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**Green Frames: Exploring
Cinema Ecocritically**

Harri Kilpi
PhD
Cinema and Television Studies
University of Helsinki

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Green Frames: Exploring Cinema Ecocritically

Since its emergence as an industry, cinema has been almost exclusively an urban art form and has served and continues to serve audiences, which are predominantly urban. This means that most of the cinema audiences have a limited scope of knowledge and first-hand experience regarding nature. In current Western (post)modern society, which relies on completely outsourced or minute agricultural work force, the alienation from real nature becomes more and more comprehensive. In this situation, cinema and other audiovisual media have a key role in representing nature for us, the audiences, and in shaping of our views about it. This is one of the reasons why the research of nature and cinema is important, and gives rise to some central questions, such as: how does cinema shape and aesthetise nature? What kind of conventions, patterns and trends does it adhere to? And simply, what are understood as representations of nature on film?

If one applies the broadest definition of nature describing it as the biosphere and everything in it, including humans and their cultures, it seems to encompass all films, the most urbanite, technocentric sci-fi films included. Even if one excludes everything man-made that is inorganic (e.g. buildings, cars, roads) as I intend to do here, how does one approach this vast topic? How can one start to analyse it into more manageable fragments? And in what other ways, besides the issues concerning representation, does nature dissect cinema and its institutions? These are some of the core questions that I will explore in this essay, which is based on an introductory lecture given in the Finnish Film Archive's Cinema and Nature series in Spring 2007. Given the scope of the topic it is perhaps necessary to emphasise that the thoughts and ideas I outline should be understood as preliminary sketches and ruminations, which are due for refinement in subsequent research.

There is, of course, a lot of research on nature in cinema. However, most of this research tends to focus on one narrowly defined special topic, such as, say, a chapter on nature in a book on Westerns, or nature in television documentaries. Comments outlining a broader picture or analysis that would chart the relationship between cinema and nature have been left to the background. The only exception seems to be ecocriticism, an approach developed and crystallised within the research of literature during the 1990s.

Although there is no consensus on what is the precise definition of ecocriticism, there seems to be a general agreement that it contains three main focal points. These are the investigation of relationship between literature and nature, the search for interdisciplinary connections and synergies between different fields of knowledge engaged in the study of nature, and affirmative, positive politics, that is, environmentalist ethos that frames and inspires the research (Estok 2001). The first two can easily be transferred to the study of cinema, while the third probably emerges automatically in one shape or another as an inevitable by-product of hermeneutic process of interpretation. However, the more critical findings can be backed with data from other sciences and/or fields of criticism, the more persuasive and less subjective the case that is being made will be.

Linked to this vague terminology is another issue concerning some ecocritics, namely that of missing theoretical identity, or as Estok puts it, "*we need to understand why ecocriticism has problems in getting its theoretical footing.*" (ibid.). As compared to, say, marxism, ecocriticism lacks a theoretical tradition and clearly formed basic, core assumptions, which could help bring the field into focus.

Thus, there has been some questioning as to what extent ecocriticism is a theoretical formation, a bunch of methodological tools or just a focus (Estok 2001). For me, and for the purposes of this essay, this question is a non-starter. To fulfil the three criteria mentioned above and to be useful, an ecocritical approach does not have to form a solid theoretical structure. A collection of piece-meal, small-to-medium-sized theories and methods that effectively explain some small-to-medium-sized problems can do the trick just as well. In fact, it can be argued that this is actually the best way of tackling such complex and multifarious phenomenon as cinema, since it avoids the strictures and maxims of an over-arching theory and the pre-determination and homogenisation that it can impose on any given source material or data.

Over ten years ago, David Bordwell wrote that "*Middle-level research programs have shown that an argument can be at once conceptually powerful and based on evidence without appeal to theoretical bricolage or association of ideas... Most important [they] have shown that you do not need a Big Theory of Everything to do enlightening work in a field of study*" (1996a, 29. See also: Carroll 1996, 56-61).

In the sections below, I will refer to different bodies of research and methodologies which, to my mind, can best help enlighten the questions at hand.

If ecocriticism is a young innovation in literature, it is even more so within the research of cinema. During the past five years it has produced only few significant texts, and since the space here does not allow for a detailed survey I shall briefly mention four principal texts.

