

## NATURAL DESTRUCTION IN STEVEN SODERBERGH'S ERIN BROCKOVICH (2000)

**Laveliea Dinda Ramadhanty<sup>1</sup>, Pratiwi Retnaningdyah<sup>2</sup>**

Universitas Negeri Surabaya<sup>1</sup>

Universitan Negeri Surabaya<sup>2</sup>

[laveliea.17020154082@mhs.unesa.ac.id](mailto:laveliea.17020154082@mhs.unesa.ac.id)<sup>1</sup>, [pratiwiretnaningdyah@unesa.ac.id](mailto:pratiwiretnaningdyah@unesa.ac.id)<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** The study is to analyze natural destruction and determine the causes of the destruction in Steven Soderbergh's Erin Brockovich (2000). The study aims to examine how natural destruction and its causes are portrayed. The study employs an ecocritical approach to literature to reveal apocalyptic and pollution aspects in the film and mix it with Giannetti's cinematography theory. The result of the study reveals the issues of water pollution and drought as caused by water exploitation by industry and the company interest for land ownership. Humans overexploit nature and it leads to a bad impact on living things.

**Keyword:** *drought, ecocriticism approach, industrial activity, natural destruction, water polution*

### INTRODUCTION

Natural destruction is an unexpected event that damages society. It is not just brought about by humans yet without anyone else as well. Two significant powers which can cause natural destruction; nature and humankind. For instance, pollution, ozone consumption in the stratosphere, and global warming are caused by humankind while tornadoes, earthquakes, and floods are caused by nature. It shows that nature has its power through human capacity. This study analyzes natural destruction in one of Hollywood films by American director Steven Soderbergh entitled Erin Brockovich focusing on natural destruction in the film. Erin Brockovich (2000) shows the natural damage caused by humankind who only care about their business interests, and it causes the destruction. Developing industrialization and uncalled-for misuse of common assets have carried the reverberation framework to a verge of non-reversibility and irregularity. In this context, Greg Garrard's Ecocriticism theory offers grounds for understanding natural destruction in the relationship between nature and literature. This theory consolidates literary strategy with its environmental viewpoint and eco-analysis is applied to a work in which the landscape is the dominant character. Landscape refers to the non-human elements (Garrard, 2004).

The destruction of nature is a big concern in Erin Brockovich's story. Soderbergh as the director builds an amazing film based on a true-story carried out from the biography of Erin Brockovich, a struggling single parent. The film is about the case of the Pacific Gas & Electric Company (PG&E) contaminating real estate's water in Hinkley, California. The company PG&E uses harmful chemicals such as chromium hexavalent more than the normalized uses for uncontaminated water, for example water pollution and drought.

Erin is a hopeless woman who does not have a job and a single parent with three children and has been divorced twice. One day, she got a job in a law firm in California. When she works in an office, she finds mysterious data from PG&E Company which it has not finished yet. A lot of healthy notes inside of the box at that point she asked authorization from Ed Masry to discover what occurred.

Several previous studies are relevant to this research and those are used to support the analysis of the data. These previous studies have been chosen with two criteria: have the same movie, and the same topic.

First previous study entitled Ecocriticism in Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs First Series Movie (Pratiwi & Rochmawati, 2009). This study uses three theories of ecocriticism. The main theory from Glotfelty about ecocriticism has been used to analyze the relationship between humans and the environment. Then for the supporting theory, the researcher uses theory from Garrard to analyze the environmental issues that happen because of the relationship of the inhabitant to the environment and the

environment itself. For the second supporting theory, the researcher uses the theory from Buell to discover the literature and environmental issues on it.

Puspitasari's (2009) study on Women's Independence in Steven Soderbergh's Erin Brockovich argues that the character of Erin shows how women can dare struggle, women can battle for social status, and women can rehearse the correspondence job. People judge her by the looks despite her good personality. Her social caring is also amazing since it shows when she helps all the victims in Hinkley's case. This shows that Erin is a strong and courageous woman. Without a man she can survive with her 3 children.

