

# Perfectly balanced as the world should be: An ecocritical exploration and discuss analysis of the supervillain in Marvel films

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## Abstract

Environmental concerns have been growing globally as the evidence of global warming and other environmental events has become more difficult to ignore. While environmental discourse is vital, the overall interest in this topic leaves much to be desired. One point of contention is the decimation of information on environmental issues to the vast majority. There is an urgency to normalize the notion, research, and dinner table conversation of overpopulation. Overpopulation is at the heart of all environmental concerns; the number of mouths/bodies and available natural resources create a global imbalance. The rapid human population growth highlights the scarce conditions of wildlife and is directly associated with humanity's overpopulation. Can the popularity of Marvel and other comic book films serve as a tool to normalize conversations about ecology, environmental concerns, and societal issues? This article uses an ecocritical approach to interpret and interrogate films that attempt to make ecology connections and make meaning of living in an environmental crisis, using *Marvel's Avengers: Infinity War* as the primary text, in conjunction with other films that attempt similar approaches. *Avengers: Infinity War* receives record-breaking notoriety for gross revenue, translating into a high viewership. However, what cannot be concluded is if the ecological narrative of the film was decoded. There is still work to be done on environmental concerns, but popular comic book films do cast a ray of hope, given their global influence.

**Key Words:** Marvel, Ecocinema, Environmental, Ecocritical, Supervillain.

## Introduction

The power and influence of cinema in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are unparalleled by any other form of media. Laura Fairman writes, "Films. Everyone watches them. Everyone enjoys them. From psychological thrillers to rom-coms, film is a part of everyday life, and the industry is developing and growing daily. This results in the massive influence that film has on today's society. Society is reflected in movies, and in turn, movies influence society through changes in representations, challenging the audience's morals

and transforming viewers' opinions" (Fairman, 2016). The film's conceptualization reflects society, bringing a host of questions and concerns online as we begin to critique and analyze. This concern can be extrapolated when we begin to ask questions about the film's theme or topic, which is centered on discourses of racism, sexism, ableism, xenophobia, capitalism, or environmentalism. The beautiful element of the film in these discourses is that it ignites conversations to help unpack what society tends to gloss over or conveniently forget there is a societal concern.

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This paper questions how ecocinema is present in pop culture films but more directly in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Can the popularity of Marvel and other comic book films serve as a tool for conversations about ecology, environmental concerns, and societal issues? Environmental issues are topics that become difficult to ignore in certain aspects of humanity/society. Deena Robinson wrote an article on Earth.Org entitled *14 Biggest Environmental Problems of 2023*; she listed global warming, fossil fuels, food waste, and biodiversity. Robinson states, “The past 50 years have seen a rapid growth of human consumption, population, global trade, and urbanization, resulting in humanity using more of the Earth’s resources than it can replenish naturally” (Robinson, 2023). According to the World Wild Fund report, wildlife has dropped the population of mammals, fish, and birds by 68% between 1970 and 2016 (Robinson, 2023). If the wildlife population is declining, one can surmise that there must be abnormal growth in another population. The rapid population growth highlighting wildlife conditions is directly associated with humanity’s overpopulation. This is probably one of the least popular concerns in the discourse on environmental issues. “Unfortunately, the issues associated with the rising global population are often ignored, even though its impacts are highly correlated with global changes. Nevertheless, this issue must be addressed, as it is closely related to an increased demand for food as well as its increased wastage” (Bose, 2022). The lack of confrontation in the much-needed dialogue may be due to the limited choices available for humanity to address, which is uncomfortable for many governments and scientists. The control of the human population suggests controlling human life and human rights. In this case, the human right to live and/or procreate is under question. There is this unsettling theory that if the government can dictate who and how we procreate, it has the potential to give life to the limited discretion of who and how we perish. Some freedoms need to be considered in such a troubling dilemma.

While I agree that population control is a disheartening context, it must be considered, no matter how inhumane or uncomfortable. The need for an ongoing and impartial conversation is

unavoidable. There is an urgency to help and, at the very least, normalize the notion, research, and dinner table conversation of overpopulation. Cinema is the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s most superb storyteller, with films like *Avatar*, *Avengers: Endgame*, *Avatar: The Way of Water*, and *Avengers: Infinity War* listed as some of the top-grossing movies. These films have a massive command in their stories, enticing the world to watch and listen. With much ease, all these films (and many others) can be classified as ecocinema. Once we understand ecocinema, according to Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt, “In essence, we tend to agree that *all* films present productive ecocritical exploration and careful analysis can unearth engaging and intriguing perspectives on cinema’s various relationships with the world around us” (Rust et al., 2013). My goal within this framework is to present the film *Avengers: Infinity War* first as production of ecocinema and use an ecocritical exploration of Thanos (supervillain) as a “super ecologist.” Marvel films have a unique relationship in the cinematic world in that their product encompasses all demographics. Marvel cinema demographics capture gender with males 53% to females 47%, age with millennials 40%, Gen Xers 25%, Baby Boomers 26%, and Gen Zers 9%. Communities: urban 34%, suburban 42%, and rural 25%. Lastly, the political layout with Democrats 41%, Independents 33%, and 27% Republicans, according to Morning Consult (Alyssa Meyers, 2022). Race has been intentionally omitted due to the limitation of accounting for only the adults in this section.

