

Wasted lives and expulsions. *A study of Beasts of the Southern Wild* *by Benh Zeitlin*

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The author analyzes the mutual determinants of the ecological and social crisis. The starting point is Zygmunt Bauman's concept of wasted lives and the concept of expulsions proposed by Saskia Sassen, referring both to activities destroying specific areas and the communities inhabiting them. This frame includes films showing various scenarios of a dystopian future in which individual characters or entire groups have been consumed and expelled by the aggressive Capitalocene and doomed to live in the dustbin of contemporary civilization. The article focuses on the production *Beasts of the Southern Wild* directed by Benh Zeitlin. The author looks at the reality and, at the same time, the symbolism of the film's wall/dam; communities living on both sides of it, relationships between nature and culture, or rather (in posthumanist terms it is written as one word – natureculture); the methods and consequences of excluding and expelling human and non-human beings used by the mechanisms of late capitalism.

KEYWORDS: ecopathy, wasted lives, expulsions, ecofiction, ecocriticism

Seeking to contribute to rectifying injustices in the areas of gender, race and class is a praiseworthy aim for critics and theorists to have, but it isn't sensible to ignore the fact that making a difference in these presupposes that we can manage to avoid environmental catastrophe. Otherwise, it might seem like working flat out to secure improved working-conditions for the crew as the Titanic speeds towards the iceberg.

Peter Barry, *Ecocriticism*

According to Timotheus Vermeulen, experiencing the Anthropocene is a principal dominant of contemporary culture: a vital structure of feelings, sentiments, moods. The Anthropocene does not so much nestle in our minds, but rather in our bodies and emotions; it is not unlike "LSD, or crystal meth, or rather still, asbestos: thoughts spinning, muscles tensed up, blood pumping, heart racing, increasingly out of control." [1] Thus diagnosed, ecopathy is "the cultural condition of being on climate change." [2] This may be phrased more vividly: a stroll on a post-apocalyptic, polluted beach, "avoiding the wasted bodies only

**Introduction:
filmic ecopathy**

[1] T. Vermeulen, *Ecopathy*, [in:] *Posthuman Glossary*, [2] *Ibidem*. eds. R. Braidotti, M. Hlavajova, Bloomsbury 2018, p. 125.

to tread on the refuse of pins and needles every other step. One step, 'hey, climate change,' the next, 'oh, the last panda,' 'drought,' 'tsunamis,' 'posthumanism,' and so forth, to the point that a walk on the beach resembles the experience of a walk on a garbage belt."^[3] The route, or the area in which I journey is film. There is no doubt that in this field of art, in its various types, genres and genre variations, the issues of ecology (in its diverse aspects) are an important theme. This is evinced by the growing number of productions labelled "films about ecology, nature and environmental protection,"^[4] the emergence of new sub-genres of speculative fiction film/literature, such as eco-horror, eco-fantasy, climate fiction, as well as by film festivals devoted to environmental issues.^[5] Following Vermeulen, one could say that the documentaries and those films of the above-mentioned sub-genres (eco-horror, eco-fantasy, cli-fi) bear the imprint of ecopathy: a crisis that is experienced and felt, the dread of what is to come; the fear fuelled by living on a littered and dying planet, which seems less and less alive with each passing year; the fear which is a response to the unbearable reality of our own making.

Waste is one part of this unbearable reality. Data from the World Bank's report *What a Waste 2.0: A Global Snapshot of Solid Waste Management to 2050* demonstrate that today we generate around 2 billion tonnes of solid waste annually. According to expert predictions, if the pace of permanent modernization, (over)production of goods and consumerism is maintained, we may be expecting to produce 3.4 billion tonnes of waste a year by 2050.^[6] If we count in the waste/substances released from the produced and widely used items, e.g., plastics (not only single-use plastics, but all materials consisting of synthetic polymers), we arrive at a truly post-apocalyptic picture. We must not delude ourselves that this problem remains beyond us, our experiences, bodies, emotions, human and non-human ways of being in the world – quite the contrary. The author of the term "Plasticene" (an alternative to Anthropocene), Ted Schettler, argues as follows:

Wind and ocean currents carry large and small pieces of plastic to all parts of the world. They block the intestines of seabirds, fish and marine mammals. Plastic bags plug storm drains and litter streets. Landfills release highly hazardous compounds from burning plastics. Wastewater from our homes is a prominent source of microplastics, much of which is released from clothing. Babies are born with toxic plastic additives in their blood.^[7]

[3] Ibidem.

[4] See e.g., an example website: *Films for the Earth*, <<https://filmsfortheearth.org/en/films>>.

[5] E.g., Environmental Film Festival in the Nation's Capital, Barents Ecology Film Festival, Ecology – Krakow Film Festival, BNP Paribas Green Film Festival.

[6] S. Kaza, L. Yao, P. Bhada-Tata, F. Van Woerden, *What a Waste 2.0. A Global Snapshot of Solid Waste Management to 2050*, Washington 2018.

[7] T. Schettler, *The Plasticene: Age of Plastics*, "Science & Environmental Health Network" 2020, vol. 25(1).

Quoted from online publication dated March 3rd, 2020: <http://www.trailblz.info/ScienceEnvironmental/doc/MgA2ADMAOAAoADgANgA1A-CoAMQAwADMANwXAA2/The_Plasticene_Age_of_Plastics.pdf>, accessed: 28.08.2021.

The last issue is also highlighted by researchers from the Robert Koch Institute in Berlin. Their research shows that substances that are contained in plastic can be found in the bodies of almost all children from Germany.[8] So the problem of littering concerns both our external environment and literally, our bodies. We are all experiencing the effects of the Anthropocene/Plasticene, although not equally. To reverse Peter Barry's assertion cited above, I emphasize that climate change and environmental crisis are closely linked to social injustice, whether due to class, ethnicity, all gender. For example: the much-publicized collapse of a building in Bangladesh on 24th April 2013, in which more than a thousand people died and twice as many were injured (mostly women), revealed the terrible working conditions at the textile factory and the direct impact of exposure to toxic substances used in the production of clothing on the health of those employed in such places. Further situations can also be indicated: electronic waste from the European Union deposited for storage in African and Asian countries is an example of how waste management policies are correlated with social issues. On top of this, there is the increasing climate migration from areas particularly affected by drought or floods to safer places (according to a report by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, 12.6 million people left their homes between September 2020 and February 2021 due to the severe effects of climate change),[9] which results in international tensions,[10] thus adding to the overall picture of multiple, mutually dependent environmental and social issues.

