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p-ISSN 1733-1218; e-ISSN 2719-826X

<https://doi.org/10.21697/seb.5899>

Research Article

Authoritarianism as an Ecological Risk: A Political Ecology Reading of Mez Breeze's "A Place Called Ormalcy"

Autorytaryzm jako zagrożenie ekologiczne. Odczytanie „A Place Called Ormalcy” autorstwa Mez Breeze w perspektywie ekologii politycznej

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Received: 2025-12-15; Revised: 2026-07-18; Accepted: 2026-07-25; Published Online First: 2026-07-29;

Abstract

This paper examines authoritarianism as an ecological risk through a political ecology reading of Mez Breeze's digital fiction *A Place Called Ormalcy* (2020). Its playful, distorted lexicon and whimsical interactive narrative conceal Ormalcy's gradual descent into environmental degradation. Drawing on textual analysis and insights from an unpublished interview with Breeze, the study shows how authoritarian systems weaponize linguistic obscuration to reshape both civic life and human–environment relations. They transform shared ecological spaces into controlled zones, mechanize natural environments, disrupt biodiversity, and weaken emotional attachment to non-human life. Mr Ormal's transformation from a contented, nature-loving citizen into an enforcer of the regime that once oppressed him illustrates how authoritarian governance produces emotional desensitization and ecological indifference. Situated within political ecology and ecocriticism, the analysis demonstrates how authoritarianism may operate as a systemic force of ecological collapse by eroding biodiversity, ecological freedom, and affective human–nature relationships. The article interprets Breeze's work as a cautionary digital allegory exposing the linguistic, psychological, and structural mechanisms through which authoritarian power normalizes environmental degradation. It also highlights the importance of democratic institutions and ecological responsibility for advancing SDG 15 and SDG 16.

Keywords

political ecology, authoritarianism, environmental degradation, electronic literature, ecocriticism, Mez Breeze, authoritarian environmentalism, environmental governance, SDG 15 – Life on Land, SDG 16 – Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł analizuje autorytaryzm jako zagrożenie ekologiczne, interpretując cyfrową fikcję Mez Breeze pt. „A Place Called Ormalcy” (2020) z perspektywy ekologii politycznej. Jej żartobliwy, zniekształcony język i kapryśna interaktywna narracja skrywają stopniowe popadanie Ormalcy w degradację środowiskową. Opierając się na analizie tekstu i spostrzeżeniach z niepublikowanego wywiadu z Breeze, badanie pokazuje, jak systemy autorytarne wykorzystują językowe zaciemnienie jako broń, aby przekształcać zarówno życie obywatelskie, jak i relacje między człowiekiem a środowiskiem. Przekształcają wspólne przestrzenie ekologiczne w strefy kontrolowane, mechanizują środowiska naturalne, niszczą bioróżnorodność i osłabiają więź emocjonalną z życiem pozaludzkim. Przemiana pana Ormala z zadowolonego, kochającego naturę obywatela w egzekutora reżimu, który go kiedyś uciskał, ilustruje, jak autorytarne rządy prowadzą do emocjonalnego odwręcenia i ekologicznej obojętności. Analiza, osadzona w kontekście ekologii politycznej i ekokrytyki, pokazuje, jak autorytaryzm może działać jako systemowa siła katastrof ekologicznych, niszcząc bioróżnorodność, wolność ekologiczną i emocjonalne relacje między człowiekiem a naturą. Artykuł interpretuje dzieło Breeze’a jako ostrzegawczą alegorię cyfrową, obnażającą językowe, psychologiczne i strukturalne mechanizmy, za pomocą których autorytarna władza normalizuje degradację środowiska. Podkreśla również znaczenie instytucji demokratycznych i odpowiedzialności ekologicznej dla realizacji Celów Zrównoważonego Rozwoju nr 15 i 16.