Last previous study describes the consequences that Josey Aimes and Erin Brockovich face for disobeying the patriarchal values. They did not want to be bound by patriarchal values which inhibited their position to express themselves. Meanwhile, patriarchal society expects women to obey men as their level is superior. It shows that the characters are being discriminated against men. (Puspa & Handoyo, 2013)

The similarities regarding the topic of ecocriticism, especially water pollution and specific characters can be found in Jerry Rothwell's film *How to Change the World* (2015). It narrates about a group of young pioneers who want to stop nuclear bomb tests in Amchitka, Alaska, and also, wind up making the worldwide green movement and the eco-hero create the global organization (Greenpeace). In Erin Brockovich, natural destruction is also shown by the dryness throughout the film. There are only a few trees visible. This is a dry ruined piece of California. No midtown, no community. Only a great many plots of dry farmland, with little, insipid, unprotected farm homes springing up out of the scene like periodic gravestones.

Considering the above explanatory ideas, this study analyzes the film Erin Brockovich based on the ecocriticism's perspective because the natural destruction that can be seen in the movie has been done by humans. Therefore, this study focuses on nature destruction rather than Erin character by using Garrard's ecocriticism theory that applied within the contexts of the films. Using Garrard's Ecocriticism theory of natural destruction, this study presents two questions that must be tackled: How are natural destructions portrayed through cinematographic elements in Steven Soderberg's Erin Brockovich? What causes of natural destruction in Steven Soderberg's Erin Brockovich?

### ***Ecocriticism***

Ecocriticism is a new crucial discipline among modern literary ideas and cultural theories. The theory discusses the relationship between nature and literature. One of the elements of nature is human beings. This theory combines literary methodology with its ecological perspective and ecocriticism is applied to a work in which the landscape is the dominant character. According to Garrard 63, the definition of landscape is non-human elements such as rocks, soil, water, plants, animals, trees, rivers, air, and human modification. Nature refers to anything that can have an impact on an organism during its lifetime. In fact, all organisms, including humans, affect many components of their environment. In Garrard's expansive definition, ecocriticism involves the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, all through human social history and involves basic examination of the expression 'human'. The significance of this endeavor, in his explanation, gets from the reason that 'natural issues require analysis in social just as logical terms, since they are the result of a communication between biological information and its social expression'.

However, natural destruction ensues everywhere, for example flood, water contamination, deforestation, and etc. People are busy with their own business until they do not realize that the earth is unwell. At this point, the solution to save the environment is needed. There is no literature, no professional or group discussion, and the environment (Glotfelty, 1996: xvi). This thought can be said that people disregard what happened to the environment. There are no "words" to save the environment. Hence, literary work has influenced people to be more aware about the environmental phenomenon on the earth.

According to Kerridge's theory (Garrard, 2004:4), Ecocriticism attempts to assess text and thoughts as a reaction to environmental issues. The new term of Ecocriticism was created by William Rueckert in his

exposition *Writing and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* in 1978. “The theoretical and useful issue is to discover the grounds whereupon two networks – the human, the common – can coincide, collaborate, and prosper in the biosphere” (Rueckert in Glotfelty, 1996: 107). This supports that humans and non-humans should live in agreement. The concordance can't be made if people do not acknowledge non-humans' presence.

Based on Garrard (2004), there are six concepts of ecocriticism, for instance, pollution, position, dwelling, apocalypse, animal, and the earth. However, this study only used pollution and apocalypse concepts since those are more suitable for this research.

### ***Pollution***

Pollution is a form of harmful materials which can endanger the environment. It is a common situation in the human world since they produce industries that might affect nature, for instance, animals, and plants, humans which in water, soil, and air. Pollution is divided into four categories, namely water pollution, soil pollution, noise pollution, and air pollution. However, natural events such as earthquakes, eruption, volcanic eruption, tsunami, and floods are included as pollution too. According to Garrard (2004:6) explains pollution as an environmental issue since it tells a normative claim that is mentioned to something in an inordinate sum existing in the wrong place. He further affirms that pollution does not name a substance or class of substance. He brings up that natural destruction requires examination in social just as scientific terms. It implies that to take a gander at the natural destruction needs the investigation on social and logical terms in light of the fact that ecological issues can be depicted as the result of the association among science and social expression.

