

Aniara: Mankind's Self-Destruction and False Hopes

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ABSTRACT

A review of the film *Aniara*, placing it in conversation with science fiction works released between the original 1956 poem and the 2018 film adaptation.

Introduction

Aniara is originally an epic poem written by Swedish author Harry Martinson from 1956, a response to the hydrogen bomb test at that time. The story is set in a time when the Earth has been destroyed and humans migrate to Mars. One of the transport spaceships, *Aniara*, is forced off course by a piece of space trash on its way to Mars and loses all of its fuel. It then carries passengers to drift toward the vast darkness of space without any way of returning. Hugo Lilja and Pella Kagerman adapted it into a film and released it in 2018. The film version of *Aniara* is delicately constructed into nine chapters all of which are marked by timestamps, allowing spectators to observe how time changes the passengers on board. The passengers suffer several rounds of false hope "attacks," when they think they can return to Mars, to reunite with their families, but reality soon puts out the flame of hope. In such a desperate situation, *Ariana* elicits the introspection of humans, questioning humanity: what caused

the death of the Earth? What does technology bring us? Is it certainty always effective? What's human's position among the universe? What is killing our future?

Man's Eternal Instinct for Destruction

One of the most shocking scenes in *Aniara* is when Mima, a high-tech product which can access human's memory banks and transports the humans back to their most beautiful memory of Earth, blasts itself by poetically pouring out its sorrows: "My conscience aches for the stones, I've heard them cry their stonely cry, seen the granite's white-hot weeping, I've been troubled by their pains. In the name of things, I want peace." Mima is a substitute for the Earth—the lost paradise. According to Martinson, "Mima" is derived from the Latin word "Mimus," which is the name of the mockingbird. It represents human's conscience—bringing comfort. However, when the spaceship is off-course, passengers flock in to greedily use it, not even thinking for a second about whether this will overstretch Mima. Without

permission to rest, Mima (through its human agent) kills herself.

In *Aniara*, we learn that humans destroyed their home planet once, and through Mima's death, they destroyed the Earth again, which hints at the dark ending of human extinction on Aniara. The accentuation of human's desire to destroy themselves is so prominent that it can be further reflected in one of the characters—the astronomer. Notably, she has her own desperation, as spectators first know her as a divorced woman who does not have a care in the world. She is always the first one to spread bad news, which then causes panic and suicides on the spaceship. She is an alcoholic, which can also be seen as a way of self-destruction. A similar concern is delivered in the film *Annihilation* (2018), when the psychologist discusses with the protagonist Lena that human behaviors such as smoking, alcoholism, and being unsettled in a relationship (like marriage) are the most common representations of mankind's desire towards self-destruction. Based on this, later on, we consider the pursuit of high technology, the search for scientific exactness as another part of human's desire for self-destruction.

Defend the Uncertainty: Ambiguous Memory and False Hope

Eric O. Johannesson reviews Harry Martinson's original epic poem *Aniara* and states:

The great enemy of life is the tendency to encompass life in a formula...The picture it paints of the universe in which man lives is cold and mathematical, a world of concepts in which human wishes and dreams have no place. The airplane has given man a contempt for the art of travel and robbed him of anticipations that slower means of locomotion afforded. Thus, the sense of adventure is lost: a journey is a mere routine (1960).

Johannesson notes that exactness, precision and clarity have alienated us from life and the world, we humans have no mysteries, no imagination, as everything is being explained. In *Aniara*, it is only when the Earth becomes a lost paradise do humans realize the wonder of it. They cherish their memory of the Earth, partly because "memory" itself is indeed an unreliable source. As it is interwoven with various subjective feelings, it becomes unclear and can be modified to some extent. The intellectuals on Aniara have to suffer more as they are educated to believe in the data, and they trust in the certainties instead of their own feelings. So, we see the astronomer

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suffering a nervous breakdown and becoming an alcoholic, as she is unable to forego expectation, and is haunted by the “nightmare of clarity.”

A similar concern is displayed in Ted Chiang’s short story *The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling* (2013), where the characters live in a not so far away future where they wear “Remem” to keep lifelogs. The equipment records all the things they see and hear, and when one of the “memories” is mentioned, Remem brings up relevant videos. With the equipment everything seems certain, but in fact, people lose their feelings, which is maybe the most precious part of memory. For instance, someone may have a blurry, warm memory from their childhood, when their mother held them tight in her arms while singing lullabies with a warm smile. However, with the equipment recording the “correct past” like Remem, upon reviewing this memory, he may find that his mother was simply holding him, while she was busy doing other things. Perhaps, the weather that day was bad, which makes the scene look grey, so his warm feeling about his mother is destroyed.

