

Amitav Ghosh: Climate Change Here and Now

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Abstract In this contribution I would like to give back something of the atmosphere of the debate that gave birth to Amitav Ghosh's essay *The Great Derangement. Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016). By referring to the lectures that preceded its publication and to the introductory presentations of the author on behalf of major scholars of the University of Chicago, and to the questions by the audience, it is possible to reconstruct a whole debate that acquires different meanings in the Anglophone countries and in Europe. Questioning some of the assumptions implied in Amitav Ghosh's discourse it is possible to better place his text and the relevance of climate change within our literary and philosophical discourse, and to re-think our cultural policies, and didactic engagement, here and now.

Keywords Environmental Humanities. Amitav Ghosh. Literature. Climate change.

On the occasion of Earth Day, on Saturday, April 22, 2017, Amitav Ghosh's essay *The Great Derangement. Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), was released in its Italian translation by Anna Nadotti and Norman Gobetti: *La grande cecità. Il cambiamento climatico e l'impensabile*, by Neri Pozza, in Vicenza. This was an important gesture on the part of the publisher, that salvaged the celebration from the risk of empty rhetoric and allowed literature to speak to a wider audience.

On that day, celebrations, meetings, and talks contributed to the spreading of environmental awareness; one such event was the *March for Science* in Washington DC, which asked for a renewed attention to a science, 'the truth' of a science, based on facts, evidence, serious research and its dissemination.¹ As we can all easily read on the Web, the main aim of the Earth Day Network is to achieve global climate and environmental literacy by 2020, thanks to education and to a new platform providing didactic and pedagogic materials to both teachers and students. Furthermore, environmental justice is a major topic in this context and current debate, aimed as it is at raising consciousness and creating a new citizenry.

The *National Geographic Science Festival* in Rome (11-14 May 2017) somehow echoed the principles of the *March for Science*, promoting scientific culture in Italy, too.

1 URL <https://www.earthday.org/earthday/> (2017-07-21).

Amitav Ghosh perfectly embodies these initiatives, for his essay adds on to the classical philosophy of nature, ethical responses to political, economic and cultural derangements, the aesthetic quality of an imaginary shaped for too long by models and narrative patterns imposed by Western literature and by the modern bourgeois novel. This cultural, psychological and philosophical model has become dominant all over the world with the complicitous forces of colonialism, imperialism and neo liberalism. Thus, Ghosh starts creating a discourse that follows the steps of Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), in that he, too, delves into the implications that bind culture to economics, to political and juridical powers, to the philosophy of science.

Before being published in India (Penguin) and in the US in 2015, Ghosh's essay was presented in the form of four public speeches held at the University of Chicago, within the *Berlin Family Lectures* program. The aim of this paper is to reproduce the atmosphere and debate of those public talks, all easily available on Youtube, for a readers' audience.

The first lecture (29 September 2015) was introduced by Dipesh Chakrabarti, author of the well-known essay *Provincialising Europe* (2007), historian and scholar of subaltern studies. About *The Great Derangement*, he claims that as a follow up to all of Ghosh's writings the relationship between 'history' and 'fiction' remains a central discourse. He also rightly points out a movement in Ghosh's writings from an early phase, when his fiction was set on land, that is inland, to a later phase of fictions dealing with rivers' estuaries and deltas, even seas and oceans. The movement is also from a focus on the human experience to a focus on the non-human: dolphins and sea-life, as happens in *The Hungry Tide* (2004), for instance. Therefore, he concludes, Ghosh's further movement to climate change is not surprising.

In that lecture, which is also the first part of the volume, *Stories*, Amitav Ghosh tries to answer the following questions: why is serious fiction loath to deal with climate change? And if it does, when does that happen? Why is it that it is immediately classified as 'sci-fi', or relegated to a subgenre? The answer is complex and composite, yet Ghosh has an immediate first proposal. He claims that

the challenges that climate change poses [...] derive ultimately from *the grid* of literary forms and conventions that started to shape the narrative imagination in precisely that period when the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere was rewriting the destiny of the earth (7; emphasis added).²