Słowa kluczowe

ekologia polityczna, autorytaryzm, degradacja środowiska, literatura elektroniczna, ekokrytyka, Mez Breeze, autorytarny ekologizm, zarządzanie środowiskiem, SDG 15 – Życie na lądzie, SDG 16 – Pokój, sprawiedliwość i silne instytucje

Introduction

Over the past three decades, the world has experienced a marked rise in authoritarian governance, accompanied by a steady erosion of democratic norms and institutions. This decline in democracy has intensified in recent years: by 2021, only about 20 percent of the global population lived in countries classified as “Free,” while nearly 38 percent lived under regimes deemed “Not Free,” the highest proportion since 1997 (Repucci and Slipowitz 2022). Freedom House reports that the global decline in freedom worsened dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many governments used public-health emergencies to justify heightened surveillance, restrictions on mobility, limits on dissent, and expansions of executive power (Repucci and Slipowitz 2022). This cumulative shift has produced an intensifying authoritarian, anti-pluralist, and anti-institutional wave that now threatens the constitutional democracy that prevailed as the dominant ideology throughout much of the twentieth century. As Justice Barroso observes, as quoted in Gilliard (2025), authoritarian populism is driven by “personalistic and charismatic leaders who manipulate the fears, the needs, and the desires of the population, often promising simple and mistaken solutions for complex problems.”

This acceleration in authoritarian governance and the consequent global recession of democracy carries

profound ecological consequences. Authoritarian regimes often centralize decision-making, suppress transparency, and weaken environmental oversight. These conditions historically correlate with higher levels of ecological degradation and resource mismanagement. Studies in political ecology demonstrate that environmental governance is inseparable from power relations, especially in contexts where centralized authorities limit community participation. Robbins notes that state and institutional actors frequently rely on “official knowledge...used to secure employment, control resources, and justify extraction and enclosure” (Robbins 2012, 134). In such settings, both “consent and dissent...are not a mere matter of choice,” but are shaped by systems that regulate how people “come to think of themselves” within environmental regimes (Robbins 2012, 226). This reveals how authoritarian tendencies, through the manipulation of knowledge, control over access to resources, and the narrowing of political agency can intensify ecological harm by preventing communities from resisting extractive practices or influencing environmental decision-making. As democratic checks weaken, ecological systems become more exposed to exploitation, reflecting what environmental scholars describe as ecological fragility (Sustainability Directory 2025a) produced by concentrated, unaccountable power. In this scenario, authoritarianism is much more than a political hazard; it snowballs into a significant ecological threat with the potential to harm human populations and disrupt the balance of entire ecosystems.

Mez Breeze, as a veteran digital artist, also emerges as a champion of ecological welfare, weaving environmental consciousness into both her creative practice and her lived commitments. As Breeze (2020b) explains, her early resolve to reduce carbon impact through permaculture and sustainable living reflects a daily ethic of environmental care and an ongoing effort to minimize her role in the “burgeoning climate emergency.” This ecological commitment is seamlessly infused into her works, which interrogate humanity’s troubled relationship with nature. In “Totemic Pandemic” (2018), a hybrid structure combining totemic forms with organic elements such as tree parts and insect wings, Breeze critiques humanity’s tendency to “adorn cultural, religious and other institutionalized trappings rather than respect [and care for] the natural world” (Breeze 2018). Her *Prog[W]res[tile]s* (2024) explores themes including doomscrolling, democratic erosion, the climate crisis, disinformation, extremism, and gender objectification (Breeze 2025, 34). In the “Crisis” section of the work, Breeze condenses the cascading ecological breakdown which causes flooding, heat, scarcity, and systemic collapse into a fractured Mezangelle form that mirrors the instability it depicts while exposing the anthropocentric mindset driving such crises. Her strong ecological ethics has inspired the climate-centered

narrative of sixteen interconnected stories that she is currently working on. She describes it as an “urgent reflection on ecological grief, historical erasure, cultural resilience, and the fragile potential for correction,” in which the “[subtle but insistent] protagonist is the climate itself” (Digital America 2025). Across her digital literary practice, Breeze positions ecological welfare as a foundational principle rather than a mere byproduct. By integrating artistic innovation, environmental advocacy, and personally enacted sustainability, she models how digital creativity can cultivate ecological responsibility and reimagine more harmonious human-environment relations.

Mez Breeze’s 3D/VR fiction *A Place Called Ormalcy* (2020a) depicts a highly controlled world that becomes environmentally impoverished due to the growing dominance of an authoritarian regime. This alignment makes digital fiction a compelling lens through which to examine how authoritarian structures intersect with environmental vulnerability and ecological collapse. Digital narratives serve as a critical arena for challenging or imagining alternatives to authoritarian ecopolitics. Mez Breeze employs digital literature not merely as art, but as a space to critique systems of biopolitical power. As an electronic author, she primarily explores questions of subjectivity, embodiment, and power in electronic literature (Aardse 2016). As Aardse argues, Breeze’s hybrid codework, which merges programming syntax with natural language, reveals how language itself becomes a medium of governance and control in electronic environments and how such environments can function as sites of aesthetic resistance (Aardse 2016).