### ***Apocalypse***

Greg Garrard calls attention to in his chapter named "Apocalypse". The chapter manifests that the world is not going to end. The living things as well as the environment are going to endure, nonetheless civilization does not. According to Garrard, the narrative of apocalypse are: the warning, the “good guys” as a heather or admirable person, and the “bad guys” or shameless office-holder. This apocalyptic story reflects and feeds into the literary dystopia, in which “even the most egalitarian utopia would inevitably return to strife and rivalry for scarce resources,” and therefore collapse into dystopia. (Garrard, 2004)

The apocalypse has been verified as one of the most complicated, versatile, and amazing similitudes used to control social actions since centuries ago. On the other hand, it continues to be a focal expository component interfacing a large number of moderate plans (strict, military, and modern) to legitimize an accepted good matchless quality of one gathering over other people as well as nature.

### **METHOD**

The main source of the data was taken from the film *Erin Brockovich* directed by Steven Soderbergh released on March 17, 2000. To collect the data, the writer establishes several steps. First, the writer watches and rewatch the film, slowly and carefully to avoid misunderstanding the idea of the film. Second, the writer collected the data which related to the topic of natural destruction by writing notes and finding the forms of words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs that show the influence of destruction through ecocriticism. Besides using ecocriticism theory, this study applies theory developed by Gianetti (2002) regarding the camera movements (shots), mainly extreme long shot, long shot, medium shot, and deep focus shot, along with warm color in the film. Third, the writer analyzes the collected data with mentioned theories. Last step is classifying the data into topic discussions and then drawing the conclusion.

### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

## ***Portrayal of Natural Destruction***

### ***Water Pollution***

Water is one of the assets for supporting all forms of life, production of food, and economic growth. These properties bestow water its incredible utility for humans. The surface water and groundwater assets of the nation assume a significant part in agriculture, livestock production, industrial activities, and so forth. The last few decades, there has been an enormous expansion in the interest for freshwater because of the population growth and the accelerated pace of industrialization (Ramakrishnaiah et al., 2009). In addition, lacking water assets have progressively limited water contamination control and water quality improvement (Bu et al., 2010). In *Erin Brockovich*, the water pollution is captured in some scenes. Here, the writer will utilize an ecocriticism approach to discover some data in *Erin Brockovich* and combine it with Giannetti's cinematography approach which contains the camera movements and color.

Erin: "Internal PG&E documents, all about the contamination. The one I like best says, and I'm paraphrasing here, but it says yes, the water's poisonous, but it'd be better for all involved if this matter wasn't discussed with the neighbors. It's to the Hinkley station, from PG&E Headquarters. Stamped received, March, 1966."

The situation above is very favorable for Erin and Ed Masry. With this evidence PG&E will completely lose. The company's goal is to make the water quality at Hinkley unsuitable. The indifference to nature can be seen clearly in the conversation. Circumstances like these can be detrimental to other living things if they do not try to cope with them.

In order to make the study to be more complete, water pollution in *Erin Brockovich* can be seen through cinematography elements in the form of camera movement. Giannetti (1982) expressed that camera movements in a visual narrative are matched to adjectives in a linguistic narrative while color gives a dramatization. The portrayed of water pollution will be shown down below:



**Figure 1.** *Erin Brockovich*, 2000. (54:15 – 54:20)

In *Erin Brockovich*, the deep focus shot found in this scene. In that scene, the director wanted to make the audience focus on the picture which shows the frog carcass. This shot is taken using a wide lens that it captures at medium long to close objects. The director can make the viewer's eye with one distance then onto the next (Giannetti, 2002). It can be seen that the water is very turbid and also the carcass looks clear enough. This deep focus shot drives the audience to the sharp focus and it is intended to clarify the audience. With this kind of camera movement, it gives proof that water pollution is a serious problem.



