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Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt, eds. *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 325 pp.



*Ecocinema Theory and Practice* is a bold and wide-ranging collection devoted to ecocritical studies of film methods and the film form. Edited by Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt, the volume endeavors “to bring coherence to the richly burgeoning field of critical attention that is *ecocinema studies* (their emphasis 2).” *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* expands ecocinema studies both in terms of scope and vision, and it successfully navigates a remarkable range of theoretical and methodological considerations in the cinematic context. This filmic turn may very well be one of the markers of comparative third wave ecocriticism. The volume is highly recommended to those wanting to explore film from an environmental perspective, as well as those interested in exploring the margins of ecocritical theory and practice.

The goal of the anthology is to challenge the mainstream ecocritical focus on (primarily) literary texts. While literary texts no doubt remain central to ecocritical thinking, there has been far too little emphasis on other cultural texts, though this is definitely changing. While a number of studies also explore the places where film and nature come together in dialogue, ecocritical studies of film remain on the fringe. The editors of this collection are aware of this, and confidently declare that “cinema and ecocinema studies enable us to recognize ways of seeing the world other than through the narrow perspective of the anthropocentric gaze that situates individual human desires at the center of the moral universe” (11). This is no doubt a bold and important statement, and one that is borne out by the way in which the collection pulls together diverse perspectives. If ecocriticism is to live up to its potential by pushing the boundaries of scholarship, then the dissemination of research in the form of edited scholarly volumes no doubt serves an important function.

*Ecocinema Theory and Practice* is arranged in four separate sections. The first section is devoted to “Ecocinema Theory,” which opens with important theoretical considerations. Two sections on “Ecocinema Practice” follow, and form the bulk of the collection. These two sections include a number of papers ranging from “Wildlife and Documentary Film” to “Hollywood and Fictional Film.” The book ends with a very brief section called “Beyond Film,” which includes papers by two of the editors: Salma Monani’s piece on environmental film festivals, and an essay by Sean Cubitt on data visualization. While it is impossible to examine all of the essays published in this collection here, a look at representative papers can help provide a sense of the overall quality of the scholarship contained in the collection.

David Ingram's paper "The Aesthetics and Ethics of Eco-film Criticism" is one of theoretical essays included in the anthology. The essay suggests that "cognitivist film theory" is useful as a theoretical orientation to examine "three films of radically different aesthetic styles whose content may be of interest to ecocritics" (43). Ingram then examines three films produced after 2000. The first case study involves Gideon Koppel's *Sleep Furiously* (2008). Ingram discusses ways that attention to dialogue and editing in the film contribute to cognitive meaning. He then addresses both audience and spectatorship. It is suggested that television can be effective in influencing viewers, and can even fulfill a didactic function. Ingram's second case study involves John Sayles' *Sunshine State* (2002). This section of the paper suggests that our understanding of ecological discourses "are shaped by the aesthetics of popular and art film" (50). The discussion then turns to issues of "moralism in art, and the critical opposition between realism and melodrama" (50). The author points out that *Sunshine State* deals with ecological issues differently than *Sleep Furiously*. The former places "more emphasis on the viewer's emotional and cognitive engagement and less on cinematic affect" (52). The final case study is on Richard Kelly's *Southland Tales* (2008), which is described as a "near-future science fiction" film (54) that covers familiar issues of "technological hubris" (54). Ingram considers the ways in which the film deals with "speculations on spiritual transcendence, the metaphysics of space-time travel and the fate of the human 'soul'" (57). The point is made that the film utilizes both "affective and cognitive cues" without allowing the kinds of "emotional identification" typical of popular narrative films (57). Ingram challenges what he sees as the overly prescriptive nature of films that make moralist claims and instead says that films not adhering to politically correct ecocritical standards can be "grist to the mill of environmental awareness and debate" (59). This suggests that there remains considerable space for further ecocinematic reflection.

Jennifer Ladino's "Working with Animals: Regarding Companion Species in Documentary Film" is one of the papers in the sizeable "Ecocinematic Practice" sections of the collection. Ladino seeks to import "Haraway's influential concept of 'companion species' from animal studies to ecocinema studies" (130). Such comparative work is necessary if ecocriticism is to make an impact beyond the analysis of textual aesthetic forms. But there are some surprises. Ladino suggests that a "camera becomes speciesist when it privileges an anthropocentric, or androcentric, way of seeing" (130). This raises some questions, since biocentrism suggests humans should be allowed to view the universe through human eyes. As Lawrence Buell has argued, one can hold biocentric principles while also recognizing human concerns (134). While Ladino says a "speciesist camera sees animals through human eyes," (130) films are made by and presumably also for humans, so I think it is reasonable for us to view the universe through human eyes. However, Ladino is certainly right that humans can also try to take on the experiential view of nonhumans. Next, Ladino carries out case studies that provide rich discussion of human-nonhuman considerations. One of the more interesting examples involves discussion of Werner Herzog's cinematic attempt to capture Timothy

Treadwell's ill-fated effort to understand grizzly bears on their terms. Ladino discusses the tricky issues of human-nonhuman mediation as well as Treadwell's earnest efforts to "cultivate a companion species" (138). In the end, Ladino suggests that Herzog's endeavors to represent bears as alien killer antagonists fails in the light of Treadwell's apparent "democratizing effect" of sharing space with other creatures.

While I have some gripes about the construction of the book, there is no doubt that the overall project helps push ecocinematic studies forward. The structure of the book is a little disjointed, as the weight between the different sections is uneven. The attempt to include so much material from so many different theoretical and methodological approaches leads to a fragmented overall presentation. This is not uncommon with edited collections. Of course this problem is also a strength, since the wide-ranging perspectives found in the collection at the same time provide very diverse perspectives. Nonetheless, the weight between the ecocinematic theory and practice sections is rather unbalanced. In other words, the title of the book suggests a great deal of theoretical work is done, but in fact most of the papers are written on the practice of ecocinema studies. If greater emphasis had been placed on integrating more theoretical papers, the collection might have been stronger. This is a rather mild complaint, since the existence of this book is itself enough to help push ecocinematic studies forward. While ecocinema is not yet a mainstream form of ecocritical analysis, this collection shows that the field is gathering momentum.

### Works Cited

Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005. Print.