Sean Cubitt's *EcoMedia* (2005) is a collection of highly theorised, in-depth case studies of films exhibiting environmentalist themes ranging from *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-3) to *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and addressing issues such as bio-security, over-fishing, eco-terrorism and genetic modification. While Cubitt sketches a theory that links nature, technology and film, he does not provide a general analysis of nature on film.

Pat Brereton's *Hollywood Utopia: Ecology in Contemporary American Cinema* promises an account of "the contrasting ecological connotations of nature through Hollywood film from the post-war period to the end of the century," (2005, 51). Unfortunately the book is beset by various difficulties, from argumentation via style to typology, that undercut this aim considerably (see my review of the book at: <http://www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk/bookreview.php?issue=6&id=167&q=Brereton>).

David Ingram's *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema* (2002) is a clearly laid out thematic survey into films that are particularly about nature and ecological issues, whether about masculinist survival, big game conservation in Africa or problems with nuclear energy. While Leo Braudy's 1998 article contains many valuable insights, observations and meditations, they focus on one particular manifestation of nature on film, which he calls *The Genre of Nature*. Although these texts all reflect and respect the heterogeneity of the topic, they do not engage in any wider speculation about how the relationship between nature and cinema could be analysed on a more general level.

One such opening, that will also take into account the ecocritical assumptions outlined above, could be achieved by loosely applying the old tripartite division of cinema into production, texts and reception. Therefore, I will first look on the film industry and its relation to nature. Then I will try to tackle some of the problems relating to the film texts and representation of nature on film. In the final section, I will briefly point out what anthropology, cognitive and ecological film theory and evolutionary psychology, that is, the "nature" of the spectator, can offer in terms of explaining the basic and universal fascination of cinema.

What kind of films I am investigating? I am mainly interested in popular narrative cinema (with a couple of excursions into television), which is why I will skip avant garde cinema in this essay. Nature has of course been used by various avant gardists, from Maya Deren (*At Land*, 1944) and Robert Smitson (*Spiral Jetty*, 1970) to Chris Welsby (e.g. *Seven Days*, 1974; *Stream Line*, 1976; *Sky Light*, 1988) and Peter Greenaway (*Water Wrackets*, 1975; *A Zed & Two Noughts*, 1985), which are all fascinating, yet cannot be thought of as instances of popular cinema. Furthermore, it has been argued, though, that many avant garde films discard the (conventional) narrative (Bacon 2004, 95), a feature which differentiates these films from others. (In addition, since a penchant for and the use of narrative is a universal human trait, discarding it affects avant garde films in a nature-related way. I will return to this theme in the last section of the essay).

Film Industry and Nature

In the study of cinema some variant of Marxist cultural criticism has traditionally been deployed when a critical analysis of culture industries has been needed. Money flows, hierarchies of power, issues around centralisation, monopolisation and around institutes and persons managing these entities and using them for their benefit have usually been the mainstay of this kind of analysis. The focus has generally been on corporations, people (capitalists, movie-goers) and the processes of oppression such as the exploitation of film-workers, and the ideological effects of films on audiences (e.g. the false consciousness hypothesis).

Although the filmic representations and their potential effects on the audiences have been a central concern for research, cinema also produces as a matter of fact concrete, real-world effects on the environment. It does so by being an industry engaged in the uses of raw materials and locations. Therefore, instead of focusing on people, a critical look at the film industry from the perspective of nature would focus on the usage of raw materials and on environmental strains caused by film production. In effect, this kind of research would trace the ecological footprint of a given production and help contribute to the environmental audit of the industry.

Although detailed and reliable facts about a film production can be hard to come by, some general trends can already be identified. Nearly obvious point of departure is the recognition of the fact that cinema (and by extension, all popular, widely-distributed audiovisual media) is by far the most polluting and least ecologically sustainable form of art. A brief look at the three sectors of the industry – production, distribution and exhibition – from an ecological perspective confirms this claim. The focus is on the modus operandi of Hollywood, although many of the facets analysed are applicable to other film industries as well.