Few films can speak of having this vast influence across America. It is unlikely that an American would not have watched at least one Marvel film, more so *Avengers: Infinity War* (*AIW*). As *AIW* is ranked among the top-grossing films, it is safe to suggest that most Americans have seen this film. Exploring the film as an ecocinema transforms the discourse of the film’s widespread cultural impact and brings online its environmental implications and propaganda. It would insult the storytelling and writers in the film industry to suggest that Marvel films are merely entertainment. All films are written with messages, many as deliberate as *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and others more subtle as in *AIW*.

Interesting as it may be, both of these films are making an argument for environmental issues. These approaches and many others are needed, but where *An Inconvenient Truth* may fail to reach and connect to specific demographics, *AIW* continues the discipline, practice, and discourse.

This paper aims to present *AIW* as a product equal to ecocinema but also to carry ecocinema into the upper echelon of popular culture in the film industry. *AIW* is more complex than simply classifying it as science fiction (Sci-fi), but in more depth, a modern film of dystopian and Malthus theme embedded in its core. This is consequential because society is experiencing the effects of environmental issues. There are few public settings where the masses can engage in these topics in an informative and non-hostile environment. Sure, most people will view a film as entertainment, but films have the capacity to entertain and educate, with the caveat of presenting the difficult conversations and themes of society. This may be the most effective way to address serious issues and concerns in modern society.

While films like “*An Inconvenient Truth*”, which goes directly into environmental issues, function as elongated lectures/documentaries with the potential to lose mass appeal. There is a sense of urgency resulting from environmental issues that requires something that can appeal to a more diverse audience. Popular culture is the vehicle to deliver societal concerns in a way that captives and engages the masses. However, the method in which film produces this awareness and consciousness is most effective in comic book films. *AIW* sits in this unique space, packing out the movie theaters nationwide and speaking to the significant environmental concerns. It presents ecocinema with arcing themes of dystopia, Malthus, and environmental issues in a method that draws in rather than repels.

Marvel’s *Avengers: Infinity War* is about the universe’s most capable and mightiest heroes assembled by the leadership of Tony Stark (Robert Downy Jr.), Steve Rogers (Chris Evans), and Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson). These heroes corral under the premise that there are greater evils from different worlds, galaxies, and universes that modern military defense cannot address. The Avengers (Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, The

Hulk, Black Widow, Vision, Wanda Maximoff, Hawkeye, and Falcon) are the response to those evils. While the Avengers have had success against some of their formidable Supervillains (Loki & Chitauri, and Ultron). There would be one supervillain who proves to be their most arduous nemesis: Thanos. Thanos is a citizen of the planet Titan, an advanced race of humanoid beings. Their planet was on the brink of collapse due to depleting resources crippled by overpopulation. Thanos presented a solution to the officials of Titan, which was to kill half of the planet’s population by invoking random selection. The officials of Titan rejected Thanos’ proposal, eventually causing a societal cataclysm that rendered the species functionally extinct, leaving Thanos as the only survivor (Marvel Cinematic Universe Wiki, n.d.).

Taking the lessons learned from his own experience, Thanos makes it his mission to bring perfect balance to the entire universe, which is on the brink of extinction. Earth becomes the next planet on his campaign. His mission is to retrieve six infinity stones spread throughout the universe. Once he has captured these stones, he explains he will be able to wipe out half of the Earth’s population with a snap of his fingers. Thanos is met with resistance from the Avengers ignited by his approach to acquiring these stones. He and his armada invaded the Earth’s atmosphere by means to commandeer the stones at all costs. There are no diplomacy conversations, just the likeness of a hostile takeover. Thanos does explain the reason for his invasion. During his campaign, he is driven by the echoing collapse of Titan and other planets, which is on the verge of extinction if there is no course correction. He explains that this is his destiny. A portion of that knowledge is what happens to a planet that does not significantly adjust its practices within its population growth and the available resources.

Thanos, also known as the Mad Titan, successfully eliminates half of the Earth’s population with the snap of his fingers. He is successful, and the Supervillain is victorious for the first time in the Avenger trilogy films. The Avengers have failed and lack a suitable response, an experience none of them has ever known. Grief and melancholy are the only expressions available to them. Thanos is transported to a timeless space

where he is greeted by the child version of Gamora (his daughter). She asks him, “Did you do it?” He replies with sadness, “Yes”. She asks, “What did it cost?” He states, “Everything”. The film concludes by showing the results of Thanos’s “snap”. Thanos makes a climactic exit, where he does not assume power and domination over the Earth to rule. Instead, Thanos retires to a pastoral landscape, flush with vegetation and wildlife, that provides basic human needs. In other words, Thanos retires to the world he desperately attempted to create.