In *A Place Called Ormalcy*, Breeze’s critique exposes how the oppressive structures of the digital world can mirror real-world regimes that erode environmental autonomy, suppress ecological plurality, and commodify life. By placing such systemic control inside a fictional ecology, Breeze offers a powerful vantage point from which to examine how authoritarian governance can translate into ecological inertia, environmental degradation, and a loss of agency for both human communities and the surrounding ecosystems. The layered narrative combined with the interactive 3D/VR landscape renders visible the often-invisible mechanisms through which power regulates bodies, spaces, and environments, while also exposing the fragility of ecological systems subjected to fascist authority. By situating Breeze’s work within the broader concerns of political ecology and environmental humanities, this article explores how *A Place Called Ormalcy* illuminates the ecological risks inherent in authoritarian governance. In doing so, it demonstrates the value of digital literature as an analytical space for exploring the entanglements of power, environment, and resistance.

1. Theoretical Framework

1.1. Political Ecology

Political ecology is a critical research field within anthropology, geography, and related disciplines that has become well known for its analyses of how and why structural forces, such as capitalist economic processes and power relations, drive environmental change in an increasingly interconnected world (Roberts 2023, 1). It represents a critical academic lens through which we examine the intricate relationships between political, economic, and social factors and their profound impacts on environmental change and resource management. It moves beyond simplistic environmental narratives, instead emphasizing the role of power dynamics, inequality, and historical context in shaping ecological outcomes (Sustainability Directory 2025b). Disciplines such as anthropology and archaeology in connection with human ecology, which studies the adaptive strategies of humans in relation to different ecosystems, are known to have an important impact on eco-politics although their scope has been more ecological than political (Membrive and Armie 2020). The use of the term “ecological politics” is traced to the article “Ownership and Political Ecology” published by anthropologist Eric Wolf in 1972, where he discusses the dynamics of land and resource ownership in the Swiss Alps. He contends:

Capitalism progresses through the employment of jural rules of ownership to strip the laborer of his means of production and to deny him access to the product of his labor. The local rules of ownership and inheritance are thus not simply norms for the allocation of rights and obligations among a given population, but mechanisms which mediate between the pressures emanating from larger society and the exigencies of the local ecosystem (Wolf 1972, 202).

Apart from Eric Wolf, scholars such as Dianne Rocheleau, Arturo Escobar, Richard Peet, Piers Blaikie, Bunyan Bryant and Barbara Johnston have contributed to the intellectual foundations of political ecology, examining the relationships between social power and the functioning of ecologies.

Political ecology, also known as ecological politics, ecopolitics, or green politics (Membrive and Armie 2020) is a political ideology that aims to foster an ecological and sustainable society rooted in nonviolence, environmentalism, social justice, and grassroots democracy. This approach offers a critical counterpoint to earlier Malthusian perspectives, which attributed environmental degradation and food insecurity primarily to population growth exceeding the carrying capacity of available resources. Rather than locating blame in demographic pressures, political ecology situates environmental harm within broader

structures of political economy and power (Roberts 2023, 1). Ecopolitics may be understood both as an ideological movement and as an academic discipline with a dual purpose: to critique and analyze the underlying causes of environmental injustice and resource overexploitation; and to advance pathways for addressing ecological problems through policies and practices that promote environmental sustainability (Membrive and Armie 2020).

In this context, political ecology becomes essential for understanding how environmental governance is shaped by competing interests, uneven power relations, and struggles over access to ecological resources. As climate disruptions intensify and ecosystems are sweltering under conflict, the question is not merely how resources are managed, but also who holds the authority to make those decisions, whose interests are prioritized, and which communities bear the burdens of environmental degradation. The increase in environmental conflicts has given rise to innumerable questions related to the authority that political actors have to manage the distribution and conservation of natural resources. Power relationships evolve influenced by their origin, motivation, and desired final result (Vivas 2024). Political ecology foregrounds these tensions by revealing how state institutions, corporate actors, and global economic forces shape ecological outcomes through mechanisms of control, exclusion, and enclosure. It prompts us to interrogate not only the material dimensions of ecological decline, but also the political motivations and power structures that sustain it. It also enables a critique of ecofascism that exposes how environmental crisis can be weaponized to justify exclusionary, fascist forms of governance. As Hancock (2022) observes, ecofascist narratives manifest across a range of contemporary discourses – from news hosts attributing pollution to immigrant populations, to politicians deflecting responsibility by highlighting emissions in other countries to justify climate inaction in the United States, to cultural commentary that portrays population decline as desirable and even necessary. By examining how authority is exercised and contested within environmental regimes, political ecology offers a deeper understanding of why ecological crises persist and how they become intertwined with broader social, economic, and political inequalities.