2 Ghosh 2016. All references are to this edition.

Thus, our frame of mind, our way of reasoning, our episteme is subjected to a grid, a model, a pattern that conditions and limits our imagination. That grid works as a normative Super-ego that imposes rules, while concealing other possible shapes and patterns. Climate change has been removed from our consciousness as if it were 'akin to' extra-terrestrial phenomena, not of this world. We have become blind to life-changing threats, writes Ghosh. And therefore the Italian title of the volume has explicitly become *La grande cecità* (2016). It is Chakrabarty in his essay "The Climate of History" (2009), who specifies that in this era of the

Anthropocene [...] humans have become geological agents, changing the most basic physical processes of the earth. (2016, 9)

The climate crisis is a crisis of culture and of the imagination. For our imagination has been moulded by, for instance, Jane Austen's narratives of green meadows. This cultural matrix, this grid, has its origins in the carbon economy, in capitalism and in colonialism. But our time of distraction, evasion, and concealment is a time of great derangement, says Ghosh.

Now, at this stage, few considerations must be made on the colonization of the mind and culture, and on the risk of a single narrative about landscape. The crisis of the imagination that Ghosh laments reminds one of the words of the Caribbean novelist and poet Wilson Harris, who claimed that we have lost the capacity to marvel at a man walking on the moon, this is a failure of the imagination (Maes-Jelinek 1991).

As regards the colonization of the imagination, it is sufficient to remind ourselves of the words by Lucy, a character in Jamaica Kincaid's homonymous novel:

I remembered an old poem I had been made to memorize when I was ten years old and a pupil at Queen Victoria Girls' School. I had been made to memorize things, verse after verse, and then had recited the whole poem to an auditorium full of parents, teachers, and my fellow pupils. [...] The night after I had recited the poem I dreamt, continuously it seemed, that I was being chased down a narrow cobbled street by bunches of those same daffodils. (Kincaid 2002, 8)

When Lucy finally sees real daffodils for the first time in her life she reacts:

Along the path and underneath the trees were many, many yellow flowers [...] I wanted to kill them. Just like that. I wanted to kill them. (7-9)

William Wordsworth's poem "The Daffodils" (1807) resurfaces in a recent novel by Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake*, and in the eponymous film (2006) directed and produced by New York based, Indian filmmaker Mira Nair.

Ashima, the female, promised-bride protagonist of the novel is inquired after her studies and she is asked to recite a few stanzas from the poem *The Daffodils* (Lahiri 2003, 9), while in the film she stands up and shyly pronounces those same stanzas in the presence of her parents and prospective in-laws (fig. 1).



Figure 1. Mira Nair, *The Namesake*. Mirabai Films, USA 2006, starring Tabu (Ashima) 77'

These two examples, both coming from writers based in New York, one from Antigua, in the Caribbean, and one from West Bengal, in India, representing two different generations, and published after a time span of more than a decade, show that if not the green meadows and wuthering heights of English literature, at least a foreign flora was certainly invading the private lives and local culture of people and writers in the colonies. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) is taken by Ghosh as an example of a vernacular Bengali writer, who eagerly adopted and mimicked the western modern and realistic style, with its “regime of thoughts” and its “gradualist uniformitarian view” on nature (Ghosh 2016, 25).

Nevertheless, one feels the necessity to claim that there are, there must be, other landscapes/mindsapes. For people living close to the mountains, the Alps with their peaks - for instance - are certainly part of a local imaginary, thanks also to war literature and particularly anti-Nazi partisans’ literature. Whereas, for people living closer to the sea, the water expanse is definitely more a landscape of the eye and of the mind than the English one. Thus, Amitav Ghosh’s assumptions seem to speak predominantly to an Anglophone audience, while European audiences might have shaped a different sensitivity to a variety of landscapes.

Novels, serious fictions – Ghosh goes on – have excluded extraordinary events (the irrational, the inexplicable) from their pages and have given space to what Franco Moretti calls “fillers”, realistic descriptions, everyday values and details that normalise reality. This is the modern, bourgeois novel. This European realistic style of fiction has been exported elsewhere, in the colonies, too. This rhetoric of the everyday also goes hand in hand with the new statistical science, a new rationalistic view of reality. Narratives of gradualism – “nature does not make leaps” – as Stephen Jay Gould said slowly subplanted narratives of catastrophism, a view supported by Niles Eldredge (167). Unfortunately, however, natural catastrophes occur randomly, unexpectedly, un-statistically, exceptionally and they do not find a place in serious fictions.