### **Avengers: Infinity War Contributions to Scholarship**

On the surface, comic book films do not sit on the prowl of traditional genres of film studies. Comics have a veneer of cultural identity associated with children. However, holding this position insults the foundation of comic books and how they function as a tool of distraction and discourse for adults. Comic books have historical narratives of literature for soldiers during World War II. “During World War II comics dealing with war and crime found many readers among soldiers stationed abroad” (Britannica, 2022). Comic books are the ideal medium to speak of the horrors in the world that humanity battles daily. Comic books addressed and initiated conversations about serious subject matters worldwide (Britannica, 2022). Sub-Mariner or Namor (featured in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*) was the first character created and released by Timely, later known as Marvel. Prince Namor was the byproduct of a relationship with American explorer Leonard McKenzie and Princess Fen of the undersea kingdom of Atlantis, making Namor Prince of Atlantis. Namor was not positioned as the hero but rather as a supervillain. “The Sub-Mariner was proven to be a menace to humankind in general, rampaging through cities as he railed against the crimes of ‘surface dwellers,’ but he soon turned his attention elsewhere. In 1941, he was given his own comic, in which the Nazis rashly attacked Atlantis, and for the rest of World War II, Namor proved to be their nemesis (Britannica, 2022). In its pre-cinema production, Marvel did the ecology work in its publications, as Namor attacked those “surface dwellers” or humans that threatened the life/society of the sea (Atlantis). The transition from comic books to film was just that, a

transition. Social and environmental issues continued to be central to comic book films, more so the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Thanos in the *AIW* is carrying the torch passed to him from a tradition initiated by Marvel’s first comic, which is to address a significant environmental tragedy on Earth. To better understand *AIW* and Thanos, the film must be engaged as a topic centered on the environmental struggle of overpopulation and occupying the space of a dystopian film. Frigerio states, “The risk of an overpopulated world is a recurring theme in dystopian movies. Generally, these movies do not provide precise numbers about the future’s demographic growth. Three main problems are generally considered in dystopian movies. First, the bounds of demographic growth are dictated by the limited availability of resources globally. Second, solutions to counter the risk of overpopulation must be identified. Third, an unexpected rise in infertility rates might threaten the survival of humanity. Many dystopian movies sustain the idea that an overpopulated world will be unsustainable” (Frigerio, 2019). From this understanding by Frigerio, *AIW* is the production of a dystopian film that, in every possible format, reflects the characteristics of an ecocinema. Thanos is an ecologist of the best kind. He has the knowledge that many refuse to welcome the resources and power to set the environmental issues properly without hegemonic sanction. Thanos recognizes the catastrophe that awaits humanity because Titan has reaped the consequence of ignoring his pleas and supplications for environmental alterations.

Dystopian films are not a new concept in the cinematic industry. However, *Avengers: Infinity War (AIW)* has carried the tradition into the upper echelon of popular culture. The dystopian genre shows its malleability to occupy (eco) spaces in mass consumption through *AIW*. “Films such as *Pandorum (2009)*, *Idiocracy (2006)*, *What Happened to Monday (2017)*, and *Inferno (2016)*, along with *AIW*, maintains that “the core idea is simple but clear: a world (or universe) with finite resources can only be inhabited by a limited number of people; otherwise the consequences are going to be nefarious for all” (Frigerio, 2019). The point where dystopian films are on one accord is the planet’s overpopulation; however, they part

ways on how to address these concerns. Frigerio identifies two categories in which the solution to overpopulation can be addressed. One, the artificial increase of human death, or second, the restrictions on the freedom to procreate. However, Frigerio does not acknowledge what he presents as an ethical approach. In all its gratuitousness, no solution brings about euphoria or even a consensus. Thanos and the many ecologists and environmentalists see and understand the magnitude of the crisis before them. They are willing and have made concessions to ensure the planet's survival amid an ethical dilemma. What gives life to this positionality is what Robin L. Murry and Joseph K. Heumann call "environmental nostalgia" in Eco-disaster movies. They state "...harks back to a world where humans and nature coexist harmoniously"...*"Omega Man (1971), Soylent Green (1973), and Silent Running (1971)* all embrace the memory of an environment and ecology that no longer exists on their Earth-an eco-memory. At the same time, though, these films reflect a nostalgia for a world that still exists in its view both in the 1970s and today (Murray and Heumann, 2005).

