

La Sapienza

Revisione esterna tesi ASIA BATTILORO (38° ciclo)

mgr Karolina Konteczna-Montak

BATTILORO ASIA

Evaluation form for PhD dissertation

Evaluation form

Title of the thesis

Epistolary Embodiment(s) in Twenty-First-Century British Climate Change Novels

Affiliation of the reviewer

Newcastle University, United Kingdom.

Report

Please see the evaluation file attached.

Confidential report (it will not be shown to the candidate)

There is no confidential report.

Evaluation file (optional)

Presentation and clarity

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☐ Good ☒ Excellent

The reviewer should be able to read the text without difficulty. This implies that the dissertation is clear and 'user friendly', without duplications or repetitions.

Integration and coherence

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☐ Good ☒ Excellent

The manuscript should present logical and rational links between different parts of the thesis.

Introduction to scientific background

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☐ Good ☒ Excellent

The text should contain a satisfactory introduction to the scientific background which is relevant to the research, preparing the reader to the exposition of the problem.

Review of relevant literature

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☐ Good ☒ Excellent

The candidate must have a detailed knowledge of original sources, have a thorough knowledge of the field, and understand the main theoretical and methodological issues.

Statement of research problem

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☐ Good ☒ Excellent

A clear statement of the research problem should be made, together with specific hypotheses, predictions, or questions which the research is designed to address.

Originality

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☐ Good ☒ Excellent

The research must be the candidate's own work. The degree of independence may vary according to the research topic.

Contribution to knowledge and scientific relevance

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☐ Good ☒ Excellent

The dissertation should be substantial enough to be able to form the basis of two articles on refereed journal, a book or research monograph.

Mastery of the English language

☐ None ☐ Poor ☐ Average ☐ Good ☒ Excellent

The candidate must be proficient in written English and show mastery of appropriate scientific/technical language.

The thesis can be considered for a 'cum laude' award

☒ Yes ☐ No

A major goal of the review process is to evaluate if the present version of the thesis is:

1) adequate as is

2) require minor revision

3) require major revision

for admission of the candidate to the defense of the work in front of a national evaluation board.

☒ Accept as is ☐ Minor revision ☐ Major revision

Date: 12/14/2025

It was an absolute pleasure to read this excellent PhD thesis. From the opening sentence the writing is clear, sophisticated and fluent. The arguments are strong and nuanced. The thesis reflects on recent debates and developments in ecocriticism and contemporary scholarship on climate epistemology with real insight. It makes an original and timely contribution by focusing on form, narratology and epistolarity. The authorial voice is confident and shows a complete grasp of the material. The textual readings are attentive and sensitive. They bring the four narratives to life. The careful selection of themes and focus on epistolarity allows the thesis to bring together four interestingly different texts.

The long chapters on *The Cloud Atlas* and *The Year Without Summer* are particularly impressive, engaging deeply with these expansive fictions while maintaining a clear focus. They attend to important aspects of the recursive threads (*Cloud Atlas*) and collaged 'patches' (*Year Without Summer*) of these novels while also showing how forms of implicit and explicit modes of climate understanding emerge through movement and reflection across the elements. The shorter chapter on *The Still Point* offers a sophisticated examination of this quieter and more narrowly focused narrative. The analysis builds up a many layered examination of the devices through which Sackville brings the wide, cold, expansive spaces of the Arctic into a contemporary domestic interior and to Julia's consciousness. It also shows why it matters to notice and critique the heroic polar narratives that relentlessly reproduce imperial logics of the climate emergency. This all adds up to an extensive analysis of how narrative structure can show, in a deeply personal, gendered and generational way, how attending to climate crisis can be "fragmented, deferred and refracted" (p200). The chapter on *The Future* generatively picks up a speculative and future-focused dynamic from *The Cloud Atlas* and moves this into a fuller discussion of the changing relationship between apocalypse and utopian hope in contemporary climate fiction. The thesis handles Alderman's genre fiction with delicacy and insight. It traces the novel's argument about how 'the future' is an object relentlessly (re-)produced in media and how it elaborates impossible and possible forms of agency in relation to looming crisis.

As well as attending to the distinctive pleasures of each of the text, the thesis forges new connections across the corpus, notably between historical novels and speculative fictions, and between modernist and post-modernist textual strategies. It also gives an incisive and richly temporal sense of how the 21st century novel is changing to make sense of the climate crisis. The thesis argues that new narrative forms have emerged, initially with the climate crisis at the edges of the text, shifting through successive modes and coming to work in new and interesting ways through and around apocalypse and more linear SF temporalities. The argument of this thesis joins other important critical works interrogating the space between an important but limited canon of self-conscious climate fiction on one side, and Bould's argument that the Anthropocene unconscious drives all contemporary cultural production on the other. The ecocritical voice of this thesis rejects this binary, working with an interesting body of texts registering the crisis beyond conventional genres and rhetorical stances, making new formal sense of climate epistemology and experience.

