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# Moving Environments: Affect, Emotion, Ecology, and Film edited by Alexa Weik von Mossner

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## **Completely Affecting: The Cinematics of Environmental Concern and Real Change**

***Moving Environments: Affect, Emotion, Ecology, and Film***, edited by **ALEXA WEIK VON MOSSNER**

Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2014 \$32.24

Reviewed by **TED GEIER**

In this volume from the excellent *Environmental Humanities* series, Alexa Weik von Mossner gathers key ecocinema scholars to explore cinema through existing work on emotions and cognition in film studies and to articulate potential new horizons for ecocinema and affect. The book asks important questions about how affective and emotional registers are produced in film experience, and furthermore, how cinematic emotion and cognition relate to ecological concern and action: what and how is the constellation of *care* produced by cinematic expression, environmental themes, and audience experience? These questions complicate how we might measure a thing like care through audience studies, especially as we work to resist determinate evaluation given the ostensibly pre- (or non-) critical register of affect.

This is a provocative set of readings engaging a comprehensive set of recent affect theories in robustly argued film essays. Few other works have attempted to bridge formal/technical studies with social and ecological thought in this way, and fewer still dare to suggest an affective calculus for ecology and action in cinematic expression. Those that had begun such work are generously affirmed in Weik von Mossner's introduction and occasionally cited in later chapters. In fact, many of the

authors and editors of those important prior works are contributors to this volume.

In her opening, Weik von Mossner presents very clear and substantive thinking about the volume's scope and its relation to existing definitions of ecocinema, to environmentalism, and to activist approaches, but this cannot always soothe some of the uncritically activist tones of select chapters. One stark example of how this plays out at the level of argument is in Robin L. Murray and Joseph Heumann's contribution— which is not the only chapter in this collection to address the documentary *The Cove*. Drawing on Leopold, Singer, and other familiar thinkers in the ecocritical canon, the authors suggest that this exposé of the Taiji dolphin slaughter “goes further” than other films and mounts a “call to action.” As they write, “*The Cove* successfully slows the slaughter of dolphins because it draws on the emotional appeal of animal rights arguments in its strong advocacy for the dolphins of Taiji” (121). The chapter retells the film's gruesome, vivid, and loud scenes of suffering, claiming that the emotional response to those scenes carry the animal liberationist day. The diminution of dolphin slaughter since proves the “effectiveness” of the film's expression of animal sentience and the validity of the animal rights claim. The fishers/labourers and Japanese governmental and official entities are effectively demonized in the film and the chapter, which appears to neither acknowledge nor engage any of the critical discourse on the film's representation of Japanese individuals and groups.

The certainty of their articulation of “catastrophe” and cause misses a chance to extend animal studies, ecocriticism, and affect to deeper transnational waters. Furthermore, the chapter's focus on aquatic

life may have robbed the authors of a very nice point, but then they don't really take up *any* of the criticisms of the film, even one that could only help their central argument: the controversy over the use of hidden cameras in *The Cove* could be an excellent reference in both liberationist and welfarist fights against slaughterhouses and any legislative restrictions on filming within them. Throughout the collection, prior critical theories of affect and ecoactivism are accepted and employed in practical applications and "clinical" diagnoses such as this, leading to a recognition of and response to ecological problems and not "merely" meditations on affective coexistence. The book is trying to make the case for an affective ecocinematics that produces real change.

If there *is* a real weakness here (crisis environmentalism, catastrophic tropes, or animal liberationist conviction are nothing of the sort), it is that the book is not terribly curious about the shape and status of affect studies. Affect is rehearsed and employed in this work more than it is interrogated. Acknowledging the decisions she was forced to make in order to produce a coherent initiatory text across these fields, Weik von Mossner writes that the volume attempts to fill a longstanding gap in affect- and emotion-based ecocritical studies (1) and that "much of the work presented here is initiatory, and is meant to be exactly that" (14). Indeed, this timely book, despite Weik von Mossner's modest framing of its breadth, will be an important motivator for further ecocinema and affect studies.

Those familiar with "screen theory" and the recent history of film studies will especially appreciate Weik von Mossner's elegant presentation of cognitivist film studies in response to prior investments in

semiotics and psychoanalysis. The volume also offers a nuanced interrogation of the supposed divide between cognitive studies and affect studies. While some contributors to the volume, Weik von Mossner writes, "find cognitive film theory highly productive for an ecocritical analysis of film emotion, others look critically at its somewhat limited (and limiting) concentration on the interaction between an individual film and an abstract, ideal spectator." (7) These generative tensions inflect the opening section of the book. Part I, "General and Theoretical Considerations," coherently presents the recent critical heritage, addressing some of the phenomenological precursors but focusing on recent theorists of affect. Janet Walker's later chapter is also especially good on recent affect scholarship.

