

Review Essay:
From Representation to Material Entanglement:
Tracing a Decade of Ecocinema

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Rust, Stephen, Salma Monani and Sean Cubitt, eds. *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2012), 344 pp.

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The past decade has seen ecocinema studies evolve from an emergent field at the intersection of film studies and ecocriticism into a broader, interdisciplinary space engaging with political economy, media infrastructures, and global environmental justice. Once primarily concerned with how films represent nature and environmental crises, the field has expanded to include questions about how cinema itself, as an industrial practice, contributes to environmental degradation. This shift reflects larger trends in the environmental humanities, where scholars have moved beyond textual analysis to examine the material entanglements of cultural production with ecological systems. At the heart of this transformation are the two volumes of *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, edited by Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Seán Cubitt.

The first volume (2013) was instrumental in establishing key debates around cinematic representation of environmental issues, arguing that all films—whether explicitly environmental or not—shape ecological consciousness. The essays within the collection explore a diverse range of cinematic forms, from avant-garde slow cinema to Hollywood disaster spectacles, examining how film aesthetics, narrative conventions, and genre tropes construct environmental meaning. Some chapters focus on how documentary and narrative films communicate ecological messages, while others examine ideological contradictions within mainstream environmental filmmaking. The book draws from ecocriticism, semiotics, and media studies to analyse the ways cinema frames human-nature relationships.

By contrast, the second volume (2023) extends these conversations into the realm of materialist critique and examines the environmental costs of media industries and digital infrastructures. Moving beyond an exclusive focus on

representation, the book situates film within broader industrial networks, exposing the ecological consequences of cinematic production, distribution, and consumption. Essays within this collection analyse the extractive economies underlying camera and film equipment manufacturing, the hidden energy demands of digital streaming platforms, and the environmental labour conditions of the global media supply chain. This expansion aligns ecocinema studies with political economy, decolonial theory, and media infrastructure studies, marking a significant evolution in how scholars approach the ecological dimensions of film.

From the outset, *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* (2013) sought to define ecocinema studies as an intellectual project. The introduction, “Cuts to Dissolves: Defining and Situating Ecocinema Studies,” written by Stephen Rust and Salma Monani, emphasises that while environmental films have existed for decades, ecocinema studies as a discipline had, until then, lacked a unifying framework. The editors make the case for an expansive approach to ecocinema, one that considers not only overtly environmental films—such as nature documentaries or climate disaster films—but also how cinematic form, genre, and ideology construct environmental meanings. The chapters have the goal “to explicitly highlight how ecocinema studies is not simply limited to films with explicit messages of environmental consciousness, but investigates the breadth of cinema from Hollywood corporate productions and independent avant-garde films to the expanding media sites in which producers, consumers, and texts interact” (2). They argue that cinema itself is always an ecological act, from its material production to its role in shaping public perception of environmental crises, and the collection aims to push the field toward greater theoretical rigor and openness. At the same time, Rust and Monani acknowledge the material bases of cinema and its embedding in infrastructures with ecological footprints. This awareness, reflecting shifts already underway in ecocritical thought in the late 2000s, points toward the potential expansion of ecocinema studies beyond representation, even if the volume as a whole did not yet fully pursue this direction.

One of the foundational essays in the volume, Scott MacDonald’s “The Ecocinema Experience,” establishes an alternative, ecologically engaged mode of viewing that resists Hollywood’s rapid-cut aesthetics, favouring slow, contemplative cinema that fosters attentiveness to landscape and natural rhythms. MacDonald draws on avant-garde filmmakers including James Benning, Sharon Lockhart, and Andrej Zdravič to argue that form matters as much as content when assessing a film’s ecological potential. By slowing down the cinematic experience and allowing audiences to engage with images of the natural world in a meditative/contemplative way, such films may encourage more patience not only in the watchers’ “engagement with the environment, but in their efforts to guide inevitable environmental change in direction that nurture a more healthy planet” (41). The chapter’s emphasis on alternative modes of cinematic perception anticipates later discussions of slow cinema that gain further development in Elio Garcia’s “Polytemorality in the Slow Ecocinema of Lav Diaz: An Installation in a Trauma Field” in the second volume. Garcia extends MacDonald’s analysis by examining how Diaz’s “aesthetics of the ‘long take’”

(103), that is, extended durations and narrative ellipses disrupt Western, industrialized time structures, creating a cinematic temporality that mirrors ecological rhythms rather than conventional dramatic arcs.

