



RESEARCH ARTICLE

ECOLOGICAL DYSTOPIAS IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA: ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND CLIMATE CRISIS IN KALKI AND UGLIES

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Abstract

This paper examines how contemporary cinema engages with environmental crisis through an analysis of two distinct dystopian narratives: Kalki and Uglies. Through comparative textual analysis, this study explores how these cinematic texts deploy world-building, visual symbolism, and narrative structure to critique humanity's relationship with nature and warn against environmental negligence. By positioning these works within broader ecocritical frameworks, this research demonstrates how dystopian cinema serves not merely as entertainment but as a vital medium for environmental discourse, collective ecological conscience, and sociopolitical critique. The analysis reveals how both films, despite their different cultural contexts and stylistic approaches, converge in their warnings about climate change, human disconnection from nature, and the consequences of environmental exploitation.

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Introduction:-

Cinema as Environmental Discourse

Cinema, as a cultural artifact, often mirrors and critiques societal anxieties. In an age of accelerating climate crisis, biodiversity loss, and political instability, dystopian films and series increasingly reflect ecological fears and their intersection with governance, identity, and morality. These visual narratives have become significant vehicles for communicating environmental concerns, often reaching wider audiences than scientific literature or policy debates (Rust et al. 191). As Ingram notes, "Film does not merely represent environmental issues but actively participates in environmental discourse formation" (45).

The proliferation of climate-themed dystopias in contemporary cinema reflects what Chakrabarty describes as the "collision of human history with geological time"—a recognition that human activity has fundamentally altered Earth's natural systems at a planetary scale (201). These narratives serve multiple functions: they visualize potential futures shaped by climate catastrophe, critique present-day environmental politics, and explore the psychological dimensions of living amidst ecological uncertainty.

1.2 Kalki and Uglies: Contrasting Dystopian Visions

Kalki and Uglies, though distinct in tone, style, and cultural context, present haunting visions of environmental collapse that warrant comparative analysis. Kalki, drawing from Hindu mythology and set in a post-apocalyptic Indian landscape, offers a spiritually-inflected meditation on environmental decay and moral rebirth. Uglies, adapted

from Scott Westerfeld's young adult novel, presents a Western techno-dystopia where environmental catastrophe has been covered over with technological solutions and aesthetic distractions.

This paper examines how these cinematic texts represent dystopian futures and environmental degradation through world-building, visual symbolism, and narrative critique. By analyzing these works through an ecocritical lens, this study contributes to understanding how contemporary cinema engages with the Anthropocene—the proposed geological epoch marking significant human impact on Earth's ecosystems.

Research Questions and Significance

This study addresses several key questions: How do *Kalki* and *Uglies* visually represent environmental degradation and climate crisis? What narrative strategies do they employ to critique current environmental practices? How do they engage with broader discourses of environmental justice, technological solutionism, and ecological ethics? In what ways do these works reflect or challenge dominant cultural narratives about humanity's relationship with nature?

The significance of this research lies in its examination of how popular visual media translates complex environmental concerns into affective narratives that shape public understanding. As Ghosh argues in *The Great Derangement*, the climate crisis presents unique challenges for narrative representation (72). By analyzing how these films attempt to overcome such representational challenges, this study contributes to both film studies and environmental humanities scholarship.

Literature Review

Ecocriticism and Visual Media

Ecocriticism—the study of the relationship between literature, culture, and the physical environment—has increasingly turned its attention to visual media. Pioneering works by Lawrence Buell established frameworks for examining environmental imagination in literature, while scholars like Ursula Heise have explored how narratives encode environmental ethics into plot and setting. Heise's concept of "eco-cosmopolitanism" provides a useful framework for examining how global environmental concerns manifest in culturally specific narratives like *Kalki* and *Uglies* (10).

Rust, Monani, and Cubitt's collection *Ecomedia: Key Issues* has been instrumental in extending ecocritical methodologies to film and television studies. Similarly, Weik von Mossner's *Affective Ecologies* examines how environmental narratives in film generate emotional responses that potentially influence viewers' environmental attitudes and behaviors (28-32).