When exemplifying two specific experiences, one real and one fictional, Ghosh stresses how in certain moments of face-to-face confrontation with nature, the latter looks back at us and reciprocates the gaze. First, during a prodigious tornado in New Delhi in 1978, the young Ghosh saw a terrible spectacle of devastation. It was a premonition of what today seems to have become the rule: flash floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, tempests or droughts. Only, people react with fatalism and often think that something will happen but not here, not now: elsewhere. On the contrary, all those natural catastrophes are real, they happen on this earth and in our time, and both surrealism and magic realism could not translate them into fiction. More precisely, Ghosh claims that it would not be ethical to translate them into magic occurrences. Second, there is the topical encounter of Kanai, the male protagonist of the novel *The Hungry Tide*, with a Bengal tiger in the archipelago of the Sunderbans. Looking at the tiger in the eyes means to be looked at in the same way: with recognition, as an act of mute communication. The mystery that is enveloped in that instant of recognition is “uncanny”, says Amitav Ghosh.³

In this case, Ghosh uses a term with specific connotations, because of its use in the field of psychoanalysis, as well as in the field of philosophy. The German word used by Otto Rank and Sigmund Freud to define something disturbing and unfamiliar is *das Unheimliche*. This word contains the notion of ‘das Heim’, which means house. The prefix ‘un’ serves as negation. Thus, *unheimlich* is what is not of the house, what is unfamiliar. The word also has to do with *das Ge-heimniss*, what is ‘secret’. Now, the English translation of the psychoanalytical term is ‘uncanny’, similarly composed of a negative prefix ‘un-’ and an adjective deriving from ancient Scott, ‘canny’, meaning something that has to do with the supernatural,

3 “These and other literary novels not only offer simulated experiences of environmental disasters, they explore ideas for handling them, possible actions that individuals and organizations might take, and the ethical dilemmas such challenges will create. At their best these novels can also make visible ideological commitments” (Levene et al. 2010, 225).

the magic, the mischievous. In Italian, the term has been translated in psychoanalytical literature as *perturbante*, which has something in common with *perturbazione*, as in a meteorological perturbation. Finally, the shift from *unheimlich*, to ‘uncanny’, to *perturbante*, although only loosely related, brings us closer to weather phenomena.

Furthermore, the term has been used by Heidegger in a different way. According to Heidegger, our human experience of being is ‘uncanny’, that is, our human existence is strange to itself. Our limitations, in terms of what we cannot grasp completely about our self-knowledge gives us a sense of our being uncanny. Thus this is a way of seeing ourselves as if from the outside. And that is the experience lived by Kanai in his encounter with the tiger. Uncanny, thus, means not being at home in one’s being (30, 169).⁴

What is implied here is that a confrontation with a natural catastrophe, as the confrontation with a Bengal tiger is a mute dialogue with deadly forces and deadly potentials that pushes us to the limits of our finite possibility to understand ourselves. It is also an experience that is not known all of a sudden, but is rather pre-understood through our power of recognition (Heidegger 2001).

The Italian translators are therefore right in translating ‘uncanny’ sometimes with ‘estrangement’, which is closer to the Heideggerian definition of what Ghosh has framed in the icons of the Delhi tornado and of the Bengal tiger:

no other word comes close to expressing the strangeness of what is unfolding around us. [...] that is to say, the presence and proximity of non human interlocutors. (Ghosh 2016, 30)

Although, the term non-human, standing for nature, flora, fauna, minerals, but also water, salt, landscapes, maintains and fixes the old Fichtian dichotomy between the ‘I’ and ‘not-I’, man and nature, as well as the Cartesian *res-cogitans* and *res-extensa* binary, what Ghosh does is not so much to claim the affinity between the biological nature of man and other natural beings, but to claim a rationality and a will, an intelligence to “nature”: those beings, Ghosh writes, show our same “capacities of will, thought, and consciousness” (31). Therefore, the uncanny as it manifests itself in portentous natural events is different from the ghosts, doubles and psychic projections of the past, for tornados and such apocalyptic events are due to our human modification of the environment and, like a boomerang, they are now turning back at us.