Other contributions take up Hollywood's engagement with ecological crises, critiquing its tendency to frame climate change as a spectacular, apocalyptic event rather than a slow, systemic process. Stephen Rust's "Hollywood and Climate Change" in the first volume contrasts *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), showing how mainstream cinema both amplifies and distorts environmental discourse. While *The Day After Tomorrow* sensationalises climate disaster with CGI-enhanced catastrophes, *An Inconvenient Truth* presents a more data-driven, but still highly dramatised, depiction of climate change through Al Gore's persuasive, emotionally charged narration. Rust argues that while both films raise public awareness, they make it clear that "more and more people are becoming aware that new ways of imagining the relationship between people and the planetary [are] not only possible, but necessary" (205). At the same time, he cautions that they also reinforce a crisis-response mentality that overlooks the structural causes of environmental degradation. This theme is echoed in David Ingram's "The Aesthetics and Ethics of Eco-Film Criticism," which examines different aesthetic strategies used in environmental films—ranging from realism to melodrama—highlighting how each shapes audience interpretation in distinct ways.

A related chapter by Pat Brereton, "Appreciating the Views," considers the role of landscape cinematography in shaping ecological narratives. Analyzing *Into the Wild* (2007), *Grizzly Man* (2005), and *Into the West* (1992), Brereton argues that mainstream cinema often aestheticizes nature in ways that obscure environmental politics. *Into the Wild*, for example, presents the Alaskan wilderness as both an idyllic refuge and a site of existential confrontation, yet it largely ignores the indigenous histories of the land. Similarly, *Grizzly Man* portrays Timothy Treadwell's interactions with bears as a form of deep ecological engagement but avoids interrogating the human-animal hierarchies embedded in Treadwell's perspective. Brereton's chapter is an early example of ecocinema scholars pushing beyond textual analysis to consider the ideological work performed by cinematic landscapes. This concern with cinematic representations of wildlife and ecological relationships is expanded upon in later chapters such as Luis Vivanco's "Penguins Are Good to Think With" and Jennifer Ladino's "Working with Animals," which both interrogate how wildlife cinema constructs anthropocentric narratives around animal behaviour. Vivanco's analysis of *March of the Penguins* (2005) exposes how nature documentaries reinforce human values—such as family structures, perseverance, and cooperation—by selectively framing animal behaviours, while Ladino critiques the ways in which documentary filmmakers manipulate wildlife imagery to reinforce existing cultural attitudes toward nature and conservation.

Despite these rich discussions, the first volume largely confines itself to questions of representation and spectatorship, barely addressing the material realities of film production, distribution, and consumption. This omission is precisely

what *Ecocinema Theory and Practice 2* (2023) seeks to address. The introduction, “Cut to Green: Tracking the Growth of Ecocinema Studies,” frames the book as a response to the field’s shifting priorities, arguing that ecocinema studies must now engage with cinema’s “imbrication in the fabric of the world” (1), namely, its entanglements with global supply chains, digital infrastructures, and extractive economies. The authors distinguish between ecology (systems of interconnected flows) and environment (historical constructions of separation and exclusion), and emphasize that ecocinema must attend both to the utopian possibilities of reconnecting with the world through film and to the political urgency of confronting environmental injustice. This expansion of the field aligns with a broader shift in environmental humanities toward materialist ecocriticism, which examines how cultural production is embedded in industrial and ecological systems.

Seán Cubitt’s chapter, “Unsustainable Cinema: Global Supply Chains,” offers one of the volume’s most incisive interventions, exposing the hidden ecological costs of filmmaking, from the mining of rare earth metals for camera equipment to the massive energy demands of data storage and streaming platforms. Cubitt critiques the assumption that digital filmmaking is inherently more sustainable than traditional celluloid production, showing that the environmental impact of cloud computing and data servers is often overlooked in discussions of cinematic sustainability. His argument builds on concerns raised in Nicole Starosielski’s “Beyond Fluidity: A Cultural History of Cinema Under Water” and Salma Monani’s “Environmental Film Festivals: Beginning Explorations at the Intersections of Film Festival Studies and Ecocritical Studies,” both from the first volume. While Starosielski highlights the material infrastructures underpinning digital circulation, and Monani examines the political economies of environmental film distribution, Cubitt expands these insights into a broader systemic critique of the global supply chains that sustain contemporary media. Looking ahead, he warns that without intervention, humanity risks being caught “between two seemingly unstoppable forces: a cyborg economy out of control and a planet rebelling against market anarchy” (30). In other words, Cubitt sees the cinematic supply chain as emblematic of a wider crisis in which technological systems and ecological systems are spiralling beyond human control. Against this backdrop, he argues that by “intervening in the intervals left vulnerable by the inevitable incompleteness of cinematic illusion,” (30) ecocritical film studies can help imagine and build new, collaborative forms of human–technical–ecological interaction.