1.2. Political Ecology and SDGs

In today's epoch of the Anthropocene and escalating metacrises, including climate instability, biodiversity loss, and resource scarcity, it has become imperative to examine the central concerns of political ecology alongside the global framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by the

United Nations. The relevance of political ecology extends directly to the SDGs, which aim to address the intertwined challenges of poverty, inequality, environmental degradation, and governance. While the SDGs outline ambitious targets for fostering sustainability and equity, political ecology provides the critical lens through which to interrogate the power structures that either enable or obstruct their achievement. By examining how authority is exercised over natural resources, political ecology reveals that environmental harm and socio-economic inequalities often arise from the same political and economic arrangements that the SDGs seek to transform. This perspective interrogates the presumption that sustainability initiatives are inherently neutral or universally advantageous, emphasizing the need to critically examine whose interests such measures ultimately serve. It is important to note that the SDGs have been widely contested for their internal contradictions, particularly their dual emphasis on economic growth and environmental conservation, a tension that many scholars argue is not viable (Hickel 2019, 2). Gupta and Vegelin observe that the SDGs embody “trade-offs in favor of economic growth over social well-being and ecological viability” (2016, 433). Moreover, the SDGs have been criticized for advancing models of sustainability that align with the priorities of the Global North, sidelining the environmental harm caused to less privileged regions. As Arora-Jonsson remarks, “The SDGs have evoked optimism but have also been criticized for reproducing a universal template grounded in a western and neoliberal ideology” (2023, 1), pointing to broader concerns in political ecology that sustainability frameworks often mirror existing global power inequalities.

Political ecology highlights how certain policies aligned with the SDGs, such as conservation programs, climate adaptation strategies, or resource management initiatives can inadvertently reinforce inequalities when implemented through top-down or authoritarian governance structures. Such approaches risk displacing communities, marginalizing local knowledge, or consolidating control in the hands of powerful actors, thereby undermining SDG commitments to justice and inclusivity (e.g., SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities; SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). At the same time, political ecology supports the SDGs by emphasizing the need for participatory governance, transparent decision-making, and equitable access to environmental resources, principles that are essential for addressing climate action (SDG 13) and protecting marine and terrestrial ecosystems (SDGs 14 and 15). In doing so, it deepens the normative and analytical foundations of the SDGs, insisting that sustainable development must go beyond technical solutions to confront the underlying political dynamics that shape ecological vulnerability and social injustice.

1.3. Authoritarianism in Political Ecology

Shaped by the crises of progressive neoliberalism and its mix of elite global interests, militarization, and uneven forms of globalization, recent years have seen the rise of new kinds of authoritarian populism with significant ecological consequences (Huff and van Sant 2018). In political ecology, these developments are not only political shifts but also environmental ones, because authoritarian governments often change how land, natural resources, and ecosystems are controlled. Such regimes tend to accelerate large-scale resource exploitation, weaken environmental protections, and suppress the voices of communities who depend on these environments. They may also promote narratives that deny climate change, restrict public participation, and justify unequal claims over land and resources. These patterns increase social and ecological vulnerabilities and limit possibilities for sustainable and just environmental governance. As these tendencies spread across different regions and political systems, authoritarianism itself becomes an ecological threat, changing the way societies perceive, manage, and respond to environmental crises. It has become imperative to explore this emerging global wave of regressive, authoritarian regimes and movements as they manifest in diverse forms and contexts.

A crucial distinction within contemporary discussions on environmental governance is between neoliberal or neoconservative authoritarianism and environmental authoritarianism, as they produce markedly different ecological outcomes. Brown argues that neoliberalism and neoconservatism, two seemingly contradictory political rationalities, paradoxically converge to produce de-democratizing effects. He adds:

Their respective devaluation of political liberty, equality, substantive citizenship, and the rule of law in favor of governance, according to market criteria on one side, and valorization of state power for putatively moral ends on the other, undermines both the culture and institutions of constitutional democracy (Brown 2006, 690).