**Figure 2.** Erin Brockovich, 2000 (47:56 – 58:00)

This scene is using yellow color which portrays an illness. Within this scene, there is a kid who swims in mini swimming pool. Implicitly the color shows that the water in the pool contaminated with chromium. Chromium is toxic chemical that could not be consumed as they could bring a danger to human and other living things.

Therefore, the explanation above is an important part of the theme of water pollution. This phenomenon can be studied with Garrard's apocalypse theory where he explains the key of this situation is acceptance of the apocalypse itself. Some human do bad things to nature then they have to deal with the consequences (Garrard, 2004:85).

### *Drought*

Drought is also caused by humans due to water imbalances including overexploited groundwater and surface water and decreased water quality which is often associated with disturbed land use and changing ecosystem carrying capacity (Pereira et al., 2005). For example, land use may have changed, and changed infiltration and runoff characteristics. Declining water quality is often associated with water shortages and exacerbates the effects of water scarcity. In *Erin Brockovich*, the drought phenomenon occurs due to the inappropriate use of natural supplies caused by humans so that the water quality decreases. It can be seen from the scenes of this film. The street, residents, and land look so dry. There were only a few trees visible. The example will set out down below:

**Figure 3.** Erin Brockovich, 2000 (28:20 - 28:30)

The drought of Hinkley is captured on this scene. It is used for the extreme long shot which the function is to point out the condition in the film. The real estate is particularly vivid in that picture and the town looks very flat. Stevan Soderbergh as the director conveys the mission of the film that natural destruction generally happened today. The extreme long shot is critical and predominant in this film since it catches the entire circumstance and condition in Hinkley and the outside of town. In the film, the camera shot Hinkley to show the audiences how the genuine condition.

Another example of drought can be seen from cinematography elements in the form of camera movement and color. The scene was shot at a considerable distance, reaching almost beyond human sight to show the whole situation. Long shot usually to show the characters in entirety as well as the surrounding. According to Giannetti (2002: 25), color brings the emotions and atmosphere from the audience. With color the movie will be more dramatic. In *Erin Brockovich*, the writer found a scene which captures a warm color of orange. Here the example of warm color:

**Figure 4.** Erin Brockovich, 2000 (31:09 – 31:15)

The view above uses a warm orange color. Taken at 31:09 - 31:15 minutes when Erin finished meeting with Donna Jensen to discuss the PG&E case. The image is PG&E Industry. Looks very smoky, and cloudy. The orange color of the scene depicts human brutality towards the environment. As captured in those two scenes, it can be seen that Hinkley has experiencing drought because of human's activity. Humans tend to exploit water resources by doing harm to their environment, such as gas emission, intensive irrigation, diminished supplies, land use change, as well as the disposal of factory waste to water resources.

### ***Causes of Natural Destruction***

#### ***Water Exploitation by Industry***

Water is the most important natural resource for human life and other living things. Generally, surface water is polluted during its drainage period, such as industrial waste. On the other hand, humans and nature are connected to each other. The most important thing is to comprehend the relationship between the pollutants and their effect on human health and on biodiversity (Jorgensen et al. 2012). In *Erin Brockovich*, industrial activities are present to give a bad impact to living things. They only take the benefits by exploiting nature.

Erin: "May used the hexachrome here, as the cooling towers, anti-corrosive. And then they drown the access water into these ponds."

Ed: "I don't remember seeing any ponds out there."

Erin: "They cover 'em over. And not too carefully either, because you dig one inch under the surface, and the dirt is green as a fucking shamrock".

Ed: "And that's what caused the contamination?"

Erin: "According to this, they were supposed to line the ponds so this shit couldn't seep into the ground. But guess what-".

Ed: "They skipped that step".

(Dialogues in Erin Brockovich in minute 1:14:42-1:15:49)

The dialogues above shows that Ed and Erin are having a discussion about the case they are working on. They start thinking to figure out how to stop the company's activities that may lead to destruction to all living things. The company contributes contamination and harm to the environment. They bring the pollution around Hinkley. Ed and Erin's action shows that they are trying to take care of the environment and other living things.