[8] A. Murawski et al., *Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH) in urine of children and adolescents in Germany – human biomonitoring results of the German Environmental Survey 2014–2017 (GerES V)*, “International Journal of Hygiene and Environmental Health” 2020, no. 226, pp. 1–11.

[9] K. Lumpur, *New report: Alarming levels of climate-related displacement*, March 16, 2021, <<https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/press-release/new-report-alarming-levels-of-climate-related-displacement/>>, accessed: 31.08.2021; see also: *Responding to Disasters and Displacement in a Changing Climate: Case Studies – Asia Pacific National Societies in Action*, Geneva 2020, online edition: <<https://www.rcrc-resilience-southeastasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/16032021-Responding-to-Disasters-and-Displacement-in-a-Changing-Climate-final.pdf>>, accessed: 31.08.2021.

[10] On December 4th, 2020, the French Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly announced that the strategic military innovation planned for 2019–2025 involves, among other things, engaging science fiction writers and graphic artists. The aim of the project conceived by the Defence Innovation Agency (Agence de l'innovation de défense – AID) is to reflect on the

war of the future. The ten persons of the so-called Red Team are tasked with “breaching the wall of imagination” so as to venture beyond the traditional modes of predicting conflicts. As Parly explains, the idea is to envision the nature of prospective conflicts and develop corresponding countermeasures. The range of issues that the writers and graphic artists are expected to explore include conquest of space, social control by means of brain implants and aftermath of the global warming. It appears therefore that climate change and the consequent social migration are indeed taken into account as potential causes of future conflicts. (Speech by Florence Parly, Minister of the Armed Forces on the launching of the Red Team, at the Digital Forum Innovation Défense, Paris, December 4th, 2020. <<https://www.defense.gouv.fr/salle-de-presse/discours/discours-de-florence-parly/discours-de-florence-parly-ministre-des-armees-a-l-occasion-du-lancement-de-la-red-team-au-digital-forum-innovation-defense-a-paris-le-4-decembre-2020>>, accessed: 17.12.2020. The projects was publicized by means of a promotional video: L'initiative Red Team Défense: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jRfp37FYVNC>>, accessed: 17.12.2020.

Let us note how those reciprocal relations are depicted in film, setting out with Zygmunt Bauman's treatise entitled *Wasted Lives. Modernity and Its Outcasts* (2003),^[11] in which waste is a literal protagonist in the shape of used-up, superfluous, unwanted objects filling the planet, and features in the metaphorical sense, denoting specific social groups who lead the life of outcasts, unwanted and troublesome for the highly developed part of the world which pursues constant modernization. Life doomed to disposal, "wasted life" or, even more literally, life among rubbish and on a landfill (in the physical and social sense) is the subject of many documentaries and feature films (we will focus on this issue in the third chapter), but this text is going to focus chiefly on science fiction and fantasy. The advantages of the literary and filmic speculative fiction in environmental studies and inquiry into human-non-human justice in the circumstances of the ecological crisis has been underscored by researchers such as Ursula K. Heine,^[12] Alison Sperling,^[13] Gerry Canavan,^[14] Rebecca Evans,^[15] Adeline Johns-Putra,^[16] Eric C. Otto,^[17] Amitav Ghosh,^[18] Donna J. Haraway,^[19] and Pramod K. Nayar.^[20] Regardless of the differences of themes and methodologies used by those scholars, all stress that literary and filmic portrayals of human-non-human relationships are not only generated by particular cultures, but also contribute significantly to their building. In other words, the works display traces of ecopathy, while the same time they generate further symptoms of ecopathy by depicting unfolding various, usually pessimistic scenarios of the future (so-called 'dark ecology'). With this context in mind, I will take a closer look at the 2012 American production *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, directed by Benh Zeitlin. In terms of genre, the motion picture is not 'pure' fantasy, as it combines elements of drama with fantasy, draws on the conventions of the doc-

[11] Z. Bauman, *Wasted Lives. Modernity and Its Outcasts*, Blackwell 2003.

[12] See e.g., letter by U.K. Heise sent to *Forum on Literatures of the Environment* of 1999. Cited in: E. Otto, *Science Fiction and the Ecological Conscience*, University of Florida, 2006, p. 15. Doctoral dissertation available online: <http://etd.fcla.edu/UF/UFE0013481/otto_e.pdf>, accessed: 10.05.2022.

[13] A. Sperling, *Climate Fictions*, "Paradoxa: Studies in World Literary Genres" 2019–2020, no. 31, pp. 7–22; eadem, *Radiating Exposures*, [in:] *Weathering: Ecologies of Exposure*, eds. C. Holzhey, A. Wedemeyer, Berlin 2020, pp. 41–62; eadem, *Queer Ingestions: Weird and Vegetative Bodies in Jeff Van der Meer's Fiction*, [in:] *Plants in Science Fiction: Speculative Vegetation*, eds. K.E. Bishop, D. Higgins, J. Määttä, Cardiff 2020, pp. 194–213; eadem, *Second Skins: a Body Ecology of Sickness in 'The Southern Reach Trilogy'*, "Paradoxa: Studies in World Literary Genres" 2016, no. 28, pp. 231–255.

[14] *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fictions*, eds. G. Canavan, K. Stanley Robinson, Middletown 2014.

[15] R. Evans, *Nomenclature, Narrative, and Novum: 'The Anthropocene' and/as Science Fiction*, "Science Fiction Studies" 2018, no. 45, pp. 484–499; eadem, *Fantastic Futures? Cli-fi, Climate Justice, and Queer Futurity*, "Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities" 2017, vol. 4, no. 2–3, pp. 94–110.

[16] *Climate and Literature*, ed. A. Johns-Putra, Cambridge 2019.

[17] E.C. Otto, *Green Speculations. Science Fiction and Transformative Environmentalism*, Columbus 2012.

[18] A. Ghosh, *The Great Derangement. Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Chicago – London 2017.

[19] D.J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham – London 2016.