2.2 Dystopian Cinema and Environmental Crisis

Dystopian cinema has long served as a site for the interrogation of environmental and political themes. Scholars like Frederick Buell argue that ecological catastrophe narratives function as warnings and as reflections of collective guilt (Buell 201). These narratives often deploy what Nixon terms "slow violence"—environmental damage that occurs gradually and out of sight but with devastating consequences (2).

Films such as *Children of Men* (2006), *Snowpiercer* (2013), and *Wall-E* (2008) have been extensively studied for their ecological dystopias (Brereton 112; Morton 78; Rust 203), where decaying environments signal broader social collapse. Bradshaw argues that such films play a vital role in making the otherwise imperceptible processes of climate change visible, while Fiskio suggests they help audiences work through ecological grief and anxiety (17).

2.3 Scholarship on *Uglies* and *Kalki*

Research on *Uglies*, notably by Maria Nikolajeva and Susan Basu, focuses primarily on its critique of beauty standards and technological control rather than its environmental dimensions. Day has examined how the novel series engages with posthumanism and biopolitics (195), while Bradford et al. position it within young adult dystopian fiction's engagement with environmental ethics (88).

Scholarly engagement with *Kalki* remains more limited, positioning it within post-apocalyptic Indian cinema (Nair 80). Roy briefly discusses its environmental symbolism in relation to Hindu cosmology (30), while Damodaran contextualizes it within the emerging "cli-fi" tradition in South Asian cinema (68). Sen's work on ecological themes in Indian cinema provides useful context, though it predates *Kalki*'s release (710).

2.4 Theoretical Frameworks: Environmental Justice and Climate Communication

This paper builds on emerging scholarships at the intersection of environmental justice and media studies. Concepts from environmental justice—including distributional justice, procedural justice, and recognition justice (Schlosberg 12)—provide analytical frameworks for examining how *Kalki* and *Uglies* represent differential vulnerability to environmental harms.

Additionally, research on climate change communication (Moser 35; O'Neill and Smith 75) informs analysis of how these films visualize abstract environmental processes and potentially influence public understanding. Particularly

relevant is Sakellari's work on apocalyptic framing in climate communication and its psychological implications (830).

Methodology

3.1 Comparative Textual Analysis

This study employs a comparative textual analysis of the cinematic adaptations of *Kalki* and *Uglies*. Drawing from ecocritical theory, film studies, and cultural criticism, it analyzes how each narrative constructs dystopian futures and depicts environmental decline. As Brereton notes, such analysis allows examination of "how films encode environmental values through narrative structure, characterization, and visual design" (18).

The comparative approach highlights both shared ecological concerns and culturally specific responses to environmental crisis. It reveals how different cinematic traditions approach the intersection of environmental and socio-political collapse, allowing for examination of both universal and culturally particular dimensions of environmental representation.

Analytical Framework

The analysis focuses on four primary dimensions:

1. World-building and setting: How environmental degradation is incorporated into the fictional world's physical landscapes and social structures
2. Visual rhetorics of climate change: Analysis of cinematography, color palettes, and visual metaphors used to represent environmental crisis
3. Narrative strategies: How plot, character development, and dialogue engage with environmental themes
4. Cultural and political critique: How each film positions environmental degradation within broader social, economic, and political contexts

This multidimensional approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how these films function not merely as entertainment but as environmental texts that contribute to public discourse about climate change and ecological responsibility.

Analysis

Setting and World-Building: Landscapes of Environmental Crisis

Kalki: Mythic Desolation

Kalki offers a post-apocalyptic vision that indirectly critiques environmental neglect through its portrayal of urban decay and moral collapse. The film's setting—a once-thriving Indian metropolis now reduced to rubble and dust—serves as a material manifestation of what Ghosh calls "the unthinkable"—the cognitive challenge of representing climate catastrophe (72).