Another example of overexploit nature for their interest is presented below. The industry was built close to settlements. When groundwater is contaminated the entire industrial area will be affected. For example, the deadly disease experienced by residents at Hinkley. Not only nature, but humans are affected as well.

Sanchez: "Let's be honest, here. Two million dollars is more money than these people have ever dreamed of."

Erin: "They dream about being able to watch their kids swim in a pool without worrying they'll have to have a hysterectomy at age 20, like Rosa Diaz -- a client of ours -- or have their spine deteriorate like Stan Bloom. Another client of ours."

(Dialogues in Erin Brockovich in minute 1:22:48 – 1:22:59)

This dialogue shows that the PG&E does not feel guilty towards the victims. They cause natural destruction. The water content of chromium which brings diseases for humans who consume it. They let it happen for years. The groundwater in Hinkley has been broken due to these people being ignorant and

they take the benefits without thinking about the risk. With the compensation fee, they assume that the problem is resolved and the case is closed. Thus, the PG&E Company continues to develop its industry. In addition, the writer utilizes other scenes by using camera movement of low angle shots. As indicated by Giannetti (2002: 17), the low angle is a shot in which the camera angle is placed anywhere below the eye line, facing up. The utilization of this shot builds the importance of characterization. In *Erin Brockovich*, the writer found the low angle shot in order to show the audience that the PG&E industry leads to natural destruction by exploiting water resources. This scene happens when Erin wants to take samples from a water well in the Hinkley area of the PG&E industry.



**Figure 5.** Erin Brockovich, 2000 (1:06:48 – 1:06:56)

In this scene, the camera takes a picture from below. The camera focuses only on her. It can be seen when Erin goes down the stairs in the well. In this angle, she also looks so powerful and fearless. She is looking for a way to prove that PG&E has contaminated water sources in Hinkley by taking water samples. The director successfully delivers the message of this scene through the low angle shot and the action of Erin.

Hence, natural destruction is caused by industrial activity. This phenomenon leads to pollution and disease. Having the same right to live in peace on this earth without overexploit for the sake of their respective interests. At this point, *Erin Brockovich* presents that these people only exploit nature without thinking about the impact on others. This film appropriately clarifies the natural destruction to the audience.

### *The Company Interest for Land Ownership*

Land ownership and related issues significantly affect neediness decrease and abundance creation in developing countries. According to FAO in the journal of An Assessment of The Effects of Land Ownership and Land Grab On Development (C. Gerstter et al., 2011) , around 80% of the world's undernourished individuals live in rural areas and most rely upon agriculture, including animals, for their occupations. In *Erin Brockovich*, this situation also happened in Hinkley's real-estate. The company of PG&E wants to buy all the houses in order to develop their industry's location. However, not all residents take the offer so the company took the wrong step by putting hazardous chemicals into groundwater at Hinkley. The example will be shown down below:

Donna: "PG&E came around a few years ago, told us they put chromium in our well by mistake. And since we shouldn't have to drink it if we don't want to, they gave us free spring water and offered to buy our house."

Based on this dialogue, Donna Jensen explained that the company deliberately introduced chromium so that the water quality in residential areas is not feasible. People will leave and sell their houses to the company. This action can be said to be illegal because it destroys natural resources for their own interest. At first, the residents believed in the company but after years they realized that PG&E had been lying to them. The deadly disease they have suffered so far comes from the greed of the company that wants the land.

Another example can be seen from the cinematography elements which camera movement and color. The camera movement and color are very important elements in film. The medium shot will show the



object or subject from the knees up to the waist because of this shot the audience can see the expression in more detail and carries motion and dialogues (Gianetti, 2002:12). While the color captured in this scene is a warm orange color. In *Erin Brockovich*, a medium shot is used in this scene when all residents discuss their case with Ed Masry and Erin.