Ghosh concludes his first lecture by admitting that climate-change-connected disasters are now an irreversible fact, against which governments

4 For this definition cf. Andersen 2016.

cannot do much. When he allows questions, a member of the audience claims that science shares the same difficulty in finding a credible narrative about draughts. They are becoming more and more frequent in various parts of the world, but science has not found so far a reasonable cause-effect narrative. When asked if cinema, particularly 'dystopic films', is/are more successful than literature in showing climate change effects, Ghosh agrees that this might be true. Yet, he adds, literature is a logo-centered art and what it is experiencing is a failure of the logos. His central question remains: "Do we have a language that can frame climate change within the structure of a novel?" Amitav Ghosh asks himself.

Another man in the audience informs the public that mangroves in the Sunderbans are now suffering because of persistent and repeated floods. Ghosh acknowledges that it is a fact that the sea level is rising, while deltas are sinking at four times the rate, thus allowing salt water to eat up even cultivated land. Ghosh claims, when given the chance, that one of his major interests as a novelist is science, "descriptive sciences" he calls it. Moreover, family stories and history are also relevant to his writing. Two questions from the audience touch - what in my opinion are - two crucial points of Ghosh's discourse: the first is about the, so to speak, 'mis-use' of the word non-human. The second is about whether magical realistic narratives do participate in the concealment of catastrophic events. In the first case, Ghosh agrees that the term 'non-human' persists in maintaining those same dichotomies it tries to dismantle, that is the enlightenment heritage, but he says that sometimes its use is a mere matter of rhetoric. Anyway, the author admits that "we must look for a new and renewed language".

On the second point, Ghosh is keen on seeing magical realism as a form of concealment as much as the realistic, modern novel. However, this is a debatable question. For why and how can we praise the novels of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Isabel Allende as political and civil exemplary novels, even though they are acclaimed magical realistic masterpieces and deny them the capacity to speak convincingly about nature and its behaviour? Or why should it be unacceptable that *Imaginings of Sand* (1996) by André Brink had been defined a magical realistic text, in spite of the fact that it is a political novel, for it deals with the first democratic elections in South Africa, as if the former could diminish and belittle the latter? One more writer who spoke of nature with a language imbued with quantum physics, that is with a precise scientific discourse, and whose main concern was the workings and the failure of the imagination is Wilson Harris, author and waters surveyor in British Guyana, whose marvellous realism was not only aesthetic lyricism, but also ethical commitment:

The concept of 'marvelous realism' constitutes for me an alchemical pilgrimage... a ceaseless adventure within the self and without the self

in nature and beings that are undervalued or that have been eclipsed or imprisoned by models of conquest. (Fabre 1991, 48)

Perhaps, the prejudice lies in the labelling of genres and subgenres, according to hierarchies, which are fashioned and shaped by the same academic/journalistic enlightenment that Ghosh is trying to resist and fight, but this is particularly relevant in North America. Thus, Ghosh is brought to admit that serious fiction cannot embed climate change, otherwise it would be labelled 'science fiction', and would never be reviewed seriously by serious literary magazines in North America. An example of all this is provided by Margaret Atwood, who – with her *MaddAddam* trilogy (2014) – had to defend her work by saying that her trilogy is not set in the outer space, or on other planets. On the contrary, being set on our earth, and foretelling a plausible future development for it, it deserves to be called 'speculative fiction'. That is, a fiction based on hypotheses about a possible future for our planet. Yet, it would be better to conceive of this type of fiction as detaining a philosophical, meditative, reflexive quality; or, as literature embedding a specific and peculiar (new?) philosophy of nature. Atwood, too, is a writer with a deep knowledge in science and with an earnest environmental concern. Yet the two writers' concern for cultural and literary labels, shows how this topic is more relevant in North America, than it possibly is in Europe. Another example of this type of complaint is to be found in the lines by Marilyn Dumont, a Métis Canadian poet in her "The Devil's Language":

one wrong sound and you're shelved in the Native Literature
section
resistance writing
a mad Indian
unpredictable
on the war path
native ethnic protest
The Great White way could silence us all.

Once again the anxiety of being misinterpreted and therefore labelled and wrongly shelved by critics, librarians and book-sellers is evident in this poem, for it means being culturally discriminated and excluded from mainstream literature and its market.

The second lecture (30 September 2015) carries on the discourse on *Fiction*. It was introduced by Srikanth Reddy, of Chicago University. His presentation is both a homage to Amitav Ghosh and a model piece of literary criticism.