The foundation for these contrasts and synergies is nicely laid out in the introduction and layered through each chapter as the overall discussion is developed and enriched. The expansion of the category of epistolarity beyond the letter and into the digital epistles of *The Future* worked really well. I was impressed by the very thorough literature review. It brings together diverse strands from lively debates in literary studies – the limits of ecocriticism, returns to realism, questions of narratology, cognition, and reader response.

The discussion achieves a judicious balance between acknowledging the work of predecessors and making original claims. The thesis makes a persuasive case for the value of epistolary and near-epistolary narratives as formal ways of acknowledging the uncertainties, complexities, and multiplicities of climate knowledge. It also develops conceptual resources to show how narratives can work to create spaces of possibility and richness that resist climate reductionism. Registering sceptical positions on whether a more intimate realism can grasp the climate challenge, the thesis makes a powerful case for how some forms can mediate and 'collage' real-feeling elements of climate knowledge, experience and emotion so that planetarity, extension, and hyper-object scales are placed in a productive tension with experience, subjectivity, interpretation, the local and the personal.

The thesis argues (most notably towards the end of the literature review and at the beginning of the *Cloud Atlas* chapter) that the narrative strategies examined here not only represent but perform the multiple, heterogeneous temporalities and relationalities of climate crisis and climate change causality. This depends on strong claims about reader experiences - of interruption, recursivity and return, for example. The approach taken here to readers and reading, drawing on work on embodied cognition and its modelling of reader experience, is very different from my own (sociological) approach. I draw from post-critical literary theory and book studies to think empirically about what different embodied readers and socially-shaped modes of reading do when they engage with climate change through fiction. For me, the cognitive approach can tend to present an asocial model of readers and centre the critic's reading over empirical approaches to readers and cultural activity around climate texts. Nonetheless, I learned an enormous amount from the lucid and effective exploration here of cognitive narratology, especially Caracciolo's work, and ideas about the structure of reader response. In the context of this study, the arguments about collaged and disrupted readings are extremely compelling. They enable an original exploration of how climate epistemologies that are intrinsically complex, uncertain and multiple can be registered through inventive narrative strategies.

The Cloud Atlas chapter is a standout. Beginning with a close reading of Adam's journal as a document of the extractivism and colonialism that frame his travels, as well as his own stuttering ethical journey, the chapter carefully sets up what will follow about climate, history and causality. But it was the ostensibly less promising material in this book that speaks to the utter confidence of the insight and writing in the thesis. Working through the Cavendish section, the chapter acknowledges that this apparently slight picaresque satire seems to present a strained link to climate change. But the analysis carefully and systematically shows how Cavendish inhabits spaces and times of public ruin. This delicate unpicking of the novel builds a picture of an omnipresent but apparently banal colonial time, the degraded neoliberal present, and Timothy's own sense of ageing, inheritance and loneliness. The chapter attends carefully to Timothy's voice, both intimate and performative, and how it speaks to his imagined readers of the world his generation will pass on.

Both *The Cloud Atlas* and *The Still Point* chapters focus on what the thesis calls the "discreet" presentation of climate crisis (p199, referring specifically to *The Still Point*). It is a real challenge to convincingly tease out climate hauntings, resonances and attunements in novels whose thematic commitments are very differently focused. In lesser hands this could easily have failed. There were moments in both chapters where the focus on climate almost slips away, and it was difficult to imagine how it would be pulled back. But the thesis always returned confidently to make the climate point, enriched by long loops of

investigation through and with the two narratives. In both chapters the writing concludes with a persuasive argument about how these texts orient us to the ideological, structural and systemic “scaffolding” of the historic emergence of extractive dynamics of climate crisis and harm. But they also show how fictions can also reveal possibilities for change and difference through layers of mediation, inter- and intra-action through textual communication and reflection.