Besides representing the benefits of the memory’s uncertainty, the film *Aniara* also attempts to elicit the question of whether uncertainty of

the future can bring hope. The controversy is mostly placed in the character, Captain Chefone. He is described as the darkest thing on Earth, the most evil person in Martinson’s original epic poem, as he keeps lying to the passengers, giving them false hope to maintain his absolute control in *Aniara*. The captain’s actor Arvin Kananian jokes in an interview saying that: “I thought about, say, Trump or Putin.” (Kananian, Ross)

On the one hand, the uncertainties do bring hope. A similar scene can be seen in the film *Ikarie XB 1* (1963), when the spaceship crew suffers unknown radiation from a mystery black celestial body, falling into a state of unconsciousness one by one; they have no idea whether they will awake after the spaceship auto-navigates them away from the black star. The captain expresses his optimistic attitude stating: “Fortunately, man is not as perfect as a machine. Therefore, he has nothing left than to hope and believe.” He praises “uncertainty” as the peculiarity of mankind, as it reminds us that there is always a bright side. On the other hand, the uncertainties allow false hopes to slip in. In *Aniara*, Captain Chefone keeps making up lies to maintain order on the spaceship, in doing so, he even kills the astronomer. The passengers who

are being given false hope are cheered up for a short time, but they then fall into deeper desperation again and again, and some even commit suicide. Similar false hope is commonly seen in our daily life, these are the propaganda slogans, the advertisements, and the perfect images on social media. Lost in the abundant information on the Internet, people in this era keep losing their ability to admire uncertainties. There is a formula of being beautiful, successful, and happy, and they are so concrete that all we have to do is follow them. Humans have become more like machines, who are neat and uniform, however, we have lost a wider sense of what exactly happens around us. There are weather crises on the news discussed on the Internet, but take-out service pop-up advertisements seem closer to us. This is also a pivotal theme in *Aniara* as we see the horrible scenes of the Earth being destroyed in the passengers' memory and how mankind laments the Earth's death.

Powerful or Impotent: Two Poles of Future Human Imaginations

In terms of uncertainty, the desperate astronomer in *Aniara* is a very interesting ambivalent figure. On the one hand, she represents the intellects who are trapped in their persistence of certainty, who believe

in human's abilities. Meanwhile, she is subdued by the vastness of the universe and considers human's existence to be meaningless. When she explains to Mimarobe about the impossibility of relying on a celestial body's gravity to turn them back on the original track, she says: "It's so peripheral, what we're doing, It's so futile, so meaningless. You see this bubble? If you think of it as *Aniara*, maybe you will understand the vastness of space. Even if we move at an incredible speed, it's as if we're standing perfectly still." When they encounter a possible fuel probe, and it later turns out that it is some alien technology that humans are too backward to understand, it further destroys her beliefs, and causes her to have a breakdown. It is like two possibilities of The Fermi Paradox are combined in this one character.

A similar transition process can be seen in Liu Cixin's *Three-Body Problem* Trilogy (2008-2010). Liu's first and second books depict a variety of dazzling advanced technologies that future mankind creates as a means to defend the Earth from the threat of a belligerent extraterrestrial civilization. This fully illustrates human's confidence and complacency in controlling everything. As the story progresses, Liu proposes the hypothesis of the "Dark Forest" through one character

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Luo Ji, explaining that “the universe is a Dark Forest in which every civilization is a hunter armed with a rifle.” If the earth is not being hunted, that is because it is far too backward to be a threat to other civilizations. This is proved in the third book, where mankind finally becomes a threat; they are too complacent and foolishly expose the exact position of the Solar system. This causes the Solar System to be targeted by the “hunter” and it eventually collapses into two dimensions.

Humans in science fiction works wander between a sense of being powerful and impotent. There are films such as *Starship Troopers* (1997) and *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014) which accentuate how powerful human beings can be. Meanwhile other films such as *Ikarie XB 1* (1963), Denis Villeneuve’s *Arrival* (2016) and Arthur Charles Clarke’s novel *Rendezvous with Rama* (2018), assume that humans are too undeveloped to understand alien technology and are in need of their protection. It is brilliant to see that *Aniara* blends both tendencies into its small spaceship society, presenting the conflict and contradictory nature between the two tendencies. Through these conflicts, layer upon layer, it further explores human’s perception of time, the meaning of

life and how this affects our vision of the future.

