

## ENVIRONMENTAL-MAFIA. THE ROLE OF LITERATURE IN EDUCATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION PROJECTS

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**Abstract:** The judicial systems of many countries contemplate the notion of "environmental crime". A crime always involves suffering; then, through the notion of environmental crime, the law recognizes the existence of a pain inflicted to the entire Earth. A narrative focused on "Environmental Crimes" allows readers to experience (virtually) this "pain of the planet." The purpose of this intervention is to illustrate how the thriller, thanks to the identification mechanisms, may contribute to the formation of an "environmental consciousness" able to feel empathically the planet's pain and prevent it. In other words, it is assumed that fiction can play an important role in environmental education projects.

**Keywords:** environmental education, fiction, .

### Introduction

My aim is to analyze the role of literary fiction in the definition of massive environmental sensitivity. To explain the problem I'll start from a text by one of the most famous contemporary Italian writers: Roberto Saviano. In his non-fiction novel, *Gomorrah*, Saviano illustrated the tremendous power of the economic empire of the Neapolitan Mafia, the Camorra, and for this reason he was sentenced to death by the mafia itself. In the last chapter of the book, he speaks of the "Land of Fires", of the territory where, through criminal organizations, thousands of tonnes of toxic or polluting waste are illegally disposed of. The following passage clarifies many aspects of this business, but also tells us something about social attitudes that make it possible:

The image of a landfill, pit, or quarry is increasingly a concrete and visible synonym for deadly danger for nearby residents. The Giugliano-Villaricca- Qualiano triangle near Naples has come to be known as the Land of Fires. Thirtynine landfills, twenty-seven of which contain hazardous waste. An area with a 30 percent annual increase in landfills. When a site approaches capacity, the trash is set on fire. A tried and true method. Gypsy boys are the best at it. The clans give them 50 euros for each mound burned. The technique is simple. They circumscribe each hill with videocassette tapes, pour alcohol and gas all over it, twist the tape ends to form an enormous fuse, then move away, putting a cigarette lighter to the fuse. In a few seconds there's a forest of flames, as if they'd launched napalm bombs. They throw foundry remnants, glue, and naphtha dregs into the fire. Dense black smoke and flames contaminate every inch of land with dioxins. The local agriculture, which used to export fruit and vegetables as far as Scandinavia, is collapsing. Plants sprout diseased, and the land grows infertile. But this disaster and the farmers' rage are only the umpteenth advantage for the Camorra: desperate landowners sell off their fields, and the clans acquire new landfill sites at low—very low—costs. Meanwhile people are constantly dying of tumors.(Saviano 2008: 223)

What Saviano tells is not an absolute novelty, it is not a discovery. The " Land of Fires " is inhabited by two million people, and the mountains of garbage is plain to all: the strength of Saviano's book is not in the choice of the facts, but in the power of the word that denounces. To denounce is to make known who ought to have a fact that otherwise would be hidden, but in Italian literary practice, denouncing means, more often than not, to turn into a story not what is concealed but what has been circulating for a long time in the vox populi, as if the reality, to be really such, needs a sort of literary consecration.

«The world was so recent – writes Garcia Marquez in *One hundred years of solitude* - that many things lacked names, and in order to indicate them it was necessary to point». So, the literature of denunciation has this function, that of providing a vocabulary to reality. Literature does not disclose the world of environmental disasters, but it does make this world within us not only in a rational but emotional way: literature, through the mechanism of imitation, forces us

to suffer together with the planet who suffers and this suffering is the starting point for any environmental education project. To make this statement clearer, we read again a passage from Saviano:

The bosses have had no qualms about saturating their towns with toxins and letting the lands that surround their estates go bad. The life of a boss is short; the power of a clan, between vendettas, arrests, killings, and life sentences, cannot last for long. To flood an area with toxic waste and circle one's city with poisonous mountain ranges is a problem only for someone with a sense of social responsibility and a long-term concept of power. (Saviano 2008: 214)

I once decided to cross the Land of Fires on foot. I tied a handkerchief over my mouth and nose, the way the Gypsy boys do when they set fires. We looked like a gang of cowboys in a desert of burned garbage. I walked through lands devoured by dioxins, dumped on by trucks, and so gutted by fire that the holes would never completely be erased. The smoke around me wasn't dense, but more like a sticky patina on the skin, making me feel damp. Not far from the fires was a series of houses, each one sitting on an enormous X of reinforced concrete. Homes resting on closed landfills and unauthorized dumps, their potential exhausted now that they'd been filled to the point of exploding and everything combustible had been burned. Yet the clans managed to reconvert them to building zones. After all, officially they were pasture and farmlands. And so they built charming clusters of small villas. The terrain was unstable, however; landslides could occur and chasms suddenly open, so a fretwork of reinforced concrete propped up the dwellings, securing them. The houses were affordable. Everyone knew they were standing on tons of trash, but given the chance to own their own home, office clerks, factory workers, and retirees don't look a gift horse in the mouth. (Saviano 2008: 224)

These words make us realize that the first obstacle to the path of environmental education is the failure to acknowledge the danger. So are the bosses of the mafia who scatter poisons in their own land, as ordinary citizens who build their homes on that land, place the times of ecological apocalypse, but also the shorter ones of the inexorable decline of a circumscribed territory, outside of the temporal horizon of their lives; they are convinced that the consequences of their acts will not concern them, nor their children, and even think that so far distant consequences are not even related to their gestures and that maybe in the meantime someone will find the way to clean where they are got dirty.

