment(s) in 21st-Century British Climate Change Novels* is a highly accomplished and independently written doctoral thesis that meets and, in many respects, exceeds the standard requirements for a PhD in literary studies. It demonstrates the candidate’s ability to formulate and pursue clear and original research questions, demonstrates excellent mastery of relevant scholarship, develops a coherent and well-argued methodological framework, and offers insightful, detailed, independent textual analysis. The work makes a significant and original contribution to the study of climate fiction, eco- and econarratology, and epistolary theory, and it displays a high level of intellectual independence and critical maturity that fully justifies the award of the doctoral degree.

In my opinion, the doctoral dissertation submitted for review fully meets all the requirements set out in Article 187. p. 1–2 of the *Act of 20 July 2018 on Higher Education and Science*. In view of the above, I hereby apply to admit Ms. Asia Battiloro, M.A. to further stages of the doctoral procedure.

At the same time, in recognition of a wide range of research and valuable, original results, I recommend awarding the thesis with an appropriate prize.

Uważam, że przedstawiona do recenzji rozprawa doktorska spełnia wszelkie wymagania określone w art. 187. p. 1–2 ustawy *Prawo o szkolnictwie wyższym i nauce* z dnia 20 lipca 2018

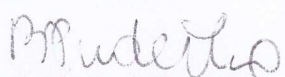
km

roku. W związku z powyższym, przedkładam wniosek o dopuszczenie pani mgr Asi Battiloro do dalszych etapów przewodu doktorskiego.

Jednocześnie, w uznaniu szerokiego zakresu badań i wartościowych, oryginalnych wyników, rekomenduję wyróżnienie rozprawy stosowną nagrodą.

Date: 05/12/2025

Signature:



Brygida Pudelko