The second two novel chapters pivot to examine more overt climate engagements in later twenty-first century fiction. The chapter on *The Year Without Summer* is very successful in mapping how epistolarity and multiply mediated narratives are mobilised in relation to an explicit focus on climate. This is a thoughtful analysis of a historical novel that imagines the geographically and socially dispersed, but situationally experienced, effects of a climate event, in this case a volcanic eruption in Indonesia. The thesis makes excellent sense of how the fiction pieces together contrasting voices, giving particular attention to social class. It shows a particular strength of the novel in imagining how oral cultures might have responded to the terrifying impact of crop failures and social upheaval. The tension in the analysis between the characters embedded in densely textual (and artistic, in Constable’s case) worlds, recording their thoughts, and those thinking through their experiences without access to literacy is delicately done. The emphasis on polyphony and deploying Tsing’s idea of the ‘patchy Anthropocene’ help to illuminate the temporal complexity and multiplicity of the novel.

Contemporary climate fears and dynamics come explicitly into the frame via *The Future*. This chapter shows an excellent grasp of debates about the value and problem of apocalypse in climate fiction and in ecological discourse more broadly. It brings this discussion to bear with a light touch on Alderman’s novel. The analysis does justice to how the novel thematises the idea of the future as an increasingly dominant and constructed category that can constrain the possibilities of the present. The chapter successfully shows how the *The Future* finds a degree of eco-utopianism in unpromising material, revealing unexpected sites of agency in digital conversations and Biblical exegesis as well as tracing a wider narrative arc in which overlooked characters bring about an overturning of fantasies of mastery and control. This chapter brings the consistent attention to reading and attention in the thesis to a high point in the analysis of the Badger Bywater viral reel. Here, insights from cognitive narratology are brought together with Alderman’s careful rendering, in linear text, of an audio-visual spectacle. The thesis shows how a focus on mediation across all four texts brings to light the possibilities of drawing readers into remediation in contemporary digital contexts. The careful analysis here examines how a slow retelling of video can also allow new ways of reading and understanding, both within and about everyday contexts of online capitalist hypermedia.

Each chapter and the thesis overall is clearly and securely structured. The argument develops carefully both within and across the chapters, enabling a brief but very telling conclusion. I was left in no doubt that this was the work of a curious and confident with a capacious ability to work across different texts and mobilise rich theoretical ideas to excellent effect. Asia’s original approach to the narratology of climate fiction and her subtle, deep and articulate way with source texts will make a valuable contribution to the field. **I do not think any revisions are required.** The thesis makes its arguments fully and persuasively. There is not a sentence out of place here. However, I do offer a couple of questions for Asia to think about as she continues her exploration of difficult questions about climate fictions, readers responses, and social change.

Firstly, what is the relationship between *the* reader invoked in this analysis and readers plural? The first is a (singular) figure drawn from models of reception and cognition. Those models are very sophisticated but nonetheless created to conceptualise textual response or a structure of response. The second are heterogeneous, empirical and embodied - the folks who pick up these texts, in specific social and historical contexts, and read them. As the thesis notes, a lot of claims about the value of climate fiction depend on the (often implicit) argument that literary narratives can rewrite or are rewriting (expanding, enhancing, extending) climate knowledge in contemporary culture. But what is the reach of the novel, and how do we account for its relatively modest voice in a wider mediated culture that probably looks more like the Alderman's fictionalised digital world in *The Future* than the world of quiet solitary readers like Julia in *The Still Point*? How do we investigate what readers do with texts in ways that aren't reductive - I found the argument in Chapter 5 that apocalyptic fiction can create quietism or apathy in readers a bit simplistic?

Secondly, how might the possibility for ethical renewal and even emergent, processual eco-utopianism identified in the texts analysed here, especially *The Future*, relate to a more political orientation to the novel and to the climate challenge? Lots of green utopian texts, certainly from the second half of the twentieth century, were linked to forms of ecological politics and politics of social justice which drew from and represented collective action. It's notable that the thesis is primarily concerned with individual ethical reflection - both on the part of writing/reading characters in the novels, and in terms of modes of narrative address that might stimulate this reflection in a reader. There's a great argument in the conclusion about how the novels "turn the epistemological complexity of climate change into an aesthetic and ethical resource", performing "the dispersed and relational cognition demanded by the climate crisis" at the level of an individual embodied reading (pp306-307) and making available new forms of ethical reflection. But the roots of destruction and violence so frequently invoked in and through these narratives are systemic and require political attention. Some recent climate novels, like Kim Stanley Robinson's *New York 2140* and *Ministry for the Future*, try to get at this in part by narrating institutional actions and/or including mediated voices in the text that speak from or for collective actors of various kinds. Others, eg N K Jemisin's *City* duology, reimagine climate challenges through a weird urban politics in which cities and their souls become able to speak and act. Is there a political dimension to what the novels in this thesis ask of their readers? Or is individual reflection and ethical intervention their distinctive strength?