[20] P.K. Nayar, *Posthumanism*, Cambridge – Malden 2014.

umentary, and taps into magical realism, while the uncanny, magical elements allow *Beasts of the Southern Wild* to be situated among other significant eco-fictions and climate fictions. Ten years after its release, Zeitlin's film still enables such an environmental collapse analysis.[21] It should be emphasized, however, that the film was also examined in terms of class divisions[22] and racial violence.[23]

In this article, I propose to look at this film through the prism of the double meaning of garbage. On the one hand, we will write about actual waste-things and life among rubbish, in garbage dumps, and on the other hand, we will talk about social exclusion and "wasted life." In this approach, the ecocritical perspective is closely related to the sociological field. The analysis of the film will rely on a "double clinch:" Baumann's diagnosis of "wasted life" and Saskia Sassen's *Expulsions: When Complexity Produces Elementary Brutalities*,[24] in which the author was concerned with the steadily growing community of displaced persons and refugees who have been forced to leave their previous dwellings due to climate change. In this paper, I argue that by adopting an approach which highlights both social injustice and climate change, Zeitlin's film constitutes a particular type of ecopathy (distinct from the imagery in dark ecology fiction), which I have tentatively defined as affirmative disaster.

In *Wasted Lives. Modernity and Its Outcasts* Zygmunt Bauman put forward the idea that socio-economic and political structures of late modernity have marginalized, or even excluded, a whole gamut of people: asylum seekers, emigrants, the unemployed, the disabled. In his vision, many inhabitants of the global village are unable to catch up with the juggernaut of capitalism and consumerism or, being a part of the machine, are constantly at risk of falling out, which also equals being rejected. The phrase "wasted lives" refers to mechanisms which cause the aforementioned groups of people to be discarded onto the rubbish dump of civilization and the consequences of such actions. However, Bauman also discusses garbage objects, waste, used products and information that are no longer needed and, just like people ostracised beyond society, have become useless; at the same time, being ubiquitous, they constitute a problem that cannot be solved. The "revenge" of material waste manifests itself in a deluge of things one produces,

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[21] A. Hartnell, *Writing the Liquid City: Excavating Urban Ecologies After Katrina*, "Textual Practice" 2017, vol. 31, no. 5, pp. 933–949.

[22] S. Rountree, *Does Subaltern Speak? Reimagining Hurricane Katrina in "Beast of the Southern Wild"*, "Ethos: A Digital Review of Arts, Humanities, and Public Ethics" 2015, no. 2.2, <https://www.academia.edu/15575017/_Does_the_Subaltern_Speak_Reimagining_Hurricane_Katrina_in_Beasts_of_the_Southern_Wild_2012_>, accessed: 10.04.2022.

[23] T. Hackett, *The Racism of "Beast of the Southern Wild"*, "The New Republic" February 19, 2013, <<https://newrepublic.com/article/112407/racism-beast-southern-wild>>, accessed: 10.04.2020; K. Maclear, *Something to Broken: "Black Car in the Wake of the 'Beast of the Southern Wild'"*, "ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment" 2018, vol. 25, no. 3, pp. 603–629.

[24] S. Sassen, *Expulsions: When Complexity Produces Elementary Brutalities*, Cambridge – London 2014.

buys, consumes, throws away and replaces with more products: expanding islands of rubbish on land and water; the emission of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere; global destruction of nature and climate crisis. Bauman concludes that with the current pace of production and consumption as well as permanent modernization, the planet is going to be flooded with waste to an even greater degree. Also, the number of people unable to keep up the pace is going to increase accordingly, only to be excluded from the process and, in consequence, treated by the system as “redundant,” “useless,” or “superfluous.”

When *Wasted Lives* came out, readers paid attention primarily to the socio-economic factors discussed by Bauman. The observation that economic progress and globalization were the machines that produced increasing numbers of the marginalized was debated with particular intensity.[25] Garbage objects aroused less interest. In a review of Bauman’s book, one researcher noted: “it is difficult to pity the material world when faced with the tragedy of humanism.”[26] Besides, ecological issues were not within the main line of inquiry in *Wasted Lives*. Almost twenty years from the publication of Bauman’s monograph, the aftermath of modernization and the pursuit of economic growth for the human and non-human subjects and objects, as well as the planet as a whole, is more evident. Discussions concerning the Anthropocene and studies of its successive stages have revealed an indubitable link between human activities (particularly appropriation, regulation, and exploitation of natural assets as well as permanent modernization of the developed areas)[27] and the production and storage of waste in sites which become the abode of “wasted lives” of many people. The African town of Agbogbloshie (known as the Toxic City), the storage site for electronic waste and used household appliances shipped from Western countries is simultaneously a home and workplace for the extremely poor local community. Still, this is merely one example demonstrating the parallelism between the treatment of material and electronic waste and the fate of people who did not catch the modernization express. They are left to live in a rubbish dump, both metaphorically and literally.

While Bauman addressed the exclusion of various groups from the processes of modernization, contemporary sociologist Saskia Sassen speaks of expulsions, a phenomenon somewhat different from the more common “social exclusion.” She argues that complex systems

[25] See e.g., how the Polish edition of Bauman’s work (2004) is appraised by R. Matera: <https://repozytorium.amu.edu.pl/bitstream/10593/6794/1/17_Przegl_d%20pi_miennictwa_Rafal_Matera_248-250.pdf>, accessed: 16.08.2021.

[26] Ibidem.