Against the strongly activist tone of the Murray-Heumann contribution, the volume seems mindful of a common criticism of eco-inflected critical studies, in which environmentalist argument overwhelms other important frames. Nicole Seymour's engaging critique of seriousness and her call for a turn "toward an ironic ecocinema" strikes a particularly "post-environmentalist" tone. Seymour poses Mike Judge's *Idiocracy* as a serious ecofilm precisely because of "its ironic juxtaposition of the grave with the light-hearted" (71). Seymour works here on humour and populist (and popular) appeal angles related to the film and its environmental effectiveness. Her formal evaluation of the ironic distance missing from "in your face" activist documentaries (*Supersize Me*, *Food, Inc.*, and *An Inconvenient Truth*) leads to her claim that *Idiocracy* does not produce the atrophied affective registers of didactic and "preachy" ecocinema. The irony, Seymour writes, is that "*Idiocracy* is affective, and

potentially effective, because what's laughable about it—a completely globalized, corporatized existence at the edge of ecological collapse—is also entirely plausible" (70-71). The chapter inspires those who know these films well to recall that this mode of relation is corporatized in a grave irony the Spurlock film quite effectively communicates: Sharing in his struggles, the lawyer Frito tells the average Joe at the heart of *Idiocracy*, "I supersize with you..."

Some parts of the book, particularly the section on documentary, are not quite so "in tune"—attunement is, incidentally, a key affective concept with even deeper roots in phenomenology—with recent ecotheory or with alternative critical modes. More focus on affective planes of toxicity, disease, and viral permeation might also improve the book's topical scope. The volume tends away from historical-formal film study in favour of categorizing and defining in contemporary contexts. It employs cognitive terms and "sense data" measures that take on the expectations of affect theory's critical project to unsettle precursor frames like representation, human nature, and narration. This rehearses anti-anthropocentric gestures most readers will already be quite familiar with. There are several chapters outside of the dedicated section on documentary that are also preoccupied with documentary films without producing terribly new ecocinematic approaches. Some moments even seem to reproduce the same aggressively categorical expressions against which other contributors to the volume are working. Having said all this: some are convincing in their investigations of how film produces care in viewers, and some are downright riveting in their negotiation of

impossible tensions, such as the "critical anthropomorphism" Bart Welling suggests.

All of these essays are good as individual ecocritical investigations, and some are especially convincing ecocinematic studies. Belinda Smaill's essay on documentary realism as a cinematic political technique that could motivate emotional responses to animal abuses and environmental problems effectively communicates the volume's thesis in measured tones. David Whitley's chapter comfortably employs Bazin's realist theory and Noël Carroll's notion of cinematic immediacy as some sort of precritically *accessible* expressive form due to its visible primacy (143). Sean Cubitt's and Whitley's chapters show strong concern for film form. Both interrogate affective registers before and after the emotional environmentalism motivating some chapters of *Moving Environments*. Yet there still seems to be a desire across the collection to push affective experience toward cognized emotion and some form of action; it reads like a cinematic manual or a "how to care" module now and then. I suppose I'm suggesting something like a "deep(er) ecocinema," and yet I don't think it's wrong to hope for a smattering of recent theory on this front—theory that knows full well that, if there's one thing ecowork can be expected to know how to do, it's to feel things and experience strong emotion (and then argue from that strong feeling for the changes to life necessary in the Anthropocene). The collection largely avoids films and theories that could really help on some of these "post-prescriptive" fronts. The book will preach well to the choir, but can it mesh with fuzzier problems and more difficult tasks? Not in all cases.

One chapter is particularly good as an original theoretical inquiry. Adrian

Ivakhiv's chapter "What Can a Film *Do*? Assessing *Avatar*'s Global Affects" begins with the formal scope of cinema through a brief review of his important theories of co-articulative processual encounter/event. This bolsters a thick reading of film experience (a word he tests a bit) in Cameron's *Avatar* that considers 3D effects and more, tracking the burst of scholarship in the film's wake and then articulating the film's shimmering, technical biomorphism (173).

The book may "work" best—be "most effective," to borrow the authors' figure for cinematic success—for those already working under the presumed sign of affect, and not those hoping to interrogate it further or consider cinematic thinking on affect. But while Spinoza and Deleuze may get zero actual index credits, Heidegger one passing shot (and barely at that, even though it comes in a chapter discussing phenomenology), Disney gets a myriad, and this means the book's task of seeking out the ecological thought of cinema and consensual media culture is in clear focus throughout.

While the volume may be light on hefty philosophical precursors, it works closely and productively with the major contemporary theorists in the field. Newcomers to the field will get an excellent introduction and sense strong alliances with theories of embodiment, and then, by further extension, with recent developments in cognitive studies that focus on the physicality of brain functions,

emotion, and the shapes of mental experience. They will also appreciate the legible, organized manner in which authors throughout the volume rehearse key "second wave" affect concepts and arguments as part of substantive ecocinema studies. The volume's task of bringing one vibrant field into meaningful dialogue with another—affect with ecology—necessitated intricate work, and the contributors live up to that charge better than one could have possibly hoped. Weik von Mossner and the contributors deserve unqualified praise for the book's general excellence. A vital resource.

**TED GEIER**, an Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in the 2015-16 Rice Seminars "After Biopolitics" in the Rice University Humanities Research Center, received his PhD from UC Davis in Comparative Literature with a Degree Emphasis in Critical Theory. His dissertation, "British and other nonhumans of the long nineteenth century: Abject forms in literature, law, and meat," interrogates nonhuman concern—its prospects, ironies, and limitations—in Romantic works and the legal fiction of Dickens and Kafka, working in dialogue with the London history of meat production at Smithfield Market and with popular print culture such as the Penny Dreadfuls. He also publishes on global ecocriticism, critical theory, and film studies.