Environmental nostalgia serves as a source of motivation for Thanos and those within these eco-disaster films. The hope is constructed on nostalgia about how the planet (Titian) was peaceful and abundant. In many cases, these films and the case with nostalgia always house a bias in remembering the past. The concerns of other equally important issues (including other environmental concerns) are conveniently omitted. Classism, racism, sexism, martial law, and tyrannical rule are magically forgotten as if the planet's former state was a utopia. This form of nostalgia holds an eerie echo of former President Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" campaign, leaving many to question when America was ever great. As with environmental nostalgia, this focus on a former utopia can be selective. Overpopulation is a genuine environmental concern that many nations have attempted to ignore while other nations have taken action to address it. "The People's Republic of China – the most populated country of the world with around 1.4 billion inhabitants – is the only state that adopted a "one-child policy" from 1979 to 2015. Positively, such measures have constrained the population boom in China, and in

addition, it has increased the propensity of Chinese families to invest in the education of their daughters" (Hesketh and Zhu, 1997). Similarly, in India – the second most populated country in the world, with 1.3 billion citizens – 12 states opted for the application of a "two-child policy." The adopted norm excludes all those with more than two children from any governmental position and guarantees maternity benefits only for the first two babies (The Hunger Project, 2013).

While some nations have considered overpopulation and its impact on society, many nations, namely America, have turned a blind eye. It is not until recently, with food shortages and price increases, that Americans have begun grappling with overpopulation's devastation. However, mainstream media in America still refuses to call the issue out directly by name. The shortage of an item directly reflects the limited resources available to the population. America's answer to many of these shortages is not to seek or speak to population awareness/control but to attempt to throw money at this issue. Unfortunately, there is a selective process of who will have access during these shortages over those who will not, based solely on income. Those with limited to no resources will starve and possibly die. The State of Tennessee is among many states attempting to create legislation that makes it illegal to feed the homeless. "A new state law says if you don't have a health certificate, handing out something as small as a cheeseburger could get you a ticket" (Hara, n.d.). This paradox creates a fascinating discourse on how and why persons and populations will have access. Much of American society fails to consider this selective yet legal genocide. However, when an ecologist from the planet Titian decides to visit Earth and correct the human population imbalance, he is perceived as a villain/mad.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review will take a chronological approach to the ever-shifting conversations in ecocinema and the sub-genre within and surrounding this theory. The *Environmental Nostalgia in Eco-Disaster Movies of the Early 1970s* by Robin L. Murry and Joseph K. Heumann in 2005 speaks to Earth Day and the environmental policies it represented in the 1970s. Ronald Bailey

argues that Earth Day 1970 galvanized prophecy of apocalyptic context. He refers to this sense of alarm as it relates to the future conditions of the Earth as an eco-disaster, which has arrived in its final scene. Bailey makes it a type of life work to discredit any production that identifies as “doomsday” prophets. In his summary, the environmental topic positions wealth as a form of profit, as the potential where “forest growth will increase, and air and water quality will begin to improve” (Murry & Hemann, 2005). This disposition of Bailey is informed by a reflection of when humans and nature’s interactions were harmonious. There are limited tones of preservation but sentiments of development (capital). In classic American capitalism fashion, he stands on the premise that money has the answer to bring the environment back into balance.

Early production of environmental movements and Bailey stood in contention with *Omega Man* (1971), *Soylent Green* (1973), and *Silent Running* (1971). These films reflected what Bailey was arguing, an attempt to return to a more glorious and pastoral time. These were films centered on an eco-memory, “the memory of an environment and ecology that no longer exists on their Earth” (Murry & Hemann, 2005). These films insert a hero who can recall a time of lush Earth, bursting life and beauty with a type of nostalgia. Murry and Hemann state, “*Omega Man* includes two nostalgic looks at the environment - one from the perspective of the “infected” zombie-like humans, and the other from those humans who are or are trying to become disease-free. *Soylent Green*, too, foregrounds two different nostalgic visions of Earth’s past - one from the intellectuals’ (the Books’) perspective, sometimes in relation to food, and the other from that of the corporations at the point of a termination. In *Silent Running*, food is one manifestation of eco-memory; as Freeman grows, the other crewmen no longer wish to eat. Freeman also looks back nostalgically on Earth covered in trees as in the biosphere-enclosed forest he presumably saves” (Murry & Hemann, 2005). The American movie industry has a practice of responding to cultural trends, not for the sake of being an advocate for the perseveration of the Earth but for the possible economic gain this trend affords. As directors and writers show interest in sharing insight and conversations on

environmental concerns, the industry is more than willing to produce and distribute this work if a profit is to be gained. The environmental movement held a more distinct position than the Civil Rights Movement and Women’s Rights movement, for the environmental movement held a myriad of supporters across classifications (race, gender, education, social status). Murry and Hemann use *Soylent Green*, *Omega Man*, and *Silent Running* as the discourse of eco-disaster films of the 1970s. These films hold a nostalgia for what was and the potential of what can be again. While there is a cry for the eco-disaster, there is still hope, and the hope is intertwined with environmental nostalgia.