His first remark was about a rudimentary air conditioner that appeared in nineteenth century Calcutta in *Sea of Poppies* (2008) the first volume

of the *Ibis* trilogy: a ‘term antidote’. A name, for a piece of technology that showed the Westerners’ preoccupation to create an antidote to our climate. This device, although ineffective, allows a dialogue between Paulette and Zachary and – unexpectedly (as any climate change) – propels the narrative forwards. Ghosh, says Reddy, has been thinking how the weather informs, distorts and evades our literary imaginary. But, in spite of Ghosh’s admission of not being able to write fictionally about climate, Reddy quotes a passage from the beginning of *River of Smoke* (2011), where Deeti describes the storm at sea “as wrapped around an eye”. Her vision is revolutionary for 1838, the year of that storm when a scientist for the first time suggested that a hurricane could be composed of winds rotating around a still centre, an eye. Deeti’s cave painting anticipates scientific theories of storm formation in the Victorian era. Certainly, Ghosh enjoys the luxury of authorial hindsight, endowing his characters with the gift of prophecy. This is how the historical novel and, in a sense, how history itself works. We do not ask novels to predict what the weather will be like tomorrow. We read fiction to imagine what a historical climate felt like to others before us, passing through the eye of the storm, that still turning point, where the freaky phenomenon looks back at you. Ghosh’s characters encounter the uncanny but they also feel something that verges on wonder. The exiled former Zamindar, Neel, learns that storms, too, have eyes. Reddy reminds us of what he sees:

a gigantic oculus at the far end of a great spinning telescope examining everything it passed over, appending some things and leaving others unscathed, looking for new possibilities, creating fresh beginnings, re-writing destinies and throwing people together, who would never have met. (Author’s transcription)

This meteorological event, claims Reddy, sounds a lot like a novelist. That day in Delhi, when the eye of the storm passed over an aspiring novelist, a sequence of events, a historical narrative was set into motion in a kind of reverse butterfly effect: that vanished tornado brought Amitav Ghosh here to speak about climate change.

In his theses on the philosophy of history Walter Benjamin memorably describes a kind of attitude toward the past. This is how one pictures the angel of history, writes Benjamin: his face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blown from Paradise, it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him to the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we

call progress. The angel of history, not to be confused with his cousin, the angel of historical materialism, in Benjamin's celestial order, faces the storm that blows him backward into the future. The angel of art in Ghosh's meteorological imagination suffers from a different predicament: he finds himself for a brief spell in the storm's travelling eye, as it were, facing inward. An equally awkward position, but one that offers its own necessary illuminations. Every novel by Ghosh is a literary dispatch from the eye of the storm. Few authors are so qualified to predict what will come next if not in tomorrow's weather report, then for the novel as a cultural form in the coming years.

Effective examples of works that provide nature with a decisional power can be found in Ghosh's narrative, both in fiction and in non-fiction. For instance, in the final chapter of the novel *The Hungry Tide*, a cyclone hits the Sunderbans and some of the characters in the plot in realistic and dramatic ways. Moreover, we find similar images in the moving, similarly realistic, factual but also beautifully-narrated reportage on the Tsunami of 2004 in the Nicobar and Andaman Islands, entitled "The Town by the Sea" (2005) and published in the collection of essays *Incendiary Circumstances*. What Ghosh hints at in both that reportage and in this more recent work is a critique to the way in which even huge cities have been built too close to the sea shore, even subtracting lands to the sea as happened in Mumbai, in Amsterdam and in New York (Manhattan). Water will soon claim those lands back due to global warming, the melting of the ice at the Poles and the rising of sea level. Or simply, and more dramatically, they can be affected by cyclones, and floods, sharing this destiny with Singapore and Hong Kong, among other cities. Ghosh, moreover, sees the matrix of a repetitive colonial project in terms of predatory urban planning and daringly 'criminal' architectural infrastructures among the responsible causes for the present state of being. What he noticed in the Nicobars is that the tsunami destroyed everything human, whereas coconut palms were still there, untouched. To be hit most seriously had been the houses of the higher ranks of the officials and military staff for their houses - and even the bases - had been built too close to the shore line. Ghosh claims that

there must be a special place in hell for planners who build with such reckless disregard for their surroundings. (2016, 36)