[27] While it is universally assumed that the Anthropocene is characterized by a substantial human impact on the geo- and biosystems of Earth, there is no consensus as to the periodization of the pro-

cess. Crutzen would associate it with the Industrial Revolution two centuries previously, but the process may be approached in terms of the so-called long duration and short duration, which spans several past generations. On the successive phases of environmental and geological changes due to human activity see S.L. Lewis, M.A. Maslin, *The Human Planet. How We Created the Anthropocene*, Penguin Random House UK 2018.

of exploiting natural resources, monoculture farming, proliferation of toxic waste, geo-environmental change, and the abuse of “cheap labour” make certain regions of the planet unliveable for human and non-human beings alike:

The globalization of capital and the sharp rise in technical capabilities have produced major scaling effects. What may have been minor displacements and losses in the 1980s, such as deindustrialization in the West and in several African countries, had become devastations by the 1990s (think Detroit and Somalia). To understand this scaling as more of the same inequality, poverty, and technical capacity is to miss the larger trend. Similarly with the environment. We have been using the biosphere and producing localized damage for millennia, but only in the last thirty years has the damage grown to become a planetary event that boomerangs back, often hitting sites that had nothing to do with the original destruction, such as the Arctic permafrost. And so on with other domains, each with its own specifics.[28]

One of the upshots of those actions is the aforementioned climate migration, whose victims leave their previous homes and habitats (or are institutionally relocated), but most often with no guarantee that they will find a better place to live. In this sense, we can speak both of geographical-biological areas which have been depleted, devastated, and expelled areas, as well as of expelled communities or, more broadly, of human and non-human communities.

The above problems have their own film representations. The topic of ecology in combination with social injustice, and exclusion, and expulsion can be found in both documentary and fictional films. Due to their great popularity, and thus their strong social impact, these films play an important role in shaping ecoculture. We will now look at selected projects.

Irrespective of the type and genre, cinema has long featured stories where overproduction of material waste was shown to be coupled with the social problems that arise as the population of those condemned to “wasted lives” increases, as described by Bauman. Notable examples include: documentaries such as 2010’s *Waste Land* by Lucy Walker,[29] showing how portraits of scavengers were assembled from waste gathered in a Rio de Janeiro landfill; the 2014 documentary *Something Better to Come* by Hanna Polak,[30] whose protagonist is an 11-year-old girl living in a landfill, and Agnès Varda’s *The Gleaners and I* (2020),[31] which explores the distinct attitudes of modern people towards waste, including the collection of rejected crops that provide an important source of food for some people; Steven Zaillian’s 1998 drama *A Civil Action*,[32] about the struggle of a lawyer representing

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dump of modernity –
filmic representations**

[28] S. Sassen, op.cit., pp. 3–4.

[29] *Waste Land*, dir. L. Walker, Brazil/UK 2010.

[30] *Something Better to Come* [Nadejda lepsze czasy], dir. H. Polak, Denmark/Poland 2014.

[31] *The Gleaners and I* [Les glaneurs et la glaneuse], dir. A. Varda, France 2020.

[32] *A Civil Action*, dir. S. Zaillian, USA 1998.

a community living in an area where toxic waste contamination causes fatal diseases in humans and animals; the 2014 crime-adventure film *Trash*, directed by Stephen Daldry,^[33] in which poor boys end up in trouble, having found a wallet in a landfill.

The surfeit of material waste, the environmental crisis and the social problems associated with growing numbers of people who are degraded to “wasted” existence – in their mutual contingency – are a particularly prominent theme in post-apocalyptic science fiction and eco-horror films. Many such productions not only manifest Bauman’s “wasted life,” but also reflect Sassen’s diagnosis concerning the expulsion/ejection of some people after a capitalist-ecological catastrophe. The 1995 film *Waterworld*, by Kevin Costner and Kevin Reynolds, envisages a future in which the Earth has transformed into a vast ocean after the glaciers melted, while the outcasts try to survive on a raft. Their survival and reaching dry land depends as much on cunning and determination as it does on rationing drinking water and the skilful use of any erst-while waste that may be turned into functional tools. The eco-social outcasts of *Mad Max 2* (1981) and especially *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), directed by George Miller,^[34] put all manner of artefacts from the lost past to use as they fight for survival against gangs that control access to technology and remnants of natural resources. Those are the ruins and waste which become the home of the protagonist and the mother of the eponymous *Children of Man* in the 2006 picture directed by Alfonso Cuarón.^[35] Social segregation and unequal access to food, medicines, and all goods of civilization in the face of climate disaster are the underlying theme in *Snowpiercer* by Bong Joon Ho (2013).^[36] The only survivors from a disaster that brought about the glaciation of the entire planet travel the world on board a super-modern train whose sectors are designated for specific social classes, and it is virtually impossible to move from one car to another.

In those visions of the future, ecological disasters affect both nature and social structures, human and non-human well-being across the planet. Many species of plants, as well as human and non-human animals unable to survive in the extremely difficult conditions (the most common causes appearing in the futurological speculative fiction, include flooding, drought, glaciation, radioactive contamination, pandemic) end up on the dump of post-apocalyptic reality.

Post-apocalyptic speculative fiction, in its various generic facets, delivers alternative depictions of reality, thus provoking the viewers to reconsider the place of humans on Earth, our relations with various forms of life and the political-ethical responsibility for the possible or probable shape of the future. Science fiction researcher Toby Neilson

[33] *Trash*, dir. S. Daldry, Brazil/UK 2014.

[34] *Mad Max 2*, dir. G. Miller, USA 1981; *Mad Max: Fury Road*, dir. G. Miller, Australia/USA 2015.

[35] *Children of Man*, dir. A. Cuarón, USA/UK 2006.

[36] *Snowpiercer*, dir. Bong Joon Ho, Czech Republic/France/USA/South Korea 2013.

sees these films as a movement from technological concern to ecological care, and adds: “[...] there is a clearly demonstrable trend in contemporary science fiction films of the early 21st century wherein environmental crisis narratives, themes and aesthetics become more ubiquitous.”[37] Simultaneously, as products of the times in which they were created, the films attest to the contemporary notions entertained by the authors and viewers of eco-fiction with respect to the possible or probable fates that await us if the humankind fails to change how it thinks and acts in time.

What if it fails, though? If not only the past but also the future has already happened? If this is not just a vision of the future, but an apt diagnosis of a world which has long since sunk deep into the Anthropocene/Capitalocene?[38] Given the position adopted in the report entitled *The Trajectory of the Anthropocene. The Great Acceleration of 2015*,[39] and the observations made in the study *The Human Planet. How We Created the Anthropocene* (2018),[40] in which one concludes that human actions have long influenced climate change, and that since the mid-twentieth century the impact qualifies as a significant and destructive, then the films cited above can be approached as representations of the aftermath of an anthropocentric, capitalocentric world order, which was anticipated much earlier. This order, also informed by plantatiocentrism, manifests itself e.g. in the disappearance of biodiversity, a radical shift towards biological monocultures, the elimination of undesirable plant and animal species and selective husbandry.[41] The process also involves people whose existential conditions and lifestyles are reduced to what the so-called civilized world considers a good, proper life, whereas groups which do not align themselves to that monocultural model are subjugated, enslaved or expelled.[42]

One of the most poignant films depicting Bauman’s “wasted life,” but also the “spat-out/expelled life” analysed by Sassen, is the 2012 *Beasts of the Southern Wild* directed by Benh Zeitlin. Presented from the perspective of a six-year-old girl, this drama with elements

What a beautiful disaster!