Thomas Halper and Douglas Muzzio speak of Dystopia films in their article *Hobbes in the City: Urban Dystopias in American Movies*. The film *Demolition Man* (1993) is brought online to frame their argument. “The year is 2032. The State is your nanny. Anything that is not good for you is illegal: beef, drugs, alcohol, sex, cigarettes, fattening foods. You get fined for cursing. Though there is an underground underclass, most people are so mellow that there is virtually no crime, and the few criminals are never violent” (Halper & Muzzio, 2007). The government of this Southern California megalopolis speaks for “the people” and exclaims, “they just wanted the madness over”, so they engineered a “perfect society. San Angeles was a beacon of order” (Halper & Muzzio, 2007). This portrayal of a future city is expected, falling in line with society in films by displaying some extremes. In these formations of extremeness, there is always the construction of a utopian civilization. However, utopia represents an unrealistic articulation of life, more so than life on Earth from a storytelling vantage point. Life is wrapped up too conveniently and neatly for any long-term sustainability. “The problem with all utopias is stasis; the problem with all utopia movies is boredom. Movies need movement, change, and conflict, whether emotional or physical. Hence, the appeal of the standard dystopian scenario of a brave band of brothers (and sometimes sisters) in combat with their hellish world” (Halper & Muzzio, 2007).

This article presents the problematic production of utopia in films and the fact that Hobbesian is a futuristic city in films and society.

The city achieves this through two forms of dystopia. One, cities are places of chaos and disorder where all citizens are subject to depredation. Two, the cities are leviathans, invoking order as a response to humanity's security needs. Halper and Muzzion remind the reader that the utopian concept has always been a pursuit of those who migrated to America to believe in a better life. America was the "new country, new world, new Eden, new Jerusalem, affording to those a new start and what Crèvecoeur called "the new man" (Crèvecoeur, 1783/1957). These were ripe spaces in the nineteenth century for the discourse of utopian publications during the transition into industrialization and urbanization. Halper and Muzzio states, "Utopias have always focused on societies, not individuals, positing that through reason (perhaps augmented by faith or science) it is possible to conceive a community that affords us the best possible life. Not a perfect life, for most utopians accept that humanity is flawed" (Halper & Muzzio, 2007). The driving force behind utopian ideas is the emphasis on happiness, peace, freedom, or justice. In many cases, when a type of utopia is the engine driving civilizations, it gives way to other forms of oppression and isolation, noting Colonialism, Nazism, and corrupt totalitarianism or Communism, leading to the production of World War I, II Holocaust, Civil War, and the Civil Rights Movement.

However, dystopias function in the same way as utopias, at least from the standpoint of a critique of contemporary society. Halper and Muzzio suggest dystopias present a different critique that is not influenced by hope but rather a reflection of anger and despair in foreshadowing where cities are headed or currently reside. To begin to grasp and wrestle with dystopian discourse, the use of dystopian films is the preferred medium. "This is because conflict, technology, and sin are generally assumed to weigh heavier in cities than anywhere else. Partly, too, the city setting is a corollary of a longstanding bias against cities" (Halper & Muzzio, 2007). When urban dystopia is engaged, the city falls into either lived chaos or as lived "iron fist" control. Both echo Thomas Hobbes's theory, which states that every person desires and longs for power and with that comes the resistance to other person's power. Films of the 1980s were a

factory for dystopian films, *Escape from New York (1981)* and *Robocop (1987)*. The entire *Batman* franchise has been a dystopian film of a city in chaos, where Gotham City is plagued with a plethora of rage, anger, and struggles for power. Nicholson-Cole suggests that visual media offers many advantages for communicating motivational messages, including "the capacity to convey strong messages, making them easy to remember; condense complex information and communicate new content; provide the basis for personal thoughts and conversations, contributing to people's memory and issue-awareness; [and] communicate ideas in an instant" (Nicholson-Cole, 2005).

When embarking on this terrain of ecocinema, the element of agency must remain present; the audience has to feel as if the solution to the issues is something they can accomplish and a sense of value in their work on the issue. In other words, it cannot seem like a waste of time. Ecocinema is attempting to galvanize the influence of film to highlight concerns about climate change. *The Day After Tomorrow* in the USA, UK, and Japan, which has shown along with *The Age of Stupid*, and Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* are some of those products. The format in which *The Age of Stupid* attempts to do this is a collaboration of documentary, emotional and dramatic appeal, facts, and animation. According to Howell, the reasoning behind exploring the impact of *The Age of Stupid* is that "Firstly, although the film makes an emotional appeal, it is essentially another information tool. Secondly, a dominant discourse utilized by the film is the disaster narrative, not only the fictional element but also, for example, through the use of footage of the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina. Arguably, it appeals to fear as a motivator. Thirdly, although 'Not Stupid' action packs containing a brief list of suggestions under the heading 'What can I do?' were given out at many early screenings, the film itself does not directly give information about how viewers can respond to the issues raised" (Howell, 2011). Howell's article is less concerned with assuming that ecocinema has a positive effect, but she is invested in the qualitative results of these films. Asking the question, what does the impact look like? Howell implements pre- and post-research result