Similarly, the rows of apartment buildings along Long Island are exposed to risks of floods, for they stand on what once were barrier islands, a natural protection to the interior, where the airport now is. Amitav Ghosh's accusation echoes a similar invective by architect and painter Friedrich Hundertwasser, when he claims:

today we experience the triumph of rationalism, but at the same time we find ourselves exposed to emptiness, aesthetic nothingness, a uniform desert, murderous sterility [...] the architect is a coward, a criminal. The architect is building criminal structures, unworthy for men to live in, or insane evolutions that became a reality in ferro-cement, they have been in concentration camps, their men's soul is perishing. The architect is like a criminal of war, he executes orders even against his consciousness, he is building cancerous structures which are killing nature and man. These cancerous structures can be easily seen from above, from airplanes. (Hundertwasser 1990, Author's transcription)⁵

Both artists, a writer and a humanist, an architect and painter, criticise the application of global norms that derive from European colonial models. They, too, like meteorologists and climatologists, remain unheard, like modern Cassandras. The same urban models are to be found in Mumbai, Madras, Hong Kong, Singapore (Sethi 2017, 1, 42). It is the voice of Sonali Deraniyangala, in her autobiographical memoir *Wave* (2013), however, that most tragically accuses builders and planners to have built a hotel too close to the sea, and because of that, she lost her parents, her husband, and her two children in the 2004 tsunami, in Yala, Sri Lanka:

this was the hotel. It had been flattened. There were no walls standing, it was as though they'd been sliced off the floor. [...] I had learned some facts by now, so I recited them in my head. The wave was more than thirty feet high here. It moved through the land at twenty-five miles an hour. It charged inland for more than two miles, then went back into the ocean. All that I saw around me had been submerged. (70-1)

Furthermore, on the one hand it is be extremely difficult, if not totally impossible, for governments to organise effective and efficient evacuation plans, on the other hand it is extremely difficult to convince people to leave the places of their life, no matter how dangerous it is to stay there. The earthquakes in Italy have taught us a lesson. Like some heartbreaking novels, such as for instance Anne Michael's *The Winter Vault* (2009) does, when she speaks of the grief and sorrow of forcedly removed people, due to the building of megadams.

The novel is the crucial issue in Ghosh's discourse. He proceeds to list all that the modern bourgeois novel has expunged from its pages. First of all, everything that is extraordinary, unpredictable, too large in scale, while the gap between nature and culture is made larger and larger. Second,

5 Hundertwasser, Friedrich (1990). *Hundertwasser in New Zealand. Island of Lost Desire* [DVD]. Vienna: Published by Joram Harel Management. The speech here reported was delivered in Wellington at a city planners meeting (Author's transcription).

a concept of time that is not a progressive movement forward. Third, the novel is purified from the presence of nature, which is relegated to scientific discourse. There was a ban on hybrids and this is why science fiction became a subgenre separated by mainstream literature. But this partitioning of disciplines causes the diminishing value of science fiction. There is not yet a subgenre called 'cli-fi'. But 'cli-fi' would be a set of disastrous catastrophes happening in the future, and that to me is exactly the rub, claims Amitav Ghosh, the future is only one aspect of the Anthropocene, it implies also the recent past and the present. In fact, the Anthropocene resists science fiction. For instance, petrofiction is not a popular subject matter in narratives. This topic is already present in an essay by Ghosh, *Petrofiction*, where he reviews two novels *Salt City* (1984) and *The Trench* (1991) by Jordan-Saudi writer Abdul Rahman Munif.⁶ Apart from dealing with oil, the two novels show a strong sense of community, which is rare in western fictions. But the novel was claimed unsuccessful by John Updike because it did not involve "individual moral adventure", but a community of people. Why the moral should be more important than the political, the intellectual, or the spiritual, asks Ghosh? Updike speaks of novels that are produced exactly in the space and time that coincide with Carbon emission acceleration and with the ethics all this implies (Updike 1988).

The most challenging attitude, however, consists in understanding ways of speaking the same language as nature, only we do not consider them as communicative acts requiring an interpretation. But the Anthropocene has shown that nature speaks through us. So a new language must be sought: perhaps a language made of images, no longer a language based on logocentrism. That is why cinema and tv are more successful in dealing with climate change than fiction. One more element that was expunged from modern novels is images – illuminated pages, illustrations, pictorial images – and that goes back to the invention of print. Luckily, the Internet allows an easy matching of words and images and therefore there is hope for the future, for new hybrid forms, so that even our reading practice should change accordingly.