[37] T. Neilson, *Imagining the Anthropocene. Science Fiction Cinema in a era of Climatic Change*, p. 69, <https://www.anthropocene-cinema.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Toby-Neilson-Imagining-the-Anthropocene.pdf?_x_tr_sl=en&_x_tr_tl=pl&_x_tr_hl=pl&_x_tr_pto=sc>, accessed: 11.04.2020.

[38] On the relationship between the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene see D.J. Haraway, op.cit., pp. 44–51.

[39] W. Steffen et al., *The Trajectory of the Anthropocene. The Great Acceleration*, “The Anthropocene Review” 2015, no. 2, pp. 81–98.

[40] See note 23.

[41] A. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton 2015. See also G. Mitman, *Reflections on the Plantationocene: a Conversation with Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing*, “Edge Effects” June 19, 2019, <<https://edgeeffects.net/haraway-tsing-plantationocene/>>, accessed: 27.08.2021.

[42] Next to notions such as the Anthropocene and Capitalocene, Haraway employs the term Plantationocene, underscoring that the regulation of nature and communities (slavery, colonialism, racism, forced systems of production and reproduction) precipitated the Capitalocene. See entry for D. Haraway, *Capitalocene and Chthulucene*, [in:] *Posthuman Glossary*, op.cit., pp. 79–83.

of magical realism portrays her life with her father and, more broadly, with the community who dwell behind the dam that separates them from the life on the other side, in the modern, industrialized part of the city. The storm which is unleashed at a certain point in the film forces the protagonists to fight for survival, while their fragile strength and limited resources of food and other things needed to survive become even more scarce. Upon release and later, the film was often interpreted as a metaphor for the disaster caused by Hurricane Katrina in August 2005 and the recovery of the affected communities in southern United States.[43] This line of interpretation is further strengthened by Zeitlin's earlier short film *Glory at Sea*,[44] set in post-apocalyptic New Orleans, when a group of survivors tries to retrieve their loved ones who have been engulfed by the water. In *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, the Bathtub – the place inhabited by the protagonists – is modelled on Isle de Jean Charles in southern Louisiana,[45] while shots of the Louisiana bayou and the funeral music of New Orleans reinforce this context, referring the viewers to a specific geo-cultural area, albeit not necessarily directly related to Hurricane Katrina. The director emphasized in an interview that the storm in the film has been inspired by the 2008 Hurricane Gustav, whereas the frame of reference for the natureculture (according to the posthumanist convention, without duality, but as a collective expression[46]) imagery in the Bathtub included land loss in southern Louisiana, problems with the dams around the Mississippi and saltwater intrusion, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010, as well as many other events.[47] Today, nearly ten years after the release, references to the geo-bio-cultural circle of Louisiana in the first decade of the 21st cen-

[43] See A. Hartnell, *After Katrina. Race, Neoliberalism, and the End of the American Century*, New York 2017, pp. 27, 169 ff.

[44] *Glory at Sea*, dir. B. Zeitlin, USA 2008.

[45] This issue is pointed out by a researcher of landscapes in cinema: "Although it is not a documentary, the setting of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* establishes a clear relationship with the actual landscape in which the movie was filmed. Its fictional island of "Isle de Charles Doucet" – known to its residents as the Bathtub – was inspired by several isolated and independent fishing communities threatened by erosion, hurricanes, and rising sea levels in Louisiana's Terrebonne Parish, most notably the rapidly eroding Isle de Jean Charles." A.W. von Mossner, *Cinematic Landscape in "Beasts of the Southern Wild"*, "The International Review of Landscape Architecture and Urban Design" 2014, no. 88, p. 66.

[46] In the posthumanist approach, the term 'natureculture' arises as a result of the implosion of discursive areas of nature(and)culture. See D. Haraway, *How Like a Leaf. An Interview with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve*, Routledge 2000, p. 105; G. Gajewska, *Przyroda(i)*

kultura w epoce antropocenu, „Przestrzenie Teorii” 2012, no. 17, p. 105–114.

[47] J. Butman, "Beasts of the Southern Wild" Director: Louisiana is a Dangerous Utopia, "The Atlantic" June 27, 2012, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/06/beasts-of-the-southern-wild-director-louisiana-is-a-dangerous-utopia/259009/>>, accessed: 23.08.2021. In another interview, Zeitlin stated that not all inspiration or imagery which was ultimately included in the film has been designed or realized by the authors from the start. For instance, "[...] the actual first day of photography was the same day as when Deep Water exploded. So it wasn't something that was consciously in the script, initially, but it was this very visceral parallel that was happening as we shot." B. Graham, [interview] "Beast of the Southern Wild" Director Benh Zeitlin talks success before release, shrivelling up in post-production, and Inspiration, "The Film Stage. Your Spotlight of Cinema" July 3, 2012; <<https://thefilmstage.com/interview-beasts-of-the-southern-wild-director-benh-zeitlin-talks-success-before-release-shrivelling-up-in-post-production-and-inspiration/>>, accessed: 23.08.2021.

tury are still discernible, but at the same time interpretations which go beyond that time and space, or are not limited to it, are perfectly viable.

Later in the article, I will present the arguments that the recent film *Beast of the Southern Wild*[48] can be perceived as a metaphor of economic and social divisions (a figure of the developed north and the poor south); as a parable about a wasted lives (in terms of Bauman); as an image of the naturalcultural devastation of certain areas and communities, and their spitting out, expulsion by aggressive capitalism (Sassen); as an announcement of ecological migration (Sassen and the previously cited reports – footnote no 8); as a magic-fantasy-realistic expression of ecopathy (Vermeulen). In the film in question, the first issue (the division into the global north and the poor, local south) is the physical and symbolic barrier. We'll start from there.