gathering. Simply, there was a questionnaire given to the would-be audience before watching the film, serving as a baseline for the two-post questionnaire after viewing the film. One post questionnaire is directly after the view of the film and another 10-14 weeks after seeing the film. The results of Howell's research are clear and constant, exhibiting that the desire to want change and positive impact on climate change has seen little deviation. Unfortunately, the actual production of these concerns was less likely to happen. The hurdle of employing the work of climate change is still pressing. Howell identifies the vital role and the need for ecocinema to continue the work of advocacy and policy on environmental change.

*Malthus at the Movies: Science, Cinema, and Activism around ZPG and Soylent Green* by Jesse Olszynko-Gryn and Patrick Ellis. They offer a brief description of Malthusian. Malthusian had its peak in the late 1960s and early 70s. Its main point of alarm is environmental concern related to world population growth and its control. There are two vantage points where Malthusian can operate. These two vantage points are articulated in the films *Z.P.G. Zero Population Growth* (1972) and *Soylent Green* (1973). There is a reimaged totalitarian order banning childbirth and imposing punishment up to and including death in *Z.P.G.* *Soylent Green* speaks to the domination of society by corporations controlling access to food and resources, which produces cannibalism. Both films produce undertones of environmentalism politics, even though the general understanding of Malthusian speaks to environmentalism and birth control. The 1970s produced new fears like Watergate, the Vietnam War, and the oil crises, the perfect incubators for Hollywood's production of dystopian films. The flagship film for the Neo-Malthusian was *Soylent Green*. "Now widely regarded as the first film to explicitly mention the "greenhouse effect," *Soylent Green* has come to be embraced both within and beyond the academy as a prescient cautionary tale" (Olszynko-Gryn & Ellis, 2018). This article aims to excavate the intersections of science, activism, and media in the neo-Malthusian school of thought concerning population and means of control. Olszynko-Gryn and Ellis take the position that the haphazard approach of scientists and politicians toward film and fiction in the discourse of neo-Malthusian is

grossly neglected. This becomes pronounced when understanding that an accurate analysis of the neo-Malthusian movement is at the foundation, focused on reaching the mass population of the world.

The article highlights that film was not the genesis or "fire starter" but more of a passing of the baton as technology and film became the media of choice, surpassing novels. However, novels were the birthplace, or better yet, ground zero for the discourse of environmentalism. Not only did professional science fiction writers forecast ecological doom, but prominent ecologists also fictionalized their own predictions. Take Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968), the two most influential books on American environmentalism. (Gottlieb, 1993) From a literary perspective, the enduring success of *Silent Spring* is today partly attributed to Carson's effective blend of science fact and fiction, especially in her book's evocative preface, "A Fable for Tomorrow." Unfortunately, whether than fact or fiction, these ideas will be met with opposition when there is a fear that they may have considerable influence on the mass population. Carson was no exception to the rule. Scientists dedicated time to discredit any possible truth within her publication, suggesting her work should be approached with the same legitimacy as the TV show *The Twilight Zone* or *The Outer Limits*. However, Carson was not alone, "Ehrlich too invited criticism by presenting readers to *The Population Bomb* with not one, but three "doomsday scenarios" variously combining mass famine, plague, and nuclear war" (Ehrlich, 1968). Ironically, this implication was taken literally, and ZPG, other organizations, and individuals understood that print publications were limited in their reach; motion pictures became the new medium of choice.

Olszynko-Gryn and Ellis explain ZPG production of *World Population!* (1973), this was a short animated film projecting the progression of population growth globally in synchronization with a human heartbeat. *World Population!* was one the most successful in that it was one the most viewed, which is Malthus's goal. This was not to suggest that *World Population!* was the first of its kind, but Olszynko-Gryn and Ellis share, "Millions



had viewed CBS Reports' Emmy-award winning "The Population Explosion," a television documentary about India, in 1959. Canada's National Film Board produced *People by the Billions* (1960) and *Population Explosion* (1967), while the Ford Foundation's National Educational Television (NET, later replaced by PBS) broadcast a six-part series on *The Population Problem* in 1965. *The Squeeze* (1964), a short experimental film about overpopulation by time-lapse pioneer Hilary Harris, won a Golden Gate Award for best fiction at the San Francisco Film Festival. Furthermore, most famously, the Population Council commissioned Walt Disney's *Family Planning* (1967). This became the catalyst of a "thriving subgenre of science fiction, subsequently dubbed demographic-dystopian, or "demodystopian," was not only published in paperback but also broadcast on radio and television" (Domingo, 2008).