As a result, environmental protection is often weakened, and ecological concerns are subordinated to industrial expansion, resulting in intensified pollution, habitat destruction, and socio-ecological inequality. By contrast, in environmental authoritarianism, or eco-authoritarianism, centralized authority is deployed to enforce environmental protection, regulate resource use, and mitigate ecological degradation, often through technocratic and top-down interventions (Enninga 2025, 498). While such approaches may enable rapid policy implementation and large-scale environmental reforms, they raise significant concerns regarding democratic participation, equity, and justice. Distinguishing between these two modalities is essential for political ecology, as it enables a more context-sensitive view of authoritarianism as a complex set of governance

practices whose environmental impact depends on the underlying political-economic orientation.

China provides a notable case study of how authoritarian governance affects environmental policy and ecological outcomes. Drawing on studies reviewed in Lo (2020), several scholars have noted the emergence of a new form of authoritarian environmentalism marked by increasing centralization of political authority, which challenges earlier descriptions of China's environmental governance as top-down yet fragmented. Traditionally, local governments exercised considerable discretion in interpreting and implementing national environmental regulations. Under Xi Jinping, however, greater central oversight has reduced this flexibility, limiting the scope for locally adaptive environmental governance. Consequently, local authorities are now expected to enforce environmental directives more rigidly, even when strict compliance creates significant socio-economic burdens. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge China's paradoxical position within global environmental politics: while it remains the world's largest emitter of carbon dioxide (Thibault 2024), it is also emerging as a global powerhouse in clean energy production. Chan (2025), in his article on the World Economic Forum, observes, "the rapid growth of green technology production in China has helped cut green energy costs worldwide, making sustainable energy solutions more accessible than ever for billions of people."

Recent scholarship further underscores the complexity of environmental governance under authoritarian regimes. Fengshi Wu (2026) examines the role of quasi-NGOs in China, Vietnam, and Kazakhstan, highlighting how these organizations function as intermediaries between the state and civil society, simultaneously enabling controlled participation and subtle forms of resistance. Similarly, Rodenbiker and Teebken (2026) conceptualize authoritarian environmental governance in China as a double-edged phenomenon, combining policy efficiency and administrative capacity with persistent issues related to justice, participation, and unequal power relations. These perspectives challenge any singular reading of authoritarianism, revealing it instead as a dynamic and internally contradictory mode of environmental governance.

In the United States, recent environmental governance trends illustrate how shifts in federal priorities significantly impact the regulation of ecological systems. A recent analysis by Duffau (2025) highlights that changes in administrative direction have involved restructuring research funding, altering communication protocols within federal agencies, and revising the mandates of key institutions such as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). President Trump, as a Republican, aligns with the right of the U.S. political spectrum and holds extreme views on climate

change (Cosma et al. 2025). These adjustments, combined with broader regulatory rollbacks documented by *The Guardian* have resulted in weakened monitoring capacities, reduced institutional oversight, and increased reliance on market-driven mechanisms to govern pollution and resource extraction (Milman 2025). He justifies these changes as necessary to reduce energy costs, achieve “energy dominance,” and boost the competitiveness of U.S. industries by withdrawing the United States from the Paris Agreement on climate change and rolling back regulations on drilling for oil and gas (Sall and Gross 2024). A recent report by PBS News, further shows that public communication surrounding climate change has become fragmented and inconsistent, potentially contributing to uncertainty among citizens and policymakers (Walling and Borenstein 2025). From a political ecology perspective, these developments have important implications: they shift environmental governance toward a more centralized and deregulatory model, reducing the role of scientific expertise in policy formation while creating conditions in which socio-ecological vulnerabilities may intensify at both national and global scales. The cumulative effect is a reconfiguration of environmental governance that emphasizes economic competitiveness and resource development while potentially constraining the capacity for coordinated climate mitigation and international scientific cooperation.

