

Von Mossner, Alexa Weik, ed. *Moving Environments: Affect, Emotion, Ecology, and Film*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfried Laurier University Press, 2014. 296 pp.

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Publication information: *Interdisciplinary Humanities* 32 (3), Fall 2015: 119–122

The result of a workshop held in 2011 at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Munich, *Moving Environments* is the latest in a number of recent books that approach cinema and media from an ecological perspective. (See, for example, *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film*, ed. Paula Willoquet-Maricondi; *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, ed. Rust, Monani, and Cubitt; and *Ecologies of the Moving Image*, by Adrian Ivakhiv.) By focusing exclusively on the role of affect (a near-automatic, visceral response) and emotion (our cognitive awareness of that response) in ecologically minded films, editor Alexa Weik von Mossner both sets her anthology apart from previous ecocritical work on cinema (with the exception of Ivakhiv, who strongly emphasizes affect) and places it in conversation with other important theoretical approaches: phenomenology, affect theory, and cognitive psychology.

The inclusion of these diverse theoretical frameworks—which have sometimes been considered at odds with each other—is one of the strengths of *Moving Environments*. Von Mossner is careful to balance phenomenological and affect theory with cognitivist models. In the book's opening chapter, David Ingram even calls for a synthesis of these approaches: "A film theory that is concerned with spectatorship in terms of both emotional identification and embodied affect [will be] richer than one that focuses exclusively on one

or other of these factors.” (25) As examples of this combined approach, he offers the work of Greg Smith (leaning on the cognitivist side) and Laura Marks (from the phenomenological camp), and uses the work of these two scholars in interpreting *Local Hero* and *This Filthy Earth* as “eco-films.”

Ingram’s chapter opens part one of the book, which provides an overview of theoretical approaches to affect in ecocinema. In her contribution to this section, von Mossner asks whether eco-documentaries such as *An Inconvenient Truth* engage emotion in ways that are fundamentally different from watching fictional films; while she works from Dirk Eitzen’s proposition that part of what distinguishes documentary from fictional films is the way that it compels viewers to believe in not only its nonfictional status but its “consequential” nature (that is, its importance in the real world), she also identifies cinematic techniques that work across genres and types of film to spark emotion in spectators. Nicole Seymour also contributes a chapter identifying the seriousness—and sometimes sanctimoniousness—of ecocinema, and suggests that these affective modes might actually work against films politically; as an alternative, she explores the tactics of irony and self-reflection in films such as *Idiocracy*.

Part two of the book focuses on nonhuman animals. Bart Welling explores the so-called problem of anthropomorphism and identifies documentary filmmakers’ strategies of both “sameness” and “othering” to foster an emotional relationship with wildlife, focusing on *Winged Migration* and *Being Caribou*. Part two also contains two essays that contrast the affective rhetoric of *Darwin’s Nightmare* and *The Cove*. Belinda Smail argues that while both documentaries explore and critique fishing practices in non-Western countries, *The Cove* establishes a clear binary in which Western activists’ integrity is juxtaposed with the

unjustness of the Japanese fishermen, while *Darwin's Nightmare* suggests a far more complex network of environmental exploitation—one that ultimately can be traced back to European capitalism. Robin Murray and Joseph K. Heumman add in their chapter that the two films also have markedly different rhetorical strategies: *Darwin's Nightmare* (along with *The End of the Line*, another documentary about fishing practices) is immersed within the rhetoric of “wise-use” environmentalism, while *The Cove* stakes out a firmly animal-rights stance, using emotional appeals to provoke sympathy for the plight of the dolphins depicted.

Part three explores animated environments and their relationship to the real world. David Whitley compares the documentary *March of the Penguins* with the animated film *Happy Feet*, exploring the ways in which aesthetics of poetic realism in the former and comedic non-realism in the latter both engage viewers affectively to promote an ecocritical worldview. Adrian Ivakhiv analyzes the wide range of affects produced by *Avatar* and its unique, computer-generated ecosystem of the planet Pandora. And Pat Brereton provides an “eco-reading” of Pixar’s *UP* (2009) via the bonus features on its DVD release: a short documentary extra explains how the filmmakers traveled to the Tepui cliffs of Venezuela for inspiration for the animated film’s “exotic” topography, using the affect produced by a (real) place to create the visual style of the (fictional) animated film. The final section of the book, entitled “The Affect of Place and Time,” feels somewhat less cohesive than previous parts, but contains several rich essays on “post-Katrina” eco-documentaries of New Orleans (Janet Walker); how Native American eco-films negotiate the stereotype of the “ecological Indian” (Salma Monani); and how experimental films such as Stan Brakhage’s *Dog Star Man*

use the passage of time to allow viewers to become affected by a film's environment (Sean Cubitt).