The third lecture (6 October 2015) on *History* was introduced by James Chandler of the University of Chicago. He picks up the point where Ghosh summarises the crisis and the critical positioning of literary fictions in so much as it "is about the moral adventure of a single individual" to use John Updike's words. Professor Chandler also stresses the principle of the "ordinary" that obsessively characterised nineteenth century British literature, exemplifying it in a review of Jane Austen by Sir Walter Scott. He then proceeds in appreciations of the *Ibis* trilogy as a work by a writer with a historian gift. A historian is by necessity also a geographer and

6 The term 'petrofiction' used by Ghosh started a whole tradition of critical thinking on oil and petro-narratives, within the environmental humanities and ecocriticism.

Ghosh starts his third lecture by mentioning the case of Asia, where the population density will cause fluxes of millions of climate refugees. In spite of the “vulnerability” of Asian people, the author does not fail to notice that while capitalism and imperialism have strongly contributed to global warming and climate crises, imperialism has probably prevented Asia from contributing to the acceleration of carbon emissions, for it stopped and prevented its economic and industrial activities. For instance, the production of steam engines was forbidden in India under British Rule, for these technologies had to be bought straight from the motherland. Thus, the suffocation of China’s and India’s economies had slowed down their contribution to global warming. Asia is both protagonist now, and victim of the same blindness that entraps us all. Very interesting, then, is the discourse on the figure of Gandhi, who was trying to slow down India’s aspirations to modernity in opposition to Nehru, who was favouring a technological escalation. All these implications show how climate change transforms the involuntary effects of our human presence on the planet, or, in other words, it is indissolubly part of our human History. To claim that climate change is a historical fact and product implies cultural and political consequences.

The fourth lecture (7 October 2015) is dedicated to *Politics* and was introduced by Martha Neussbaum, professor of Law and Ethics at Chicago University and author of the well-known essay *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010). Professor Neussbaum highlights how politics is looked at through the lens of novelists. She mentions the great Indian tradition of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Mulk Raj Anand, Rabindranath Tagore and modern novelists, among whom Ghosh is a leading figure nowadays. They engage with politics – casts, nationhood, the status of women – from the inside out, by exploring people’s struggles for life and human emotions. She exemplifies how politics is (re)presented in Ghosh’s fiction. First, politics can appear as frustratingly, incomprehensibly “external”, that is to say, as an imposition of limitations on people’s lives. As happens with the figure of the Grandmother in *The Shadow Lines* (1988), who is about to go back to her birthplace, Dhaka, but she discovers that she has to fill up forms for Dacha is no longer in India. Second, the other and complementary role that politics plays is “internal”. For example, Arjun, in *The Glass Palace* (2000), is an officer in the British army and he is invited to desert the army by Indian nationalists. It is partly a discussion on the nature of loyalty, but it is also a political discourse in so far as it is also real and personal, because both parties try to inhabit a dignified and self-respecting politics in a moment of world change. Amitav Ghosh also discusses literature in his final lecture and, symmetrically, in the last chapter of his volume. But one among the interesting approaches of his philosophical reflections results in an exemplary model of text analysis and discourse analysis, when Ghosh compares the style and rhetoric of the Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si’* by Pope Francis and the bureaucratic

and hypocritical language of the *Cop. 21*, or *Paris Agreement* of 2015. Finally, in this chapter Amitav Ghosh makes a plea to a mobilization of democratic forces – ground roots activism, religious activism and civic activism – but also to a new literature and new art forms on climate change. Amitav Ghosh's last chapter, a call to arms that balances the *j'accuse* tone of the previous chapters with his invitation to activism, is in tune with the closing chapter of Ramachandra Guha's *Environmentalism. A Global History* (1999), who also mentions the mobilization of various social and civic forces together with religious groups, as a possible way to the future of our planet. Together with activism a new art-ivism is also encouraged in the forms of fictions that stage anthropogenic climate change and its specific, scientific paradigm. In this way Amitav Ghosh's essay achieves its target of inspiration for writers, artists and a whole world of readers. It is not a chance that Amitav Ghosh is quoted in a volume addressed to young adults: *Teaching Climate Change to Adolescents* (Beach et al. 2017).

It must be said that Amitav Ghosh is not alone in his call, Naomi Klein, Martha Nussbaum, Slavoj Žižek and Zigmunt Bauman also continue to express concern for the future of the planet, for the rising of people's consciousness and for wise socio-political actions.

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