The wall in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* has its physical dimension (the water dam), a mental dimension (the notions about oneself and the people living on the other side) and a symbolic one (the dry, urbanized, and implicitly safe zone versus the floodplain on which the inhabitants cobble together their dwellings from waste, to underscore instability, makeshift character and poverty). Structurally, the dam tallies with the well-known divisions: the city versus the countryside, the global north versus the south, the east and west. Following Bauman's paradigm, one could say that the more revellers attend the consumerist feast of the rich North, the more waste there is in the poor South and East, at least in the first part of the action and film frames.

American literary and media researcher Stephanie Rountree goes even further in interpreting the meaning of the dam and its geographical and social divisions. The wall does not simply divide two equal, but dissimilar spaces, communities, things, but it is a barrier against wild space and society. This is indicated both by the title of the film and a statement by the main character, Hushpuppy, who quotes her father: "Daddy says, up above the levee, on the dry side, they're afraid of the water like a bunch of babies. They built the wall that cuts us off. They think we all gonna drown down here. But we ain't goin' nowhere." [49] Rountree suggests that the film's main aesthetic inspiration is its subalternity, a radically uncivilized world, so far beyond a recognizable civilized community that it does not even fit within its boundaries. According to the researcher: "The Bathtub's positionality beyond the levee organizes its spatial epistemology in relation to the world north of the levee, for through the northern land's dominant oppositional relationship, Hushpuppy's home is defined as the wild, subaltern Other." [50] The dam is a physical manifestation of unequal

the wall

[48] *Beast of the Southern Wild*, dir. B. Zeitlin, USA 2012.

[49] All quotes from the film are based on the screenplay: *Beasts of the Southern Wild. Final Draft* written by Lucy Alibar and Benh Zeitlin Based on the stage

play "Juicy and Delicious" by Lucy Alibar, <https://alexcassun.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/botsw_final_draft_2.pdf>, accessed: 25.08.2021, p. 4.

[50] S. Rountree, op.cit., p. 8.

access to goods, social divisions, distinct lifestyles, and differing values. There are 'us' and 'them' of a kind. This is intimated in the very first minutes of the film, when Hushpuppy, unusual, the six-year-old heroine-narrator says: "We live in the prettiest place on earth."^[51] The protagonist's world is polarized: she and her dad live in the Bathtub, while beyond the levee there extends some other world where different rules apply: "The Bathtub's got more holidays than the whole rest of the world [...] They only got holidays once a year [...] They got fish stuck in plastic wrappers, they got their babies stuck in carriages, and chickens on sticks and all that kind of stuff."^[52] The disparity of the places and the way the communities on both sides of the levee function is also highlighted by the photography: at home, Hushpuppy looks at the sunset, and when the other side is referred to, tall chimneys spewing fumes into the sky appear in the frame.

The image of the world beyond the dike as it emerges from Hushpuppy's narrative-a-world (taken literally and at the same time as marked by numerous metaphors and directed at an adult viewer), which she does not know, does not experience, and does not participate in, has been derived from her father's stories and filtered through child's emotionality. The words spoken by the little narrator induce the viewer to adopt her viewpoint with respect to reality, in which the Bathtub is a beautiful place surrounded by lush vegetation; its inhabitants spend their days playing with each other and the animals, and their evenings admiring beautiful sunsets. However, from the very beginning, this idyllic atmosphere is disturbed by other images: shots of dilapidated huts made of cardboard, plastic boards and tin sheets, close-ups of old tyres and other waste scattered around the hut, then of the girl's worn and dirty clothes, or a shot in which Hushpuppy prepares a meal for herself from animal feed. Thus, two pictures of the Bathtub clash in the film: the idyllic versus the depressing, dirty, and unpleasant. This is particularly underscored in the odorous scenes: shots of playing around in the mud with chickens and pigs, images of the oppressive atmosphere of the local brothel, or close-ups of the sweaty, filthy and wasted bodies of the bayou dwellers. This latter depiction of the Bathtub begins to dominate as the plot unfolds, with a violent storm as its pivotal moment; in its wake, a number of problems faced by the inhabitants of the floodplain are revealed: poverty, scarcity of drinking water and food, lack of access to healthcare and invisibility, or the fact of their being thoroughly unimportant to how things function on the other side of the dam.

This picture is set against the human-economic landscape on the other side of the dike – industrialized, organized, and modern. However, the organizational and technological complexity of that part of the city, which may be justifiably approached as an epitome of the most mod-

[51] All quotes from the film are based on the screenplay: *Beasts of...*, p. 4. [52] *Ibidem*, pp. 4–6.

ern contemporary metropolises, comes at a price for those excluded from access to wealth. When the flood comes, the urbanized part of the city is protected by the dam, but the structure channels the water into the Bathtub area, destroying houses, killing people and animals, and ultimately forcing the survivors to abandon their former residence. To use Sassen's words, Hushpuppy and several other survivors of the flood swell the ranks of the expelled: "people, enterprises, and places expelled from the core social and economic orders of our time."^[53] In the final scene, we see several people walking briskly along a narrow piece of dry land surrounded by water on two sides. They go forth towards an unknown land, an unknown future, in a way symbolic of the contemporary labour and climate migrations, the migrations of many who have been spat out, expelled by the brutal and complex mechanisms of the global economy. Watched nearly ten years after the film was released, the scene seems almost prophetic, given the increasing number of displacements from uninhabitable areas and migrations in search of better living conditions.

Before the group of protagonists set off into the unknown, they formed a community, living not far from the modernized part of the city. The geographical proximity of those two worlds is significant, invoking the well-known, mentally established large-scale divisions (the north versus the south, west and east), as well as social inequalities within the inner urban system signified by the dam. The poor and, as may be inferred, unemployed inhabitants of the Bathtub do not partake in the rush of advancing modernity, they do not contribute to GDP, nor do they consume manufactured goods. For a self-sustaining economy based on the rapid circulation of goods and the increase in the amount of money changing hands, they are irrelevant, superfluous and even burdensome as those who have not been rendered "usable" by capitalism. They are one of those groups that Bauman refers to as human waste. Hushpuppy, her father Wink and other inhabitants of the bayou also live among waste and off waste in the literal sense, finding rejected items from which they create their world: houses, clothes, food.^[54]

Nature plays an important role in the vision of "wasted lives," composed of lush, unplanned vegetation and freely moving animals. In contrast, the views of life on the other side of the dam focus on the neatly delineated routes of streets and pavements, corridors and hospital rooms, while vegetation appears in the distance as a strip of landscaped area only in the shot in which Wink is seen escaping from the hospital. The impression of orderliness and structured development is not marred even by the fact that the scenes take place against the backdrop

the community

[53] S. Sassen, op.cit., p. 1.