**Figure 6.** *Erin Brockovich*, 2000 (57:49 – 57: 52)

In this scene, all residents discuss their case with Ed Masry and Erin. They think about how the company is responsible for all of its actions. The picture shows that the shot is taken from the knee up. In that scene people's expressions could be seen clearly that they were confused. The warm color of orange in this picture also represents restlessness. The director uses less light color in that scene to make the story more dramatic.

Therefore, this attitude become an important issue in this film. An illegal action in land ownership by the PG&E Company have occurred in the *Erin Brockovich* film.

### CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Based on this analysis, the study comes to the following conclusions. First, the natural destruction portrayed through Giannetti's cinematography elements. These elements are camera movement and color. The elements reveal that water pollution in water and drought are portrayed in this film. The water pollution happened when the PG&E dumped 1,400 million liters of chromium-tainted wastewater into unlined wastewater spreading ponds around Hinkley and it made the soil in Hinkley so unhealthy that there was a drought around the city.

Second, causes of natural destruction through Greg Garrard's apocalypse theory. Industrial activities which overexploit nature for business purposes lead to bad impact to the environment, animal, and human. They are not responsible for their actions and forget that nature must be preserved. In fact, nature and humans have an intertwined relationship. Thus, *Erin Brockovich* appears to convey the message of people's consciousness to preserve nature and the impact on other living things. This film shows how significant nature is. It isn't just for the great purpose of human life, but also for nature. Hopefully, the audience can take on the plus side of this film decidedly to be executed in real life.

### REFERENCES

- Coupe, L. (2013). Green theory. *The Routledge Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory*, 154-166.
- Dobson, A. (1989). Deep ecology. *Cogito*, 3(1), 41-46.
- Garrard, Greg. (2011). *Ecocriticism*. New York: Routledge.
- Gerstter, C., Kaphengst, T., Knoblauch, D., & Timeus, K. (2011). *An Assessment of the effects of land ownership and land grab on development-with a particular focus on small holdings and rural areas*. Ecologic Institute, Brussels.
- Gianneti, L.D. (2002). *Understanding Movies* (9th edition). New Jersey: Prentice Hall
- Glotfelty, C.1996.*The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks In Literary Ecology*.London:The University Of Georgia Press.
- Hancock, B., Ockleford, E., & Windridge, K. (2001). *An introduction to qualitative research*. Trent focus group.



- Jose. 2015. *Literature Law, Science, and Philosophy*. India: Dharmanam
- Kemp, David D. (2004). *Exploring Environmental Issues*. London: Routledge. Nandhikkara, Paulo, A. A., & Pereira, L. S. (2006). Drought concepts and characterization: comparing drought indices applied at local and regional scales. *Water International*, 31(1), 37-49.
- Pezzullo, P. C. (2006). Articulating “sexy” anti-toxic activism on screen: The cultural politics of *A Civil Action* and Erin Brockovich. *The environmental communication yearbook*, 3, 21-48.
- Pratiwi, A. D. P., & Rochmawati, D. ECOCRITICISM IN CLOUDY WITH A CHANCE OF MEATBALL FIRST SERIES MOVIE (2009). In *The 4th National Conference on Language and Language Teaching (NCOLLT) 2018 is annual conference organized by English Education Department, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas PGRI Adi Buana Surabaya. The conference provides the opportunity to all EFL experts, practitioners, researchers, and students to get together to share ideas, experiences, aspirations, and research findings.* (p. 55).
- Rust, S. And Monani, S. (2013). *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*. Pdf downloaded on Tuesday, January 12th at 06.45 p.m. from <http://www.public.asu.edu/~petergo/courses/eng655/Ecocinema-Intro.pdf>
- Setyorini, A. (2016). Ecology, Technology and Dystopia: an Ecocritical Reading of Young Adult Dystopian Literature. In *International Conference on Language, Literary, and Cultural Studies (ICON LATERALS)* (Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 100-115). Study Program of English, Universitas Brawijaya.
- Singh, M. R., & Gupta, A. (2016). *Water pollution-sources, effects and control*. Centre for Biodiversity, Department of Botany, Nagaland University.