The case studies of China and the United States reveal how contemporary forms of authoritarian environmental governance, though emerging from distinct political systems share a common tendency to centralize decision-making, weaken scientific deliberation, and prioritize economic or strategic imperatives over ecological and social equity. In China, heightened centralization has reduced local implementation flexibility, reshaping environmental policy into a more rigid and technocratic framework that may undermine prospects for a just transition. In the United States, shifts in federal priorities have similarly reconfigured environmental governance by constraining scientific agencies, loosening regulatory frameworks, and fostering uncertainty in public communication around climate change. At the same time, these cases underscore that authoritarian governance is not a uniform phenomenon: it can operate through both deregulatory, market-oriented logics and more interventionist, environmentally focused strategies. While such approaches may generate short-term administrative efficiency or political coherence, they also risk amplifying socio-ecological vulnerabilities, restricting democratic participation, and weakening long-term adaptive capacity. These developments-highlight the need to critically examine how power, knowledge, and environmental governance are redistributed under authoritarian pressures, and to consider the implications for global climate cooperation, resilience, and environmental justice.

2. Eco-political Reading of *A Place Called Ormalcy*

Mez Breeze's *A Place Called Ormalcy* unfolds as a deceptively whimsical narrative that gradually reveals an authoritarian system tightening its grip on human and non-human beings along with the natural environment. At the beginning of the narrative, Ormalcy is introduced as a serene and harmonious place: "If you don't know where Ormalcy is, think of the biggest, loveliest, most blossomy place in your world: how clean the air is there, how happy and galoomfy and loved are all its creatures, how friendly and fizzy are all the people" (Breeze 2020a). Yet this apparent serenity is destabilized by the intrusive presence of the Plodiceman and the bureaucratic machinery he represents. Breeze explains that the work acts as "a warning about complacency in the face of tiptoeing authoritarianism" (Mez Breeze, interview with the authors, May 9, 2025).

The digital fiction is structured as a sequence of chapters ("Wonne" to "Severn") that guide the reader through a progressively transforming environment, moving from a vibrant, colorful, organic setting to a greyed-out, highly controlled, and mechanized zone. Within each chapter, the text appears as interactive annotations embedded in the 3D environment, accessible through an annotation bar that reveals additional textual fragments when selected. These elements can be explored spatially by rotating the scene and navigating through annotations manually or via autoplay, integrating reading with movement and interaction. Experiencing the work in Virtual Reality further intensifies its immersive quality, as the reader moves through the evolving environment and engages with the narrative as a spatial, embodied experience. The language mimics a distorted, childlike lexicon ("plark," "Popawomps," "plathway") that gradually gives way to rigid bureaucratic terminology ("Ormalcy Citizen 91101"), requiring the reader to interpret shifts in tone and meaning. Transitions in the narrative are marked by the restriction of the plark, the enclosure of creatures into "krates," and the mechanization of the environment, culminating in Mr Ormal's transformation into a Plodiceman who "pheels nothing" (Breeze 2020a). Breeze illustrates how authoritarian governance disrupts ecologically diverse communities, emotional well-being, and environmental integrity, creating a fabricated sense of normalcy. The interplay of shifting spatial settings, linguistic distortion, and narrative progression produces a disorienting experience that exposes the interlinked dangers of authoritarian control and ecological degradation.

A Place Called Ormalcy also invites us to reflect on the ironic relationship between digital art and ecology. Marine biologist and digital artist Martin Colognoli (2024), in his blog post "Digital Art, a New Form

of Ecological Awareness,” discusses how digital artists are using technological tools to create immersive and interactive works that can reach a global audience. Colognoli (2024) writes, “Through animations, augmented reality installations, or virtual experiences, digital art is becoming a powerful vector for raising awareness of environmental challenges such as climate change, deforestation, or ocean protection.” In a similar vein, Marie Chatel (2019), in her article “The Endless Summer: How Digital Art Urges for New Ecologies,” discusses how digital art participates in challenging mindsets around ecology, raising awareness, calling for action, or suggesting inspirational solutions. While Breeze’s work critiques ecological degradation within its fictional world, in reality, it is embedded in the energy-intensive infrastructures of digital computation, including servers, hardware, and immersive VR systems. This tension uncovers the conflict at the heart of digital art: the very medium that renders ecological crisis visible is itself involved in processes of extraction, consumption, and environmental harm. Moreover, the immersive aesthetics of VR, often associated with disembodiment and abstraction, risk distancing the user from the material realities of ecological degradation even as it simulates its effects. In this sense, the fiction can be read as self-reflexive, prompting viewers to confront their own participation in digital systems that both represent and reproduce ecological crisis.