The polluted skies and crumbling infrastructure serve as metaphors for industrial overreach and human disconnection from nature. Notably, the film employs what Nixon terms "toxic discourse," visually linking environmental contamination to bodily corruption (184). Characters suffer from mysterious ailments, their bodies bearing visible marks of environmental toxicity.

Kalki draws explicitly from Hindu cosmology, positioning its environmental catastrophe within the cyclical destruction and renewal of yugas (cosmic ages). This framing contrasts markedly with Western linear apocalyptic narratives, suggesting environmental collapse as part of a cosmic cycle rather than a terminal endpoint. As Dwivedi and Khair note, such cyclical cosmologies offer alternative ways of conceptualizing environmental temporality that challenge Western progress narratives (62).

Uglies: Technological Erasure of Nature

In contrast, *Uglies* present a world where environmental ruin has been deliberately obscured. The sterilized perfection of the "pretty" cities, with their gleaming architecture and artificial environments, contrast sharply with the desolate "Smoke" (wild areas), embodying a world that has abandoned ecological responsibility in favor of control and aesthetic conformity.

The film's setting embodies what Buell calls "toxic consciousness"—awareness of human-environment interconnection revealed through contamination (31). However, *Uglies* complicates this consciousness by showing how technological and social systems work to suppress ecological awareness. The carefully manicured parks and artificial landscapes of New Pretty Town represent what Heise terms "technological pastoral"—nature reimagined and controlled through technological means (65).

The stark visual contrast between the cities and the Smoke illustrates what Cronon identifies as the problematic conceptual separation of "wilderness" and "civilization" (7). In *Uglies*, this separation is literally reinforced by physical barriers and social conditioning that prevents citizens from experiencing unmanaged ecosystems.

Thematic Representation of Climate Crisis.

Kalki: Environmental Degradation as Moral Failure.

In *Kalki*, environmental degradation functions symbolically, reflecting ethical decay. The narrative suggests that the destruction of nature parallels the erosion of societal values. This approach aligns with what Adamson describes as "environmental justice ecocriticism," where ecological and social issues are inseparable (10).

The film's protagonist's journey through increasingly devastated landscapes serves as both physical travel and moral pilgrimage. This narrative strategy echoes what Heise identifies as the "toxic pilgrimage" trope in environmental literature—journeys that reveal hidden environmental damage and its human costs (119).

Kalki's environmental critique is inextricably linked to its commentary on social stratification. The film's visual economy consistently links environmental privilege with social power, showing how elites maintain access to clean water, breathable air, and green spaces while the marginalized inhabit toxic zones. This representation reflects what Sze terms "environmental privilege"—the uneven distribution of environmental goods and harms along social lines (28).

Uglies: Climate Crisis and Technological Solutionism.

Uglies centralize environmental ruin, linking it directly to technological excess and superficial societal values. The story critiques how ecological collapse is often hidden behind cosmetic fixes and societal manipulation, emphasizing the need for deep systemic change rather than technological band-aids.

The film's treatment of "the Rusties" (contemporary society) as environmental villains who caused "the oil plague" directly engages with fossil fuel dependence and its consequences. This historical framing positions current consumerist society as inherently unsustainable, critiquing what Demos calls "petroculture"—cultural formations dependent on fossil fuel extraction (85).

However, *Uglies* complicates simplistic environmental messaging by showing how the post-Rusty society's apparent sustainability masks new forms of exploitation. The city's clean energy and resource efficiency come at the cost of totalitarian control and the suppression of human autonomy. This narrative choice reflects growing scholarly concern with "green authoritarianism" (Beeson 278) and questions whether environmental sustainability can be achieved without democratic participation.

Visual Storytelling and Environmental Aesthetics.

Kalki: Aesthetics of Desolation.

