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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2025.16.2.5917>



Jean-Thomas Tremblay and Steven Swarbrick, *Negative Life: The Cinema of Extinction* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2024), 222 pp.

In *Negative Life: The Cinema of Extinction*, published in August 2025 as part of the *Superimpositions: Philosophy and the Moving Image* series at Northwestern University Press, Jean-Thomas Tremblay and Steven Swarbrick set up a lucid and rigorous encounter between the dominant ecocritical paradigms and the concept of “negative life” through the prism of cinema studies and extinction. This book invites readers to consider a counter-narrative to the pastoral and pedagogical ethos of dominant contemporary ecological paradigms and to recognize, instead, the fractured and incoherent nature of life in the context of climate catastrophe and growing political disorientation. Although this overview may seem hopeless and nihilistic—and in spite of the apparent absurdity and bleakness of many of the films and theoretical frameworks that the authors engage with—the book produces an energizing effect by providing hope through an inoperative and anti-redemptive act of bearing witness to the impossibility of inhabiting a world that is approaching extinction while resisting commodified environmentalism and still finding ground for aesthetic, poetic, and radical thought. In short, Tremblay and Swarbrick call for an ecocriticism that does not seek recovery or redemption but remains attuned to lack, absence, and unintelligibility: a general structure they call “negative life.”

Theoretically, *Negative Life* engages with the growing interdisciplinary corpus referred to as “negativity studies” and which includes contributions from psychoanalysis, queer studies, Afropessimism, affect studies, decolonial studies, race studies, and other fields. The “negative turn” in critical theory acknowledges areas of thought and existence that are historically disavowed and oppressed (the list is long and open, as it is purposefully marked by heterogeneity and the refusal of closure) and that actively sustain the dominant structures of power and identity. One important precursor for *Negative Life* is the antisocial thesis in queer theory, represented by thinkers such as Lee Edelman, Lauren Berlant, Leo Bersani, and Jack Halberstam, who argue, in different ways, for a radical negativity that opposes

¹ This publication is funded by the Research Council of Lithuania under the programme “University Excellence Initiatives” of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sports of the Republic of Lithuania (Measure No. 12-001-01-01-01 “Improving the Research and Study Environment”). Project No.: S-A-UEI-23-12.

“reproductive futurism” (Edelman’s term, standing for the idea that politics, including socially integrative branches of queer movements, orient all resources towards reproduction and care for the Child) and all types of optimistic social heteronormativity, instead aligning with the death drive as the disruptive and unassimilable facet of desire.

Although it has attracted controversy, the negative stream of critical theory remains a persistent and valid response to the pressures of a polycrisis world. While some aspects of negativity scholarship may tread too closely to Nick Land’s accelerationist death-drive enthusiasm, followed by its contemporary spawn, the dark enlightenment, Tremblay and Swarbrick manage to stir away from such swampy conceptual grounds, opting for an aesthetic approach to articulating negativity that validates affect and entropy. Thus, *Negative Life* applies the discussion of negativity to ecocriticism and proceeds polemically, as is the tradition, by identifying a framework to oppose—in this case, the recuperative logic of idealized multispecies entanglement with a strong pastoral aesthetic (meaning, generally, a vision of nature as enchanted). The authors call this logic “ecocritical positivity” (8) and associate it with a vast range of thinkers, such as Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, and many others (the authors provide an open list of pedagogical entanglement thinkers on page 14, in the subsection “Inhuman Calculations” of the Introduction, though one should note that the list contains authors whose positions are often understood in scholarship as conflicting), who are committed to the thought of relationality (an ecological variant of the speculative realists’ “correlationism”). In addition, they also refuse oppositional frameworks. In the authors’ words, “[n]egative life isn’t only a bulwark against the pastoralism of ecocriticism but a brake on the crypto-pastoralism of radical negativity, which, taken to its logical extreme, mirrors its opposite: anodyne positivity” (84).

The book starts with broader theoretical claims in the Introduction and Chapter 1, which situate the work in the field (cinema studies and environmental humanities), establish the theoretical pillars, and provide general concept definitions. In the opening chapters, the theoretical work is developed alongside attentive and engaged analyses of two films: Julian Pölsler’s *The Wall* (2012) and Kelly Reichardt’s *First Cow* (2019). Throughout the book, Tremblay and Swarbrick interweave theoretical reflections from a wide range of twentieth- and twenty-first-century sources with analyses of their chosen cinema corpus, which proceeds historically, as “representations of preindustrial, industrial, and postindustrial moments” (28). Aside the aforementioned queer theorists, the book relies significantly on psychoanalysis, turning frequently to the negativity aspects in Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Jean Laplanche, and Alenka Zupančič. Freud’s 1925 essay “Negation” plays a significant role in Chapter 1, establishing the subject as characterized by a constitutive lack. Zupančič’s “missing signifier” cements the book’s commitment to representation as fundamentally marked by incompleteness. The idea of lack becomes the basis for the book’s eponymous concept. In providing an early definition of the “negative life,” the

authors state that it “refers to that which is both of and against life, that which filibusters the conversion of staying with the trouble into making kin” (viii). If the definition seems somewhat elliptical, it is not due to the authors’ lack of precision in writing but because the concept itself is set up in a manner that refuses to be fully captured by a systematic definition. This is a rigorous theoretical and stylistic choice, in tune with the authors’ avowed resistance to conceptual closure and pedagogical approaches to environmental narratives. Instead, the authors lead readers on a (negative) journey of discovery of cinema and criticism on the brink of the abyss through an imaginative and deeply engaging interpretative style that is not without rhetorical flourish.

The book’s formal investment is just as important as its conceptual proposal, if not even more so: the cinema of extinction, according to the authors, “punctures ecocriticism’s pastoralism by obstructing characters’ and spectators’ access to the realm of multispecies entanglement or enmeshment—a realm often made by ecocritics to accommodate an ethics of harmonious co-living that scales up and down, from the planetary to the subatomic” (7–8). Cinema, moreover, is portrayed as technology that is formally and materially sustained by negativity, through the film negative which captures an absent presence. Although digital film no longer maintains the concrete presence of the negative, it nevertheless preserves the history of this absence, as well as the methodology of staging an encounter with the irrecoverable. The authors propose the further specification of the “cinema of extinction” as a “hyper-contemporary form” (7) due to cinema’s embodiment of multiple contractions, such as participating in “hydrocarbon culture” (8) while allegorizing, through form, climate breakdown. The engagement with environmental collapse through cinema is also a way of thinking nature as external to the human consciousness by depicting its senselessness and all that which frustrates integration into reparative narratives. Chapters 2 and 3 further engage with the environmental and existential crises through the formal structures and uncanny happy endings of two films—Mahesh Mathai’s *Bhopal Express* (1999) and Lee Isaac Chung’s *Minari* (2020)—and, in an effort to externalize extinction, the melancholic and sadistic registers of queer ecocide in Paul Schrader’s *First Reformed* (2017), which blurs the distinction between individual and ecological death and intensifies the cinematic unravelling of the crises. In closing, it is necessary to mention the experimental—almost feverish in style—ecohorror interludes in the book, “The Horror of Entanglement I: *In the Earth, Annihilation*” and “The Horror of Entanglement II: *Antichrist, Lamb, X*,” which dramatize the annihilation of difference and the temporal fraction of entanglement narratives.

Overall, *Negative Life: The Cinema of Extinction* is an insightful critical work, in tune with the contemporary aesthetic and conceptual landscape. It might just be the horror-inflected revitalizing read we all need during another catastrophic year filled with never-ending heatwaves, zombie wildfires, extreme flash floods, and genocidal conflicts.