2.1. Linguistic Manipulation and Ecological Degradation

In today’s era, where messaging is as powerful as missiles, language plays a crucial role in steering social dynamics. In *A Place Called Ormalcy*, Breeze exposes how linguistic and structural manipulation function as tools of subtle domination. A central feature of Ormalcy is its playful, distorted lexicon, replete with words such as “swork,” “plarks,” “plathway,” “Popawomps,” and “Slittertoads.” Although whimsical, this linguistic manipulation serves as a mechanism of authoritarian soft power. Breeze contends that the singsong lexicon was crafted “as a type of obscuration... to lull the reader/viewer into a false state of acceptability” until the underlying authoritarianism becomes visible (Mez Breeze, interview with the authors, May 9, 2025).

From an ecopolitical perspective, this mirrors how real-world authoritarian regimes use euphemistic, technocratic, or distorted language to mask environmental harm. State actions such as habitat destruction, enforced displacement, or resource extraction may be framed as “development,” “optimization,” or “public safety.” In Ormalcy, similarly, coercive commands are softened by infantilizing vocabulary, creating a linguistic smokescreen that cleverly conceals ecological and social violence.

Breeze directly connects this linguistic strategy to contemporary concerns about “weaponised misinformation and disinformation,” emphasizing that authoritarian power thrives when populations are deprived of clarity and autonomy (Mez Breeze, interview with the authors, May 9, 2025). As language becomes unstable, so does the ecological world. The breakdown of linguistic clarity works in tandem with the degradation of natural spaces, making linguistic obscurity and ecological degradation mutually reinforcing forces.

2.2. Ecological Surveillance and Control

Authoritarian control in Ormalcy is most visible through spatial restriction. Mr Ormal is arbitrarily barred from familiar pathways and public spaces as the Plodiceman enforces new regulations that redefine access. Eco-friendly areas like the plark, where humans and nature once coexisted, become inaccessible, gated, and militarized. Restrictions on movement and the enclosure of natural spaces in the town reflect key strategies of authoritarian environmental governance, in which landscapes are reconfigured under the guise of order, safety, or ownership.

The psychological consequences of these restrictions are immediate and adverse. Deprived of his ability to inhabit natural spaces, Mr Ormal experiences distress, longing, and disorientation. His emotional well-being is linked to ecological access, demonstrating how authoritarian spatial regulation harms both the environment and mental well-being. Breeze connects these dynamics to contemporary bureaucratic and surveillance systems in which individuals are increasingly treated as “data points rather than autonomous beings,” losing both personal and ecological autonomy (Mez Breeze, interview with the authors, May 9, 2025). Mr Ormal’s reclassification into a numerical identity, “Ormalcy Citizen 91101,” symbolizes the erosion of relational belonging to place, to creatures, and to the self (Breeze 2020a). The unwarranted ecological policing thus operates on environmental, social, and emotional levels, reaffirming that environmental degradation is an intrinsic feature, rather than a secondary effect of authoritarian governance.

2.3. Destruction of Biodiversity

The authoritarian regime dramatically escalates its ecological control by removing Ormalcy’s nonhuman creatures from their natural habitat. The rounding up of Popawomps and Slittertoads signifies a systematic erasure of ecological diversity, transforming a once-vibrant, multispecies environment into a barren and controlled landscape. This has several ecopolitical implications:

2.3.1. Suppression of Ecological Diversity

The authoritarian system exerts total control over the ecological fabric by eliminating biologically diverse species. Creatures such as the Popawomps and Slittertoads, once cherished by Mr Ormal, are treated as lifeless objects, illustrating how authoritarian structures reduce living beings to liabilities that need to be contained and managed.

2.3.2. Severing of Relationships with Non-human Species

Mr Ormal's sense of joy is closely tied to his everyday encounters with the Popawomps and Slittertoads, whose presence animates his environment. Their removal disrupts these relationships, unsettling the emotional and psychological balance that comes from living alongside other species.

2.3.3. Establishment of Fear-based Governance

As Breeze observes, authoritarianism advances through "subtle yet ultimately devastating alterations to routine," and the disappearance of Mr Ormal's beloved species shows this aggression (Mez Breeze, interview with the authors, May 9, 2025). By eradicating biodiversity, the authoritarian system eliminates spontaneity and interdependence while inducing fear and guilt.