Beyond its focus on material infrastructures, the second volume also broadens the geographical and cultural scope of ecocinema studies. Cajetan Iheka’s “Extraction and Wild Cinema in Africa” examines how African filmmakers critique land dispossession and environmental exploitation. Iheka highlights films such as *The Land Beneath Our Feet* (2016), which juxtaposes archival footage of corporate land grabs in Liberia with contemporary struggles over land rights, demonstrating how cinema can serve as both a historical archive and a tool for ecological resistance. Similarly, Emily Roehl’s “Indigenous Post-Apocalyptic Filmmaking at Standing Rock”

considers indigenous cinema as a form of resistance against environmental destruction. Roehl argues that indigenous filmmakers reject the apocalyptic framings of mainstream climate disaster films, instead portraying survival and resilience through indigenous ecological knowledge.

At the same time, *Ecocinema Theory and Practice 2* retains the field's early emphasis on cinematic form, particularly in relation to temporality. In addition to Elio Garcia's chapter on slow cinema, discussed above, which situates this aesthetic within a non-Western context, Andrew Hageman and Regina Kanyu Wang's chapter "Exploring SF Ecocinema: Ideologies of Gender, Infrastructure, and US/China Dynamics" compares *Interstellar* (2014) and *The Wandering Earth* (2019), showing how different cultural imaginaries produce distinct ecological visions. Whereas *Interstellar* relies on individualist heroism and techno-utopianism, *The Wandering Earth* emphasizes collectivist solutions to planetary survival, reflecting broader ideological differences between American and Chinese science fiction. A further extension of the second volume's focus on genre comes in Carter Soles' "The Toxic Sublime: Horror Cinema and Ecological Anxiety," which examines how horror films engage with environmental crisis. Soles argues that films like *The Witch* (2015) and *Annihilation* (2018) embody what he terms the "toxic sublime," (198) a mode of ecological horror that renders nature both awe-inspiring and terrifying. His analysis builds upon his earlier work in the first volume on cannibalistic hillbillies in *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), demonstrating how horror cinema reflects deep-seated anxieties about environmental collapse, mutation, and human vulnerability.

What distinguishes these two volumes from other works in the field is their comprehensive scope and methodological ambition. While David Ingram's *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema* (2000) focuses primarily on Hollywood, and Pietari Kääpä and Tommy Gustafsson's edited collection *Transnational Ecocinema* (2013) explores global perspectives on environmental cinema but remains more narrowly focused on issues of national identity and transnational exchange, the *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* volumes bring together mainstream, independent, and global cinemas under one conceptual umbrella. Similarly, while the collection *Screening the Nonhuman* (2018) makes valuable contributions to specific strands of environmental media studies, it does not offer the same interdisciplinary breadth or material engagement as the Rust, Monani, and Cubitt collections. Other recent publications, such as Hunter Vaughan's *Hollywood's Dirtiest Secret* (2019), Alexa Weik von Mossner's *Affective Ecologies* (2017) and the edited volume *Moving Environments: Affect, Emotion, Ecology, and Film* (2014) have expanded ecocritical inquiry into environmental materialism, affect theory, and transnational cinema respectively, but they address more specialized aspects of media ecology rather than synthesizing the field as a whole.

That said, these volumes are not without their limitations. The first book, while foundational, now feels somewhat dated in its emphasis on representation at the expense of media infrastructures. The second book, though more materially engaged, deliberately embraces a heterogeneous structure rather than presenting a unified

argument, reflecting the plural and evolving nature of the field. Nonetheless, despite its claims to a global perspective, the second volume still leans heavily on Western theoretical frameworks, and some key regions—such as Latin America and Asia—are underrepresented. Both books also assume a certain level of familiarity with ecocinema studies, making them less accessible to general readers or those new to the field. More recent works, such as Pietari Kääpä's *Environmental Management of Media* (2023), Cajetan Iheka's *African Ecomedia* (2024), and Salma Monani's *Indigenous Ecocinema: Decolonizing Media Environments* (2024), take up precisely these gaps, extending ecocinema's scope toward infrastructures, planetary politics, and decolonial perspectives.

For scholars seeking an introduction to ecocinema, the 2013 volume remains an essential starting point, offering clear definitions and foundational debates. However, for those engaging with the field's most pressing contemporary concerns—particularly regarding media infrastructures, political economy, and decolonial ecologies—the 2023 volume is indispensable. Together, these books chart the intellectual trajectory of ecocinema studies, illustrating how a field once preoccupied with cinematic landscapes and environmental narratives has grown into a rigorous critique of cinema's complicity in ecological crisis. While *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* asked how cinema can shape environmental consciousness, *Ecocinema Theory and Practice 2* asks how cinema itself must be held accountable in an era of planetary emergency. Taken together, they are essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the evolving role of media in the Anthropocene.

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