Cults, Motherhood and the Vision of Future

Aniara is composed of nine chapters, with each having a timestamp. It begins in fairly small time jumps, which then turn exponentially larger. When they drift along and see only the vast darkness from the window, hope is urgently needed to continue living. As a result, in year 4, when 48 suicides occur in one month, the passengers create a cult. The ritual of the cult includes kneeling on the ground pleading for God to show them light, huddling around a blind poetess in the corridor yelling incantation-like words, and having group sex in front of mirrors. As the past realities deteriorate in the spaceship, humans seem to re-rely on their imagination. The women who lead the cult dress themselves up as witches. They encourage Mimarobe and her lover Isagel to join their group sex ritual, in the name of memorizing Mima. Isagel then gets pregnant. The instigation from witches always implies tragedy. In Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, the three witches’ prophesy prompted him to murder his king, Macbeth becomes a usurper, which results in his own death. In *Aniara*, Isagel gets pregnant in the ritual and she ends up killing

her own child and committing suicide. Notably, this echoes the detriment of false hope that I mentioned above. The child for Isagel represents a form of false hope, which can be confirmed right after the birth as they encounter a possible fuel probe but it soon proves to be useless. Isagel is distressed in the eternal dark universe, she is helpless, stating: "There are no possibilities here. I'll give birth to a prisoner." Similar questions raised in the film created in the same year, Claire Denis's *High Life* (2018), "What is right? To be killed immediately or to wait on an uncertain hope?" (Pinkerton, 2019)

Furthermore, the relationship between Mimarobe and Isagel corresponds to the entanglement between humans and the Earth. In Martinson's original poem, Mimarobe is a man, but in the film *Aniara*, Mimarobe is a woman. However, this woman is a "him" in her relationship with Isagel. Specifically, Isagel is wordless and tolerant, but whenever Mimarobe runs into a crisis, she stands up to defend her. Mimarobe is more hedonistic, as she has a relationship with both Isagel and Daisy, constantly overlooking Isagel's feelings. If Mimarobe represents humans, then this is an example of humans enjoying protection from the Earth, while at the same time ignoring the needs of the Earth. More

ironically, when Mimarobe finds out that Isagel is breaking down, her counterplan is to develop a new machine that "display[s] images like Mima... so we are shielded off... from space." Through doing this, Mimarobe is not only joining Captain Chefone in creating false hope, but also escaping further away from Isagel. In the name of helping Isagel, Mimarobe leaves her to fall deeper into desperate darkness alone. Mimarobe/Mankind actually sees the Earth destruct three times during the film. The first time is through the passengers' memory, where she sees the explosions and the flames of war. The second time is when Mima blasts herself, and the third time is Isagel's suicide.

A newborn baby is a symbol of the future, and of everyone's past, a hope of human continuity, it is a more spiritual sense of rebirth. The classic scene of infants in space comes from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), which is interpreted as a metaphor of human's "impossibility of escaping from the cradle" (Chion 2019), implying that humans are in need of nurturing by an alien civilization. In *Aniara*, the alien probe comes right after Isagel gives birth to a baby, where it is interpreted as false hope by the current passengers, but what if it is real hope for the next generation? As we can

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see, Mimarobe is assigned to teach the smartest kids tensor theory, however, she ignores this assignment and concentrates on building the hallucinogenic beam-screen, which performs similar function to the huge wall-screen televisions in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, or Instagram today, which takes our attention and kills lots of our time. In *Aniara*, when the beam-screen is successfully built, Isagel kills the child, erasing the chance of a future. The beam-screen, which represents a fetish of illusion, is just another false hope that only leads to desperation. Humans should take note of their tendency for self-destruction.

Conclusion

All the plights in *Aniara* together return to the eternal question of humanity. *Aniara* is, without a doubt, a dystopian film. The atrophy of humanity is clearly pictured, as time passes by, the passengers on *Aniara*, one by one, lose their ability to perceive others emotions, to experience things through their senses, to dream, to imagine and to create. They are no longer willing to nurture the next generation. Instead, they indulge themselves in the meaningless nostalgia, in alcohol, in screens, in all kinds of self-destruction. Considering the current aging society and climate crisis, it seems difficult to tell whether the imagination of *Aniara's* society is science fiction or an ongoing reality.

BIO

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