

## Book Review

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Willoquet-Maricondi, Paula, ed. *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film*. University of Virginia Press, 2010.

The edited volume *Framing the World* is one of the first books providing an overview in the relatively new discipline of 'ecocinema.' This interdisciplinary paradigm of ecocinema is best understood as a newly built path bridging ecocriticism with film studies. While both fields have brief but interesting histories—each in different academic areas—this cross-fertilization is only a fairly recent phenomenon. The book's aim might be summarized in the form of two challenges. On the one hand, the exploration should investigate or introduce the interdisciplinary field, or bring together these two quite diverse paradigms. On the other hand, a new discipline also requires a critically developed theoretical stance as the basis for future research. This second, more ambitious, challenge will be discussed at the end of the review; what follows first is an overview of the volume's interestingly wide exploration of ecocinema.

To begin with, the book's first challenge is easily met: for *Framing the World*, Paula Willoquet-Maricondi has assembled a broad range of scholars exploring the combination of film studies and ecocriticism. The contributions vary from an examination of cinematic landscapes and environmental degradation in the quickly-cut car culture blockbusters like the *The Fast and the Furious* franchise (various directors, 2001-2009), to a comparative analysis of the commodification of third-world bodies in art house titles as *The Constant Gardener* (dir. Fernando Meirelles, 2005) and *Dirty Pretty Things* (dir. Stephen Frears, 2002). Still, other chapters focus on the ecological potential of Disney animations, avant-garde and experimental environmentalist films and their activist potential, and the book closes off with two critical essays on what Willoquet-Maricondi calls 'eco-auteurs.' Given the variety of this collection, *Framing the World* is a very welcome introduction to this new field of ecocinema.

### **OVERVIEW: FOUR PARTS**

All authors persuasively merge film criticism with ecocritical theory. Each essay takes a different perspective; the environmental issues are insightfully analyzed with a variety of films. The diverse issues discussed in this book are clustered in four parts.

The first part, "Ecocinema as and for Activism," speculates on the activist potential of ecologically orientated films: How can cinema help to evoke ecological awareness on the part of the spectator? How can ecocinema successfully spur the audience to action? Willoquet-Maricondi's essay is crucial for this part, for it distinguishes 'environmentalist films' from 'ecocinema.' Her definition, however, remains somewhat obscure. According to Willoquet-Maricondi, ecocinema is a specific subtype of environmentalist films, in that it has overt consciousness-raising and activist intentions (Willoquet-Maricondi 2010, 45). Some

readers might find this top-down distinction unwarranted: should we only use the claims or intentions of filmmakers to categorize the film's ecocritical potential? Could the sub-genre of ecocinema not be defined, equally, as being 'bottom-up,' i.e., based on the film's stylistic qualities? Indeed, Willoquet-Maricondi's division provokes the question to what extent the film's aesthetics (a slow pacing, lyrical style versus an activist rhetoric) plays a role in exciting the spectator—both affectively and intellectually—and how this effect can achieve a concrete, activist effect.

Part 2, "Bodies that Matter," is specifically oriented towards films dramatizing ecojustice questions. Ecojustice brings into discussion the relation between social issues (gender, race, class, etc.) and environmentalist questions: according to Richard Kerridge, it challenges those "versions of environmentalism that seem exclusively preoccupied with preservation and wild nature" (in Willoquet-Maricondi 2010, 6). This part displays how a fiction film's protagonists can literally *embody* these ecojustice issues. In "Disposable Bodies," for example, Cory Shaman argues that in Steven Soderbergh's representation of *Erin Brockovich* (2002), Julia Roberts' body "is a site for many competing forces" (in Willoquet-Maricondi 2010, 88); additionally, this popular fiction film also frames the other threatened bodies (neighborhood families exposed to toxic material) as the *pars-pro-toto* for an endangered environment. Such analytical attention to the role of the actor's corporeality convincingly positions a protagonist's body as a conceptual framework for further ecocritical analysis.

The third part, "Positioning Ecosystems in Fiction, Documentary, and Animation," develops similar arguments, yet in another direction. This section emphasizes the representations of bodies in their relation to particular places. Consider the chapter on Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* (2005), which evaluates the narcissistic protagonist Timothy Treadwell's fight against the (myth of the) American Frontier. Worth mentioning separately is Lynne Dickson Bruckner's essay on Disney animations. Bruckner analyzes the ideological layers of the early unselfconscious representation of woodlands and hunting (in *Bambi* [1942]) and contrasts it with the overtly pedagogical depiction of the coral reef in *Finding Nemo* (2003). This essay on Disney family films demonstrates the variety the selection of essays in *Framing the World* is. Additionally, it convincingly proves the merits of an ecocritical approach in film studies: an ecocritical reading of film—scrutinizing the ideological layer of Disney's fundamental anthropocentrism—triggers important ecocritical issues that can be tackled from a film-analytical perspective.

The final part, two chapters each concerned with an environmentally inclined director (Peter Greenaway and Kiyoshi Kurosawa), convincingly promotes the newly coined term 'eco-auteur.' Although both essays cogently indicate the stylistic strategies, narrative themes, and environmental issues at play with the work of each respective director, it still seems that the concept as such is not sufficiently developed by these stand-alone chapters. This could be because only two directors are considered in the closing section of the book. Undeniably, many other directors are discussed throughout the other parts of the *Framing*

*the World* (such as art house director and documentarist Werner Herzog, mainstream environmentalist Robert Redford, and ecocinema's experimental filmmaker Andrej Zdravic), yet they are never overtly presented as eco-auteurs. It remains unclear why some directors are considered as eco-auteur, and why some are not.