Kalki employs what Murray and Heumann term "environmental spectacle"—visually arresting imagery that draws attention to ecological conditions (24). The film uses subtle imagery—smog-choked skies, derelict buildings, barren soil—to imply environmental collapse without overtly stating it. The visuals contribute to a sense of existential despair and disillusionment.

The film's color palette shifts gradually from desaturated browns and grays in degraded environments to vibrant greens and blues in rare scenes featuring intact natural spaces. This visual strategy employs what Ingram identifies as "chromatic contrast" to emphasize environmental loss and potential renewal (52).

Particularly striking is the film's use of extremely long shots showing human figures dwarfed by devastated landscapes. This visual technique evokes what Burke described as the environmental sublime—nature's power to inspire awe and terror—but reconfigures it for the Anthropocene era, where sublime feelings arise from human-caused devastation rather than pristine wilderness.

Uglies: Sterile Perfection versus Wild Authenticity.

Uglies, by contrast, use stark visual contrasts—between ruined nature and sleek urbanism—to deliver its message. The film's cinematography establishes a visual dichotomy: the city scenes feature symmetrical compositions, smooth camera movements, and cool color grading, while the Smoke sequences employ handheld camera work, natural lighting, and warmer tones.

This visual strategy reinforces the narrative's critique of human denial and environmental irresponsibility. The aesthetic perfection of New Pretty Town—what Halpern terms "beautiful environmentalism"—masks ecological devastation with appealing design (108). This visual rhetoric critiques how contemporary "green" aesthetics often obscure rather than address fundamental environmental problems.

The film's depiction of the Smoke draws on what Cronon identifies as the "wilderness myth"—the romanticization of untamed nature as a site of authenticity and freedom (9). However, the narrative complicates this trope by revealing the Smoke's dependence on salvaged technology and its inability to exist completely outside the city's influence, suggesting that pure "return to nature" is neither possible nor desirable in a climate-changed world.

4.4 Social Structures and Climate Justice

4.4.1 Kalki: Environmental Collapse and Power Dynamics

Kalki depicts a world where environmental neglect stems from systemic corruption. Power structures exploit both people and resources, creating a dual collapse of the environment and society. This framing aligns with environmental justice scholarship that emphasizes the intersectionality of ecological and social oppression (Bullard 43; Pellow 15).

The film's representation of water scarcity particularly illustrates what Swyngedouw terms "hydro-social power"—the ways water access becomes a mechanism for exercising political control (58). Scenes showing water rationing, contamination, and commodification reflect growing global concerns about water justice in a warming world (Mehta 60).

Kalki's narrative suggests that environmental restoration requires dismantling oppressive social hierarchies. This position reflects what Pellow describes as "critical environmental justice"—recognition that environmental problems cannot be solved without addressing underlying social inequalities (18).

Uglies: Climate Crisis and Biopolitical Control.

Uglies illustrate how environmental degradation is masked by state control and distraction. Genetic manipulation becomes a tool for avoiding the reality of ecological collapse, implicating both the state and the individual in this denial. This narrative strategy engages with what Foucault described as "biopolitics"—the management of human biological life by political powers.

The film's central conceited "pretty" operation that allegedly enhances beauty but actually induces docility—serves as a metaphor for how modern societies manage environmental awareness. As Norgaard observes in her study of climate denial, societies develop complex mechanisms to avoid confronting uncomfortable ecological realities (7).

The rebellion against the pretty system parallels contemporary environmental activism, particularly youth climate movements. The protagonist's journey from compliance to resistance mirrors what environmental education scholars call "ecological identity development" (Thomashow 13)—the process of recognizing one's connection to and responsibility for natural systems.

Climate Communication and Emotional Responses.

Kalki: Apocalyptic Framing and Spiritual Renewal.

Kalki employs what climate communication researchers identify as "apocalyptic framing" (Sakellari 831)—representing climate change as catastrophic and potentially civilization-ending. However, the film tempers this approach by incorporating elements of spiritual renewal and rebirth, drawing on Hindu cosmological concepts of destruction as necessary for creation.