Several films are cited and analyzed by multiple scholars in this collection—which leads in some cases to interestingly discordant interpretations of a film's affective and emotional impact. For example, Nicole Seymour strongly critiques the pathos of *The Cove*, calling it “excessively melodramatic” and arguing that “*The Cove* teeters dangerously close to unintentional self-parody with its sentimental overtures, including activist Ric O’Barry’s tale of how Flipper ‘committed suicide’ in his arms.” (69) Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann, however, assert that *The Cove* is a prime example of a “successful” eco-documentary (since dolphin slaughter in Japan has decreased significantly since the release of the film), and suggest that this success is due in part to its emphasis on emotional appeals to animal rights, which the film makes the case for by highlighting dolphin intelligence and capacity to connect with (or perhaps “be like”) humans, as well as capturing evidence of animal suffering. (They also mention O’Barry’s story of witnessing a dolphin suicide, but do not read it as “sentimental.”)

This striking difference of opinion on the specific affective powers of eco-films—do the emotional appeals of *The Cove* move or alienate viewers?—is at the heart of Adrian Ivakhiv’s chapter on the “global affects” of James Cameron’s *Avatar*, which grapples with the profoundly different ways viewers have responded to the film. Ivakhiv argues that the film is important not only because it is able to be “read” in different ways but because it makes available to viewers a surprisingly wide range of “eco-affects”—and because those affective responses to the film both influence and are influenced by extra-textual frameworks and realities. Bart H. Welling asks similar questions in his chapter on

anthropomorphism in wildlife films. “Does a scene like an early sequence [in the film *Being Caribou*] in which Gwich’in hunter Randall Tetlichy shoots and skins a number of caribou primarily (a) evoke audience members’ sympathy for the animals, (b) reinforce a deeply engrained sense of dominion over them, or (c) carry out more complicated types of affective work?” He adds, “One of the clearest signals to emerge from our workshop at the Rachel Carson Center ... is that the days of the ‘ideal viewer’ in the study of environmental film are over.” (92) Welling, like Ivakhiv, calls for a broader engagement with the social sciences, suggesting that only detailed studies of audiences can resolve debates like the one he poses for *Being Caribou*.

Unfortunately, none of the contributors to *Moving Environments* are in a position—yet—to provide an example of a sociological study of the affective impact of eco-films on specific audiences. Salma Monani’s chapter, for example, offers detailed readings of several films screened at the 2011 Native American Film and Video Festival, which had the theme of “Mother Earth in Crisis”; perhaps a complementary approach of the type suggested by Welling (and others) would look something like an ethnography of the festival itself, incorporating interviews with festival organizers on the theme and the process of choosing films, descriptions of specific screenings, surveys of audience responses, and analysis of Q&A sessions with filmmakers.

Whatever the approach taken, the essays in *Moving Environments* demonstrate not only the need for more and diverse scholarship on eco-films but a concern among those working in the field with connecting that scholarship to a real-world political impact. However, Nicole Seymour concludes her chapter on irony and ecocinema by calling for caution around our analysis of a film’s efficacy as an activist tool: “We might scrutinize, for

instance, the dearly held assumption that making a movie about environmental crisis will actually help resolve such crisis, or that *writing about* a movie about environmental crisis will actually help resolve such crisis. We might also consider that environmental art can have other ends besides ‘political action’ (however we define that)—such as to diagnose our current moment, or to foster sensibilities suited to that moment. And in fact, in a political climate increasingly hostile to the supposedly useless humanities, we might ask what it means that so many of us on the Left are so similarly insistent that art be clearly ‘useful’ or ‘impactful.’” (74)

Of course, self-reflection on the meaning of efficacy does not contraindicate attempts to be politically effective. Janet Walker suggests that it is exactly this kind of reflective power of the humanities—our “focus on the discursive realm”, as she puts it—that might better enable us to act effectively; in the case of the post-Katrina documentaries she studies, Walker argues that humanities scholarship does not preclude, and in fact might foster, “[taking] seriously the tangible geographical constraints to rebuilding communities ... to comprehend the epistemological aspect of the material environment and help enact the just remediation of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.” (203) Taken together, the essays in *Moving Environments* have the potential not only to open up new paths for ecocritical scholarship but for linking that scholarship to political and social action—with a healthy dose of self-reflection and discursive analysis, of course.