[54] In this matter, documentary and popularizing films play an important role, e.g., *Wasted! The Story of Food Waste*, dir. A. Cgai/N. Kye, USA 2017; *Surviving*

Progress, dir. M. RoY/H. Cooks, Kanada 2011; *Minimalism: a Documentary About the Important Things*, dir. M. D'Avella, USA 2015.

of the cataclysm caused by a violent storm. If we agree with Bauman that “the modern world is all about order-building (otherwise known as ‘modernization’),” [55] then the spatial-organizational imagery from this part of the city may be treated as an illustration of that order-building. The task of gardeners (in the sociological sense defined by Bauman) is “planning the desired order of things and its implementation, mainly by exterminating weeds, i.e. intruders that disturb the intended harmony with their presence and thwart putting it into practice; weeds are plants that spread or grow on their own initiative, without looking for permission from the gardener – the overseer and warden of order.” [56] The natural disarray of the Bath tub’s wetlands reflects how the people who live there function and describes their place (or rather absence thereof) in the modern order-building paradigm. Just as the proliferating, budding, expanding ecosystem of the floodplain differs from the planned and organized space of the industrialized part of the city, so do the existential modes enacted by people on the two sides of the dam.

The main characters deal differently with the situation in which they find themselves. Wink’s attitude is one of despondency and grief; he is physically and mentally weak. The elements of magic realism incorporated into the plot and cinematography – an emanation of the child’s perception of the world – convey that state through the shots of the approaching powerful animals. Hushpuppy’s statement: “Strong animals, they know when your hearts are weak. That makes them hungry and they start coming” [57] refers to her father’s deteriorating condition, whose body, mind and emotions are overtaken by the beasts of illness, poverty, homelessness, helplessness. The underage heroine demonstrates a different attitude towards those beasts; despite the fear, no roof over her head, and uncertain future after the great flood, she fights to survive. This is vividly shown in the film as the girl faces the huge four-legged aurochs (in the convention of magical realism), and later marches on with a group of people who survived the flooding of the Bath tub towards a new yet unknown life.

The eponymous beasts are anything but equivocal. They may be interpreted as a metaphor of Wink’s helplessness and resignation as observed by his daughter. However, the giant, menacing aurochs may also stand for the brutal mechanisms of the global market economy, super-modernization, exploitation and regulation of human and non-human forms of life, due to which certain groups are condemned to wasted lives or, in the perspective suggested by Sassen, to being chewed up, digested and excreted/expelled (or sacrificed, as in the case of the Bath tub and its inhabitants), with no exemption or quarter given to areas, ecosystems, or humans. Finally, there is some kinship

[55] Z. Bauman, *Śmieć*, “Znak” 2014, December, <<http://www.miesiecznik.znak.com.pl/7152014zygmunt-baumansmiec/>>, accessed: 5.08.2021.

[56] Ibidem.

[57] *Beasts of...*, p. 29.

between the beasts and the filmic inhabitants of the bayou, in that they are figurations of Bauman's human waste and Sassen's the expelled. The association of inhabitants of the Bathtub with beasts/ animals is not accidental. As noted by Brianna Burke:

The film reflects on the position of many indigenous communities in the United States and around the world by intertwining dueling definitions of 'beast'. On one hand, the film illuminates a dangerous reality in our modern era: as storms grow more powerful, as sea levels rise, as resources become increasingly scarce, more people are positioned as disposable, as nothing more than mere beasts— particularly communities who live lives deeply connected to and dependent on their local ecosystems. In other words, *Beasts* shows how speciesism can be used by environmental racism to portray specific groups of human beings as animals, so radically different that they aren't homo sapiens but an entirely different species, and thus, as animal bodies, they lose rights, become mere flesh for consumption or experimentation, or vulnerable to extinction, like any other animal species unable to adapt to a rapidly changing planet in the age of the sixth mass extinction.[58]

In line with this view, Bathtub survivors as climate and economic migrants set out in search of an abode, they will most likely be perceived by many people from the global north as beasts from the south which trespass against the order-building structure.

“The whole universe depends on everything fitting together just right. If one piece busts, even the smallest piece, the entire universe will get busted,”[59] says the heroine looking at a leaf covered in writhing caterpillars. In her approach to nature, reflection on the world and her place in it the girl demonstrates a sympoietic attitude.[60] She perceives how various organisms interact with each other and with inanimate (ex)creations, in which she discerns a multifaceted network of relations that are not permanent but function with each other, alongside each other, in each other, thanks to each other, reciprocally creating (but also destroying) the conditions of mutual functioning. *Hushpuppy* recognizes that the Bathtub is a pulsating, sound-filled world in which: “All the time, everywhere, everything’s organs be beatin’ and squirtin’ and talkin’ to each other in ways I can’t understand.”[61] She cares for animals, plays with them, and at the same time situates them and herself in an eternal cycle of life and a quasi-primordial trophic chain: “Way back in the day, the Aurochs was king of the world [...] If it wasn’t

the buffet

[58] B. Burke, *Beasts of the Southern Wild and Indigenous Communities in the Age of the Sixth Extinction*, “Resiliencie: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities” 2018, vol. 6, no. 1, p. 62.

[59] *Beasts of...*, p. 20.

[60] *Sympoiesis* is a notion suggested by contemporary posthumanist Donna J. Haraway: “*Sympoiesis* is a simple word; it means ‘making-with’ Nothing

makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing. [...] *Sympoiesis* is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical system. It is a word for worlding-with, in company. *Sympoiesis* enfolds autopoiesis and generatively unfurls and extends it.” D.J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble...*, p. 58.