The first idea to be fought in a process of environmental empowerment is the idea that the environment is not a part of our life, which is something strange to it. Literary imitation works in the opposite direction, bringing within our lives and our experience something that does not belong to us. If we read the Odyssey, The sufferings of a Greek warrior thousands of years ago become our sufferings: we are anxious for him, we wonder if he will ever return to Ithaca, We wonder if he will ever return to Ithaca, if he will ever embrace Penelope again, and if, after returning home, he will be able to defeat the Proces that occupy the palace and make an attempt on the bride's virtue. We do not have the same emotional attitude when we read a book of Greek history; rational thought allows us to understand the lives of men who lived in such a great distance in time and space, but it is the emotional intelligence that makes us grasp Ulysses' modernity, which makes us understand that Ulysses are us. Likewise, we can read dozens of essays on the dramatic situation of pollution, but only when the environment becomes a character of a story we feel its closeness to our existence: the empathic power of fiction is even stronger than reality and physical proximity.

Siri Hustvedt says:

Fictions are born of the same faculty that transmutes experience into the narratives we remember explicitly but which are formed unconsciously. Like episodic memories and dreams, fiction reinvents deeply emotional material into meaningful stories, even though in the novel, characters and plots are not necessarily anchored in actual events. And we do not have to be Cartesian dualists to think of imagination as a bridge between a timeless core sensorimotor affective self and the fully self-conscious, reasoning, and/or narrating linguistic cultural self, rooted in the subjective-intersubjective realities of time and space. Writing fiction, creating an imaginary world, is, it seems, rather like remembering what never happened. (Hustved 2011: 195)

## Fiction as “Futur studies”

As we have seen, the first element necessary for environmental education is the projection to a future that is not our individual future, but the future of a society, if not the future of all humanity. In other words, to be truly aware of environmental damage, we must look beyond the horizon of the next two generations and to do so we must use the tools of imagination, fiction or, to say, science fiction. From its origins, science fiction has divided literary criticism into two distinct factions: those who believed it a literary genre of pure entertainment and, ultimately, corruption of reality; and those who argued that the "literature of anticipation" had the ability to warn against dangers to appear in the future but generated by attitudes of the present. The latter preferred, within science fiction, a very important sub-genre that today we generally call "dystopia".

Dystopia is an imagined place or state in which everything is unpleasant or bad, typically a totalitarian or environmentally degraded one.

The opposite of utopia

This is the definition of Dystopia offered by the Oxford dictionary.

A good example of political dystopia has been offered by Orwell's *1984*, while the end-millennium environmental dystopian imagery is surely marked by the movie *The Matrix*. The function of dystopian fiction is, for our society, very similar to that of some texts of teleological content and, in particular, is very similar to the function that has, in Christian context, the Apocalypse of St. John: the dystopia, like the Book of Revelation, are threats and warnings at the same time, they are the image of a future far away from the present time, but whose construction begins in the present or, perhaps it has already begun in the past, a building based on sin, sin against God, for believers, sin against nature, in a materialistic conception. In two thousand years, that is, in the time spent between the editing of the last book of the New Testament and the release of *The Matrix*, humanity has always needed to adjust its behavior basing on the narrative prefiguration of a world destroyed by evil. This is an anthropological necessity that we can not ignore in the design of environmental education interventions.

Dystopian fiction says with great clarity how tomorrow's world will be if we do not modify our environmental behaviors today. And here's how, in 1973, a great Italian writer, Italo Calvino, who had never been to China, imagined the Chinese cities of the future:

The city of Leonia refashions itself every day: every morning the people wake between fresh sheets, wash with just-unwrapped cakes of soap, wear brand-new clothing, take from the latest model refrigerator still unopened tins, listening to the last-minute jingles from the most up-to-date radio.

On the sidewalks, encased in spotless plastic bags, the remains of yesterday's Leonia await the garbage truck. Not only squeezed tubes of toothpaste, blown-out light bulbs, newspapers, containers, wrappings, but also boilers, encyclopedias, pianos, porcelain dinner services. It is not so much by the things that each day are manufactured, sold, bought that you can measure Leonia's opulence, but rather by the things that each day are thrown out to make room for the new. So you begin to wonder if Leonia's true passion is really, as they say, the enjoyment of new and different things, and not, instead, the joy of expelling, discarding, cleansing itself of a recurrent impurity. The fact is that street cleaners are welcomed like angels, and their task of removing the residue of yesterday's existence is surrounded by a respectful silence, like a ritual that inspires devotion, perhaps only because once things have been cast off nobody wants to have to think about them further.