According to Olszynko-Gryn and Ellis, this article set out to extend the historical understanding of population growth and control outside that of academia and government intervention, regulated to those scholars of the Malthusian movement. The film was the vehicle by which public debates and conversations on population growth, birth regulation, and environmental concerns were argued. "As we have shown for both *Z.P.G.* and *Soylent Green*, unless one follows the popcorn, even to a mediocre or downright bad film that failed to make a lasting impression, one cannot adequately understand the Malthusian moment. Grassroots activism around population control was about more than elite intellectual and political discourses. As we have argued in this article, fictionalized and filmed scenarios played a constitutive role in environmental and reproductive activism and in the imperative of both movements to reach a large number of people" (Olszynko-Gryn and Ellis, 2018).

### **Avengers: Infinity War as Neo-Dystopian and Malthus Film**

By no means is *Avengers: Infinity War* (*AIW*) the first comic to venture into ecological discourse and dystopia. "Charles Burns's *Black Hole* broke new ground in terms of content and form as an avant-garde horror comic, portraying teen angst in the

face of a mysterious epidemic in mid-1970s suburban Seattle. While one of the book's focuses is the sexual awakening of its characters, the setting and art of *Black Hole* emphasize how conditions of health, ecology, and identity are intertwined with its form and plot. The environment becomes increasingly marred by refuse as disease spreads and causes physical mutations that help interrogate the relationships between humans, animals, and ecology. Ultimately, *Black Hole's* horrific elements combined with its comical format allow Burns to portray the ecological backdrop of *Black Hole* without reducing it to an anthropocentric metaphor" (Kunyosying, 2014). There are authors like Burns who leave this discourse in publications; however, films like *AIW* pick up ecological dystopian conversation for the twenty-first century. The encouraging aspect is that *AIW* and similar films can incorporate visually what printed publications cannot. This provides the film with more power and influence over the audience. Where publications create freedom for the reader to construct their own psychological imagery and visual aesthetics, films, and movie theaters commandeer these forms of freedom with the goal of retaining as much influence of how and what the audience hears, sees, and thinks. The film industry rarely invests in the ideas and premonitions of its audiences. The film industry is driven by two significant agendas: revenue and imparting its own ideology. Paul Jenkins states, "The best films encourage us to think about ourselves and how we can improve our lives and society; they show us how to better understand one another through compassion and empathy while encouraging critical thinking about how we got here and the direction we're headed" (Jenkins, 2022).

Using close reading and eco-criticism watching of *AIW*, the possibility to unpack its elements and functions as a neo-dystopia and Malthus ecocinema are exposed to display how vital and effective films like *AIW* are to continuing this work. Thanos is a distant memory and reflection of *Soylent Green's* Robert Thorn, a man who can remember when the world was lush with vegetation, an abundance of space, healthy foods, clean water, and a picturesque life that is no more. In New York City, population growth is

overtaking every aspect of life. Ironically, many of the powerful and wealthy are not touched by these decadent conditions, and the call for panic is present, but it is suppressed by high society, a type of gas lighting. Thanos also knows of a beautiful world with plentiful vegetation, food, water, and space. Thanos tells Doctor Strange, “It was beautiful. Titan was like most planets; too many mouths, not enough to go around” (Marvel Cinematic Universe Wiki, n.d.). He understands the impact of overpopulation firsthand, as his home planet experienced it. Where Thanos and Thorn both hold solidarity is their ability to speak to life before overpopulation was a concern. A life where there was plenty for all. Where Thanos and Thorn’s part ways are that Thorn is not interested in addressing the core issue of overpopulation, which is understood to be at the foundation of many of Earth’s environmental concerns. Thorn is taking the Avengers’ position to maintain order and keep the peace. There are elements and variations of violence used to invoke peace. The state of affairs in *Soylent Green* is manufactured and manipulated by corporate greed. The film’s narrative does not provide any foreseeable solution, possibilities, or answers to the problem.

Different are the means proposed by dystopian stories to reduce the number of people living in the world. For example, in the movie *In Time* (2011), people have been genetically modified to age up to 25 years, and they have one additional year of life afterward. To survive, they must purchase additional time, which has become the new currency (Frigerio, 2019). “...dystopias generally are of two kinds: one portrays cities as places of chaos and disorder, whose inhabitants live in a state of nature where none is safe from the depredations of their fellows. The other depicts cities as Leviathans, imposing order and stability in response to the ineradicable human drive for security (Halper & Muzzio, 2007). *AIW*, however, presents a different type of dystopian film. On the surface, there appear to be no issues or problems in America or on Earth. *AIW* positions the narrative as if all is well in the world. It is just another sunny day in New York City. Nothing like Thorn’s New York City, not to say that it does not exist in *AIW*, just that this is not the section of New York City that is represented. In *AIW*, New York City is more of a downtown Brooklyn and avoids

showing the Bedford-Stuyvesant side of Brooklyn. The film intentionally presents the idea that Earth/America holds a veneer of prosperity and tranquility.