2.3.4. Excessive Surveillance and the Mechanization of Nature

As the authoritarian system tightens its hold, Ormalcy becomes increasingly monitored and mechanized. What was once a flourishing landscape gradually transforms into a zone dominated by pervasive surveillance. Natural environments are turned into mechanized zones, and the landscape begins to reflect the values of authoritarian order rather than ecological vitality. As Breeze suggests, this shift resonates with the contemporary culture of surveillance, where autonomy is buried under administrative control, and ecosystems are treated as resources to be classified, monitored, and rationalized (Mez Breeze, interview with the authors, May 9, 2025). In authoritarian ecologies, nature must be rendered predictable and controllable; this is achieved by stripping away complexity and diversity, and reorganizing society into mere administrative categories. Therefore, the mechanization of nature in Ormalcy becomes necessary for authoritarian governance to sustain itself.

2.3.5. Dehumanization of Mr Ormal

The most devastating ecological consequence in the fiction is the transformation of Mr Ormal from a

contented, nature-loving citizen into a cold and cruel Plodiceman with “slobnailed boots and slaughtery shirp and daggerfull pants” (Breeze 2020a). Over time, he loses his emotional sensitivity and his ability to connect with others around him. His numbness when he “pheels nothing” in the face of the brutal destruction of his once-favorite plark and his beloved creatures signifies the tragic internalization and acceptance of authoritarian control (Breeze 2020a). As Breeze explains, the narrative explores how individuals “internalize oppressive systems over time,” gradually becoming comfortable with the systems that harm them (Mez Breeze, interview with the authors, May 9, 2025). From an ecopolitical perspective, the point at which Mr Ormal loses his empathy is the moment at which authoritarianism achieves its gravest hold. His brutal transformation reveals the psychological dimension of ecological oppression, where authoritarianism succeeds in making citizens indifferent to the sufferings of the natural environment around them.

Conclusion

The fictional world of Ormalcy strongly reflects ongoing tendencies in contemporary environmental and political developments. For instance, the gradual restriction of access to the plark recalls the increasing privatization and enclosure of natural spaces, such as the fencing of common lands and restricted entry to urban green spaces or protected forests in the name of conservation, where what was once shared becomes regulated or off-limits to local communities. Similarly, the use of numerical identifiers and arbitrary rules reflects contemporary systems of data-driven governance, seen in practices such as digital identity systems, surveillance-based management, and carbon tracking mechanisms, where individuals and environments are managed through classification and monitoring. The capture and containment of creatures in “krates” and “klages” (Breeze 2020a) echo industrial practices such as factory farming, wildlife captivity, and biodiversity offsetting, where living beings are reduced to units that can be controlled, stored, or substituted. In the fabricated world of Ormalcy, the language of order and efficiency thus mirrors real-world policy discourses, from “smart city” governance to technocratic environmental management that often obscure the underlying realities of ecological loss, authoritarian control, and systematic exclusion.

Breeze’s fiction demonstrates that authoritarianism produces ecological collapse through strategies such as linguistic distortion that obscures environmental harm, the enclosure of ecological spaces, eradication of species, surveillance-driven mechanization of nature, and psychological conditioning that erases ecological empathy. The author emphasizes that resistance “is an absolute possibility,” but it must be collective and

grounded in early recognition of linguistic and structural manipulation (Mez Breeze, interview with the authors, May 9, 2025). The faint echo of protest at the end of the narrative (in an earlier version) suggests that ecological and political liberation arise from shared awareness, critical skepticism, and the rekindling of empathy for other living beings and the environment (Breeze 2020a).

A Place Called Ormalcy offers a powerful ecopolitical critique of authoritarian control. Through a subtle interplay of whimsy and dread, the narrative reveals how authoritarian governance infiltrates ecological life, restricting movement, erasing species, mechanizing the environment, and hollowing out emotional subjectivity. Breeze's work urges readers to remain critically aware of subtle authoritarian encroachments, especially those that disguise themselves as "normalcy," and to recognize the inseparability of ecological and political freedom.

Statements

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, C.I.; Methodology, C.I.; Writing – original draft preparation, C.I.; Review and editing, R.P.; Supervision, R.P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

AI Tools Declaration: During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to improve the academic tone and enhance its clarity and readability. The authors reviewed and edited the output where necessary and take full responsibility for the content of this publication.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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