What is more, a small number of other major ecologically relevant directors remain absent from *Framing the World*: none of the essays in the book mention Andrei Tarkovsky or Terrence Malick. Yet these two acclaimed directors certainly qualify for analysis as eco-auteur: both (in their own idiosyncratic way) effectively rethink the human's relation to the natural world through cinematic means. The works of these directors merit further ecocritical analyses; such studies might effectively help further defining the term 'eco-auteur.'

### **FROM ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY TO FILM ANALYSIS**

As an eclectic range of essays, Willoquet-Maricondi's edited volume provides an interesting starting point for many readers. For a reader trained in film studies, the book succeeds as an inspiring exploration of ecocritical issues in contemporary cinema. It introduced to me an interesting compilation of thought-provoking issues in contemporary environmental philosophy; since most of them intersect indirectly with central film-theoretical questions, the ecocritical explorations in the volume should also provide new material for film scholars.

On the other hand—and perhaps more relevant for readers of *The Trumpeter*—this book encourages environmental philosophers to systematically partake in film analysis. Take Berth Berila's study of Robert Redford's films, for example. Berila demonstrates how the spectator is spoiled with beautiful landscape imagery: the camera's high angle, the bird's eye view places the viewer with an imperial 'consumer gaze,' which Berila describes as "carefree enjoyment without responsibility" (in Willoquet-Maricondi 2010, 119). Alternatively, consider how an indigenous film's sound design help to effectively "evoke the ancestors of the lands" (Machiorlatti, in Willoquet-Maricondi, 2010: 75). Such analyses go beyond plain narrative analysis or general thematic deductions; they show how the film's aesthetic form plays a fundamental part in the spectator's experience.

In short, the book is very instructive in how ecocritical claims can be effectively supported with film analytical arguments—and vice versa. The level of film analyses should provoke researchers from other disciplines to also critically engage with a film's aesthetic style. Indeed, most of the ecojustice issues discussed in the book invite further examination, and I think these ecocritical questions can be brought to another level with the help of critical film analysis.

### **PANORAMAS FOR THE FUTURE**

At the same time, the book's admirable variety of different takes on ecocinema also results in a rather weakly developed *central* theoretical standpoint. Although the different chapters develop interesting claims, and most of the authors advance new interesting concepts that

warrant further investigation, the book lacks an overarching theoretical outlook within which its different perspectives can be assembled. Otherwise put, it leaves the reader with appetite for more.

Of course, the book promises an exploration of this new field, proves how rich this new interdisciplinary ground is, and how varied the many approaches can become. But when a new, exciting field has been explored, one also yearns for an itinerary for future examination. Once the map has been drawn, and when the noteworthy junctions have been signposted, a more general framework is desirable, or a panoramic perspective from which these various signposts can be connected. We need to indicate what central questions need to be asked, and how these fundamental issues can be methodologically approached in future research.

Let me wrap up the different questions arising from *Framing the World*, and suggest three vital theoretical issues for future research. From a film studies perspective, fundamental work still needs to be done in defining the different genres of ecocinema: we need to distinguish the rhetoric of an environmentalist documentary from the poetics of lyrical ecocinema, and understand how the aesthetics of a 'moment of ecocinema' in Hollywood storytelling can be used for an environmentalist argument. Some initial work has been done in this volume, but more elaborated essays defining the different genres of ecocinema would be helpful.

Second, more analysis is needed in order to understand the effect of cinema's representations of nature on the spectator's consciousness. Such studies can be helped by resorting to a neuroscientific and/or cognitivist framework, or a phenomenological methodology, and combined with an investigation of ecocinema's aesthetic form. For this particular topic, I would refer the reader to the latest edited volume in ecocinema: *Ecocinema, Theory and Practice* (edited by Stephen Rust, Salma Monani and Sean Cubitt). Jointly published in 2013 by Routledge and the American Film Institute, this book explicitly starts with four (diametrically opposed) approaches in studying ecocinema: from a positivist approach of cognitivist David Ingram, to Scott MacDonald's more provokingly affective agenda of lyrical cinema, and Adrian Ivhaktiv's ecophilosophy of film heavily contrasts with the ideological analysis of Andrew Hageman. This more recent volume thus provides a further theoretical exploration in the field of ecocinema paradigm.

Thirdly, and from the angle of environmental philosophy, ecocinema still needs to be related to some of the fundamental views within ecocriticism: How can ecocinema help us to gain wisdom about our environment? In what way can the concepts from, for instance, deep ecology or the land ethic, be structurally used in a study of ecocinema? What films provoke a Heideggerian framework of the four-fold and how do they do this? And how can we bypass the anthropocentric worldview when studying film?

In fact, we can concede such an ecocentric stance from Willoquet-Maricondi's three contributions to *Framing the World*. In her attractive introduction, as well as in her chapter in Part I, she suggests that we "shift paradigms" and move film studies from an unquestioned anthropocentric approach to an ecocritical perspective (Willoquet-Maricondi 2010, 5). Albeit somewhat meagerly defined, this critical standpoint is useful for a major part of ecocinema studies. However, given the potential interdisciplinary richness of such an approach, and the diversity of provided environmental issues and cinematic genres, Willoquet-Maricondi's theoretical perspective nonetheless seems a bit limited. Amidst the book's eclectic variety, finally, the reader might yearn for more variation within the book's theoretical framework.

In other words, the book struggles a bit with its second challenge—providing a stand-alone critical position for future research, which, in fact, shows how interesting and lively this new field is. *Framing the World* is a fine introduction but makes the reader yearn for more: after the individual case studies—each proving the need for the combined approach—what we need is to do more work on the new fundamental questions: how can ecocriticism and film studies be effectively connected?

**Ludo De Roo**

#### **WORKS CITED**

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