[61] *Beasts of...*, p. 2.

for giant snowballs, and the iced age. I wouldn't even be Hushpuppy, I would just be breakfast.”[62] While the human was once somewhere in the middle of the food chain, they stand at the top of it today. When Wink temporarily disappears, leaving his daughter unattended, she begins to wonder how she will survive: “If Daddy don't get home soon, it's gonna be time for me to start eating my pets.”[63] This circle of life, mutual coexistence, interdependence of different beings, but also annihilation, eating, devouring resonate in a lesson for Bathtub children conducted by one of the residents there: “Every animal is made out of meat. I am meat, ya'll asses meat. Everything is part of the buffet of the universe.”[64] This may be construed in at least two ways: as a literal message about materiality, the meatiness of our bodies which function by eating other bodies, happen to be inhabited by a variety of organisms (bacteria, parasites) and, after death, decompose and supply nourishment for subsequent life forms. Nevertheless, there is a social meaning to it as well. In line with Bauman, one could say that in the modern world we are all alternately the prey and the hunter (at least potentially), although some more often become the game, while others mostly assume the latter role.[65] In this sense, in the great buffet of the world of global economy, corporations, financial circles, there are many groups: people performing work under so-called junk employment contracts, cheap workforce, deprived of health insurance and social security, but also the “rank and file” of corporations, whose labour benefits the companies that employ them.

However, they are not the only ones. In accordance with the posthumanist concept which precludes speaking of nature and culture as separate spheres, but rather as interrelated conditions and modes of functioning in the world (expressed in the term natureculture), it is necessary to note that people and nature are not separate buffets of the world, but a nexus of complex relations at the same (and on the same) table. According to Sassen, the dynamics of those regulated relationships causes multiple actors to be expelled from diverse systems: economic, social, biospheric: “Anything or anybody, whether a law or a civic effort, that gets in the way of profit risks being pushed aside-expelled.”[66] And she argues: “The villagers and small farmers evicted from their land due to the development of palm plantations soon materialize as slum dwellers in vast megacities, completing the erasure of their past as small farmers. Stretches of deadland, poisoned by toxic emissions from factories or mines, are expelled from working land and forgotten.”[67] Such a picture unfolds in *Beasts...*: the ecosystem of the

[62] Ibidem, pp. 9–10.

[63] Ibidem, p. 11.

[64] Ibidem, p. 8.

[65] Z. Bauman, G. Gajewska, *Wywiad: Nadzieje i obawy nowoczesności w stanie ciekłym*, [in:] *Nadzieje i obawy płynnej nowoczesności*, prefaced and edited by

G. Gajewska, Gniezno 2005, p. 26.

[66] S. Sassen, op.cit., p. 213.

[67] Ibidem, p. 215.

Bathtub is sacrificed, or rather expelled, to protect the modernized part of the city; no longer habitable, the land is abandoned by people who swell the number of the expelled who migrate to cities, settle in slums, or live on landfills.

All the issues marked above: social division and exclusion symbolized by the dam; flooding of the Bathtub, loss of home, property, land, death of some people and animals lead to an ecological and social disaster. In the following, we will look at how this disaster is conceptualized in the film, what stage it closes and what stage it opens.

We accept the contemporary meaning of the term “disaster,” i.e. an event in which numerous people die or substantial losses are incurred; a phenomenon with tragic consequences that affects a large area; a complete failure of some undertaking, then Zeitlin’s film could be described as catastrophic. Despite their efforts, the protagonists fail to save the Bathtub, they lose their houses, modest possessions, while Wink, one of the main characters, dies leaving his daughter an orphan. The story of the downfall, told by Hushpuppy, seen through her eyes, imbued with childlike sensitivity, compels the viewer to adopt her perspective and see the world that the protagonist sees as beautiful, colourful, dynamic, magical. This impression was achieved by combining elements of speculative fiction with the documentary style. Much of the film was shot using the Easyring system, which positions the audience within the action, enabling them to move with the characters, as in the fireworks scene, where the cinematographer joins in the fun and takes the viewer right into the middle of it. From the outset, such devices bind sentiments of the audience with the Bathtub community, or rather the human-non-human community (community). Its collapse after the flood is painful, but even the scenes showing the inundated Bathtub, the people struggling to survive on a makeshift raft, or lonely children trudging through the grass in search of a safe haven, are all beautiful. One feels like shouting “what a beautiful disaster!” The affirmation of the beauty of this community does not falter even in the seemingly stifling and ugly scenes, such as the one when after a long journey the children arrive at the brothel in the backwaters where filth and mess predominate. However, it is there, in the arms of the sex workers, that the children find temporary solace and peace, which endows the images of that place and what has happened there with a positive aesthetic and emotional charge.

Beasts of the Southern Wild delivers a picture of two worlds based on divisions (of which the hydroelectric dam is a physical and symbolic representation), with the audience’s sympathies on the side of those who suffer defeat from the start. The Bathtub disaster, though beautiful, is still a tragic occurrence for both the place and its inhabitants. The audience is left with the image of a group of people leaving the bayou and setting out in search of a new life. A twofold meaning of catastrophe resonates in the scene: etymologically, Greek καταστροφή

the disaster

stands for “sudden end” and “unexpected change.” The characters, faced with the sudden end of their previous lives, are forced to embrace change and the associated risks of success or another failure. The ending implicitly marks the beginning of what we have witnessed for a long time: the steadily increasing number of the expelled, migrants who approach symbolic and physical walls, water dams, concertina fences separating them from a way of life, homes, cities, countries, which are not necessarily willing to welcome newcomers with open arms. The film’s tacit reversal of the “beautiful disaster” in the Bath tub is to be found precisely in the response that the unexpected change facing the migrants will elicit in the people on the other side of the dam. Not just the one in the film.

Translated by Szymon Nowak

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- Mad Max: Fury Road*, dir. G. Miller, Australia/USA 2015
- Snowpiercer*, dir. Bong Joon Ho, Czech Republic/France/USA/South Korea 2013
- Something Better to Come*, dir. H. Polak, Denmark/Poland 2014
- The Gleaners and I (Les glaneurs et la glaneuse)*, dir. A. Varda, France 2020
- Trash*, dir. S. Daldry, Brazil/UK 2014
- Waste Land*, dir. L. Walker, Brazil/UK 2010