This narrative strategy addresses what Stoknes identifies as "apocalypse fatigue"—psychological numbing that occurs when audiences are repeatedly exposed to catastrophic environmental messaging (82). By embedding environmental collapse within a spiritual framework that promises renewal, Kalki offers viewers what environmental psychologists call "constructive hope" (Ojala 627)—the belief that positive change remains possible despite serious threats.

Uglies: Individual Action and Systemic Change.

Uglies navigates what Moser identifies as a central tension in climate communication: balancing individual agency with recognition of systemic constraints (347). The narrative emphasizes personal awakening and resistance while acknowledging how social systems constrain individual choices.

The film's emotional arc moves from what environmental psychologists' term "environmental melancholia" (Lertzman 6)—unprocessed grief about ecological loss—toward active engagement. This trajectory mirrors what climate communication researchers recommend: moving audiences from awareness to action by fostering both emotional connection and efficacy beliefs (Moser 348).

Implications for Environmental Media Studies.

Comparative Insights: Cultural Approaches to Environmental Representation.

The comparative analysis of *Kalki* and *Uglies* reveals both convergences and divergences in how different cultural traditions represent environmental crisis. Both films share certain features: they position environmental degradation as inseparable from social justice concerns; they employ visual contrasts to highlight natural authenticity versus technological control; and they suggest that addressing environmental crisis requires fundamental social transformation.

However, they differ significantly in their framing of temporality and agency. *Kalki*'s cyclical cosmology offers a different temporal understanding of environmental crisis than *Uglies*' linear progression from past destruction to potential future redemption. Similarly, *Kalki* emphasizes collective spiritual transformation, while *Uglies* focus more on individual resistance and small-group action.

These differences reflect what Heise identifies as culturally specific "environmental imaginations"—distinctive ways of conceptualizing human-nature relationships shaped by historical, religious, and social factors (10). This comparative insight contributes to decentering Western frameworks in environmental media studies and recognizing the diverse cultural resources available for engaging with global ecological challenges.

Cinematic Strategies for Representing Climate Change.

Both films demonstrate innovative approaches to what Ghosh identifies as a central challenge of climate representation: making visible processes that occur at temporal and spatial scales beyond ordinary human perception (72). *Kalki* addresses this challenge through mythological framing and symbolic landscapes, while *Uglies* employ historical retrospection and technological extrapolation.

These strategies offer valuable insights for filmmakers and media creators seeking to effectively communicate environmental concerns. They suggest that embedding climate themes within engaging narratives, using visual symbolism rather than didactic messaging, and connecting environmental issues to social justice concerns may produce more affectively powerful and potentially transformative environmental media.

Conclusion.

Kalki and *Uglies* offer compelling cinematic visions of dystopian futures shaped by environmental degradation. While *Kalki* uses mythic symbolism to critique moral and societal collapse, *Uglies* delivers a more direct commentary on humanity's destructive tendencies and technological solutionism. Both works highlight the urgent need for sustainable practices and ethical reflection, positioning cinema as a powerful medium for environmental awareness.

This comparative analysis reveals how dystopian cinema contributes to what Adamson and Slovic term "ethnobioregional consciousness"—awareness of how cultural and biological systems intersect in specific places and communities (7). By presenting environmental crisis through culturally specific lenses, these films expand the repertoire of images, narratives, and emotional responses available for engaging with climate change.

Through their warnings and narratives, these films contribute to the growing discourse on ecological crisis and societal transformation. They demonstrate cinema's capacity to make visible the often-imperceptible processes of environmental change, to emotionally engage audiences with distant or abstract threats, and to imagine alternative futures—both cautionary and hopeful.

Future research might productively explore audience reception of these environmental narratives, examining how viewers from different cultural backgrounds interpret and respond to their ecological messages. Additionally, comparative studies incorporating a wider range of films from diverse global traditions would further enrich understanding of cinema's role in shaping environmental consciousness in the Anthropocene era.

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