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The Synthesized Labyrinth Eco Authoritarianism, the Anthropocene, and Biomechanical Anxiety in James Dashner's the Maze Runner

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***Abstract*—This paper aims to analyze the book The Maze Runner by James Dashner through the perspectives of ecocriticism and Anthropocene. The study will explore the themes of anti-ecological authoritarianism and the violence of technocratic control in the novel. The main argument will be that the Labyrinth in The Maze Runner is the manifestation of an eco-terrorist project of totalitarian control dressed in the rhetoric of technological salvation. The paper will examine the political and ecological dimensions of the antagonist forces in the novel, including the creation of the Grievers and the Flare virus as the means of population control. Particular attention will be paid to the themes of resource extraction and violence in the context of the Anthropocene and the eco-critical perspective. Finally, the paper will argue that the author writes about the anti-ecological violence committed by the ruling elites and the brutal revolution against the technocratic system in the name of returning ecological sovereignty to humanity.**

***Index Terms*—Ecocriticism, Anthropocene, Eco- authoritarianism, Young Adult Dystopia, Biomechanical Anxiety**

I. INTRODUCTION: THE FLARE AS AN ALLEGORY FOR THE ANTHROPOCENE

"Literature has turned to the spectacle of control as a privileged site of representation." Thus states the general tendency of twenty-first-century young adult (YA) dystopian fiction, which revolves around the theme of spatial architecture. While Suzanne Collins's The Hunger Games (2008) dwells on the gaudy pageantry of state-sponsored violence, James Dashner's the Maze Runner (2009) explores the no less horrifying prospects of the ecosphere. This paper aims to demonstrate, with reference to the concepts of ecocriticism and Anthropocene, that the Maze is the metaphorical biosphere, a controlled ecosystem designed to deprive people of their autonomy and force them into an unsustainable situation of scarce resources.

The novel The Maze Runner presents a post-apocalyptic world where civilization has collapsed in the wake of the "Flare," the fictitious force that disrupts the natural order. The concept of ecocriticism revolves around the Anthropocene idea that human activity is the primary agent of environmental degradation. It could be argued that Dashner employs the Flare as the inverted image of the Anthropocene to reaffirm the capacity of nature to overcome human endeavors. It emerges from the plot that the Flare was to become the catalyst for humanity's demise – and, as such, it embodies the fears of contemporary eco-critical theorists. The Flare "poisons" the minds of people, erasing their moral compasses and clouding their judgment. When Thomas undergoes the excruciating process of "Changing" and regains full awareness of the situation he is in, he realizes the hopelessness of the struggle against the Flare-infested world:

You don't understand, Thomas. I saw things. I saw what we were before… what the world out there is like. It's a rot, a disease, a burning fire. The Glade… it was a nice sick kind of peace. Remembering who we are is like being burned alive from the inside out. (Dashner 175)

According to the excerpt, Alby feels hopeless and utterly helpless against the Flare. Dashner uses the allegory of the fire to show the gravity of the situation – the world outside the Glade is no longer a livable habitat. If the ecosphere is understood as a bounded system, the Glade can be seen as the artificial biosphere, a fragile simulation of the natural environment, sustained by the scarce resources of water, food, and shelter.

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II. SIMULATED PASTORALISM VS. TECHNO-SYNTHETIC ARCHITECTURE

A large part of the Glade's architecture is based on agrarian tradition. Surrounded by colossal stone walls, the adolescent "Gladers" live in a miniature ecosystem that consists of the four quadrants: the Gardens, the Blood House, the Homestead, and the Deadheads (Dashner 6). The ironic aspect of the Glade's design is that teenagers are forced to live the life of a pioneer, cultivating the land and raising livestock. Yet, the organic core of this miniature ecosystem is threatened by a monolithic, hi-tech structure in the center of the Glade. The Maze, a continuously shifting labyrinth of metal and stone, represents a horrific parody of agrarian life. Dashner describes the Grievers, hideous monsters that stalk Maze solos, as an abhorrent fusion of the organic and the artificial:
An apparatus of metal and flesh… it looked like a giant slug, rolled up, its skin glistening with slime, mechanical arms clicking and whirring out of its body. (126)

Grievers are a product of nature run amok, a manifestation of the authors' unease with the militarization of biological advancements. As the creatures of the Maze, they personify the threat of the synthetic intrusion into the sphere of the organic. Essentially, Grievers are a perversion of life-affirming natural functions such as reproduction and metabolism. InDashner's vision, the technology does not serve to enhance the quality of life or help humans coexist with nature. Instead, technology and hi-tech structures such as the Maze exist to torture and threaten humans.

III. DECONSTRUCTING WCKD: THE VIOLENCE OF ECO-AUTHORITARIANISM

The story's climax reveals the conflict between the Gladers and the authorities that controls them, the World in Catastrophe: Killzone Experiment Department (W.C.K.D). As the followers of the ideology "WCKD is good," the authorities are willing to sacrifice some children to find a cure for all others. Placing children in the Maze, W.C.K.D. wants to conduct experiments to learn how to save the population from extinction.

The problem raised in the story is the eco-fascist hypothesis, namely, that democratic governments do not have the strength to overcome an ecological crisis. Therefore, the only way to avert disaster is to impose totalitarian regimes that do not care about the welfare of society. For the authorities, children in the Maze are not people but subjects for research to find a cure for a terrible disease. Newt explains their intentions and their treatment of children in the following words:they want us to solve it, but they're the ones changing the walls. They're the ones sending those bloody monsters up every week. WCKD is good? They've turned us into lab rats, watching us die for some grand equation they haven't even figured out yet. (Dashner 231)

The choice between Thomas and Newt, which the reader makes at the end of the book, concerns children's fate and the future of humanity. Thomas's group of friends manage to escape from the Maze, but they do not want to continue living in the artificial conditions of a "pastoral village." They prefer real nature, even if it is hostile and unrestrained, over a fake one created by W.C.K.D. People are used to living in comfort and forget how cruel the world can be.

IV. CONCLUSION: THE LABYRINTH AS AN ENVIRONMENTAL WARNING

Under the ecological lens, The Maze Runner serves to demonstrate the importance of avoiding anthropocentrism in approaching environmental problems. The book unveiled the violent nature of the WCKD's policy of control and exploitation of the biosphere. Thus, the narrative belongs to the tradition of dystopian eco-literature that seeks to discredit any anti-ecological project. It demonstrates the idea that the survival of the species is only possible through respect for the autonomy of nature. To achieve harmony, it is needed to stop trying to tame the wild and accept the limitations of our own nature.

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