The presence of Thanos and his henchmen is nothing more than a disruption to the lives of Americans/Earthlings/New Yorkers. There is no actual state of “dystopia”. Thanos is the bringer and harbor of dystopian doom from the perception of those occupying power and wealth spaces. This makes it simple for world leaders to suggest means to annihilate Thanos, who has come to destroy the veneer of selective prosperity and tranquility. As Tony Starks demonstrates in his dialogue with his long-term girlfriend, Pepper Potts, they discuss their future involving children and marital arrangements. Starks explains to one of Thanos’s henchmen, “Sorry, Earth is closed”. Thanos sees and gives voice to the communities in America/Earth/NYC living in dystopia but conveniently ignored. The Avengers do not fight environmental issues, corrupt political policies, and corporate domination. The Avengers are policing those attempting to dismantle what the government and corporations have established. The film suggests that environmental issues and concerns occur outside mainstream locations. The urgent response to catastrophic environmental issues does not have to be reactionary. There is a possible proactive approach at society’s disposal, should it choose to engage in environmental issues honestly.

Malthus explained that “if unchecked, people breed ‘geometrically’ (1, 2, 4, 8, 16, etc.) ... [but] the production of food can only increase ‘arithmetically’ (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc.)”. Thus, Malthus believed that “if people keep reproducing in an uncontrolled geometric manner, they will eventually be unable to produce enough food for themselves” (Mastrodomenico, 2018). Mastrodomenico points out, “Except, as our reader points out, this is only a temporary fix. Imagine that Thanos succeeds in his plan. How long would it take for the population to return to its previous level?” (Mastrodomenico, 2018). However, given the devastation, this position would suggest that life would continue as usual. When, in fact, the conversation would more than likely be centered around what caused Earth to receive such a traumatic turn of events. What triggered an

invasion of Thanos, and how do they prevent another invasion? This type of loss (elimination of half the population) offers no conceptual framework to process healthy, productive, and helpful means of mourning in traditional practices. As the world attempts to grapple with health, social, and economic impacts, mental health is widely affected. COVID-19 has sparked and amplified much more severe mental health problems. A significant number of people have reported psychological distress and symptoms of depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress. There have been worrying signs of more widespread suicidal thoughts and behaviors, including among healthcare workers (World Health Organization, 2022). This is a public response to those who died from the Coronavirus, which took the lives of 6,897,025 humans worldwide, according to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023). Earth's population is 7.8 billion; half of that would be 3.9 billion people removed from existence, and this would produce a response that would dwarf that of the Coronavirus casualty.

### Conclusion

When Thanos set his agenda toward Earth, this was no longer an experiment or some haphazard hypothesis. The story of how Thanos met his adopted daughter Gamora tells why she was furious that he murdered half her planet, she passionately states, "They were happy". Thanos explains, "I saved you, going to bed hungry, scrounging for scraps. Your planet was on the brink of collapse (like Titan). I'm the one who stopped that. Do you know what's happened since then? The children born... have known nothing but full bellies and clear skies, and it's a paradise." Thanos can provide what few dystopian films have done successfully to showcase the overwhelming success of his campaign. This is what divides Thanos from the rest of the ecologists and politicians. He can move beyond theory, working with actual data and substantial results. Gamora believes he is insane as he states, "Little one, it's a simple calculus. This universe is finite, its resources finite. If life is left unchecked, life will cease to exist. It needs correction. Gamora yells, "You don't know that! He counters, "I'm the only one that knows that. At least, I'm the only one with the will to act on it."

The status of the Earth's environment is not a secret. Thanos recognizes that those who are aware fail to act to preserve the planet. The classification of madness never means that one is wrong. It is possible to be mad/mentally challenged and be correct simultaneously. Mad is used to discredit and disregard. Thanos's presence is problematic for Earth because he challenges how Earth/America perceives its state of environmental issues. No one ever claims that Thanos is a liar or that he is wrong. It is his method that is brought into question, the shattering illusion of peace and happiness on Earth and in America. Not to mention his choice of random selection/lottery as he determines which half of the Earth's population will remain. This is a method that is supported by many. Stone states, "Scholars in a variety of disciplines—including political science, philosophy, economics, and law—thus now agree that lotteries (random selection) may be more important than conventional wisdom suggests. They also agree that lotteries should play an expanded role in future political and social decision-making" (Stone, 2009). Thanos symbolizes the choices Earth does not want to make, but the conversation must take place in honest and factual discourse.

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