Nobody wonders where, each day, they carry their load of refuse. Outside the city, surely; but each year the city expands, and the street cleaners have to fall farther back. The bulk of the outflow increases and the piles rise higher, become stratified, extend over a wider perimeter. Besides, the more Leonia's talent for making new materials excels, the more the rubbish improves in quality, resists time, the elements, fermentations, combustions. A fortress of indestructible leftovers surrounds Leonia, dominating it on every side, like a chain of mountains.

This is the result: the more Leonia expels goods, the more it accumulates them; the scales of its past are soldered into a cuirass that cannot be removed. As the city is renewed each day, it preserves all of itself in its only definitive form: yesterday's sweepings piled up on the sweepings of the day before yesterday and of all its days and years and decades.

Leonia's rubbish little by little would invade the world, if, from beyond the final crest of its boundless rubbish heap, the street cleaners of other cities were not pressing, also pushing mountains of refuse in front of themselves. Perhaps the whole world, beyond Leonia's boundaries, is covered by craters of rubbish, each surrounding a metropolis in constant eruption. The boundaries between the alien, hostile cities are infected ramparts where the detritus of both support each other, overlap, mingle.

The greater its height grows, the more the danger of a landslide looms: a tin can, an old tire, an unraveled wine flask, if it rolls toward Leonia, is enough to bring with it an avalanche of unmated shoes, calendars of bygone years, withered flowers, submerging the city in its own past, which it had tried in vain to reject, mingling with the past of the neighboring cities, finally clean. A cataclysm will flatten the sordid mountain range, canceling every trace of the metropolis always dressed in new clothes. In the nearby cities they are all ready, waiting with bulldozers to flatten the terrain, to push into the new territory, expand, and drive the new street cleaners still farther out. (Calvino 2006: 114-166)

### **Political dystopia and environmental dystopia: are they different things?**

Speaking about dystopian fiction we have said that it is generally of two types: political and environmental. But are these really two different categories?? What Calvino proposes to us in his *Invisible Cities* is surely an apocalyptic scenario from an environmental point of view, but this scenario is made possible by political choices. Political choices make possible the city-dump of Agbogbloshie, Ghana, or Guiyu in China. At the Agbogbloshie dump there are about 40,000 people, most of whom are young people: they spend their lives in waste, drink polluted water and breathe the smoke of combustion of electrical insulators; the incidence of cancer incidence is infinitely higher than that of any other part of the world. Much like this is the situation in Guiyu, where, as in Agbogbloshie, e-waste accumulates from all over the world: millions of old cathode-ray monitors, millions of motherboards, hard disks, and televisions. The technologically advanced world is the city of Leonia and the forgotten regions are its boundaries. But the risk of environmental education is that these places, these *waste lands*, are perceived as a natural consequence of development, as a simple container waste a bit smelly: it is not pleasant to have it close to home, but by moving it a little farther, it is more than tolerable. To avoid this risk, it is necessary for those who live in advanced areas to realize that much of the polluting waste disposal passes through the power of criminal organizations, through the Mafia. This is the true political dystopia: an international totalitarian governed by the mafias. And unfortunately this is not a dystopia, it is not political fiction, but a simple reality, albeit a little hidden.

Roberto Saviano writes:

There are two types of waste producers: those whose only objective is to save on price and who have no concern for the trustworthiness of the removal companies, considering their responsibility complete as soon as the poison leaves their premises; and those directly implicated in the operations, who illegally dispose of the waste themselves. (Saviano 2008: 218)

Saviano refers to industrial waste producers, but all of us, as members of a consumer society, are waste producers, doing environmental education means creating citizens who do not belong to any of the two categories, means creating citizens interested in understanding where they end up the computers, the smartphones, the paint or the tires that we no longer use, the citizens who are not content to place the waste container away from their nose. We need to make citizens aware of the fact that waste constitutes for criminal organizations a much larger business than the drug. And this is where criminal fiction can help educational processes, showing, with all the strength that narrative has, what mechanisms are governing the illegal trade of hazardous waste and what are the consequences of this trade for the planet and for other human beings.

The judicial systems of many countries contemplate the notion of "environmental crime". A crime always involves suffering; then, through the notion of environmental crime, the law recognizes the existence of a pain inflicted to the entire Earth. A narrative focused on "Environmental Crimes" allows readers to experience (virtually) this "pain of the planet." It is therefore necessary to give space to a thriller sub-genre who expressly speaks of environmental crimes. In various parts of the world are emerging editorial series completely dedicated to crime story stories and these topics were dealt with important writers such as Italian Carlo Lucarelli,(2008) US Carl Hiaasen (1986) or German Frank Schätzing (2011), but there is still no serious commitment from of television producers. Television series are perhaps the most powerful "narrative education" tool we have today; as demonstrated by studies on Miguel Sabido's educational soap opera (Lozano & Singhal 1993; Nariman 1993) and those on the use of a crime series such as CSI in health prevention; it is therefore necessary for the cultural industry to promote fiction productions focusing on the fight against the environmental mafia: of course it will not be fiction to solve the waste problem, but its role will be to create a new environmental consciousness on viewers, and this is already very much.

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