Production

As compared to other arts production of a film requires contribution from a large number of people. All have to be transported to and from locations and catered with food, all of which adds to the consumption and therefore also the ecological footprint of the production. Star entourages, in which the consumption can take excessive, not to mention ludicrous forms, are an extreme, but regrettably common feature of any large-scale film production. Nowadays alternative production budgets are made regarding different locations around the globe in order to find out the cheapest possible combinations of low labour costs, tax evasions and so on. Ecological issues, such as the distances, their effects on logistics and resultant carbon emission are not a concern. Furthermore, there is the question of effects on the shooting locations. Does the production affect the environment it has used, and if so, has anything been done to amend those effects? As a yardstick for these questions and themes one can use the recent acknowledgment that the entertainment industry is the second-most polluting industry in the Los Angeles area right after the petrochemical industries (Kotler 2006).

Distribution

Film distribution also contains lots of raw material consumption and logistics that is usually forgotten. Advertising, which sometimes devours more money than the actual production, is focused mostly on immaterial media such as radio and television. There is still however lots of outdoor advertising, while promotional and press materials have to be printed and shipped around the globe. While some of these materials can be moved through the internet, promotional tours of stars and directors (and their entourages) take place in the physical world and thus affect its carbon balance. James Schamus, the head of Focus Features says that \$150.000 is a very modest budget for a Cannes participation (2005, 97). Trade magazine *Variety* estimates that an average production that wants to get something out of Cannes has to spend nearly \$500.000 in order to be seen and heard. This figure includes \$60.000 for flights, \$10.000 for cars, \$20.000 for accommodation and a whopping \$190.000 for a sales bash alone (Ulmer 2005, 8).

Whether on a festival or not, 35mm physical copies of films have to be made and shipped around the world, which further widens the ecological footprint of distribution. In the extreme blockbuster cases the number of premiere weekend copies is measured in thousands. In addition to 35mm, a vastly larger number of DVD (and in the past VHS) copies are manufactured, along with ever-more elaborate covers and other paraphernalia. All of these have to be stored somewhere and then shipped to retailers and rental shops. What is more, with the DVD, planned obsolescence seems to have become openly shameless: less than ten years after the introduction of the DVD format, new formats, such as the Blu Ray and HDDVD, are being pushed to the markets. This shortens the lifespan of DVD players and consumer's film libraries, which in turn increases their relative footprint: the more disposable something, the less unsustainable it is. As for digital distribution and exhibition, the technology (with its environmental benefits) is already there, but the fear of piracy will keep the bulk of the distribution in physical formats for the foreseeable future (Culkin *et al* 2005, 4).

Exhibition

The third sector of film industry is exhibition, most traditionally in theatrical form. In terms of exhibition's ecological problems, one could point to the use (or lack thereof) of the auditoria during daytime: a huge number of cubic meters of air and furniture warmed-up and air-conditioned for nothing or for very poorly attended matinee shows. Furthermore, one could argue that since the main source of income for the theatres is in advertising revenues and concession sales (Epstein 2005, 196; Schamus 2005, 92), their anti-ecological contribution increases via endorsement they give to consumerism. With considerable sales of sodas, pop corn, burgers, crisps, doughnuts, candy and ice cream film theatres also form a part and parcel of the junk food culture that has well-known health and ecological consequences of its own.

To be fair, Hollywood has not been completely inactive in terms of its own environmental awareness. The industry lobbies established Environmental Media Association already in 1990 to offer researched information, green consultation and tips to the studios. This activity has, however, attracted criticism as being mere greenwash, a green fig leaf for what remain essentially polluting methods of production.

In 2006, *Variety* launched a portal called Green Hollywood. According to its information Hollywood is cleaning up its act. Carbon offsetting, ecological building practices, recycling and all-round environmental awareness seem to be making significant inroads into Hollywood mainstream. Films such as *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *Syriana* (2005) and *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) were all carbon neutral (Kotler 2006), that is, their emissions were offset by using different corporations which specialise in, say, tree-planting and renewable energy schemes and initiatives.

Stars, such as Cate Blanchett, George Clooney, Leonardo DiCaprio (who is releasing an environmental documentary of his own, *The 11th Hour* (2007); <http://www.11thhourfilm.com/>) and Harrison Ford, which have considerable leverage in Hollywood through their agencies, have raised the green profile of the industry. According to *Variety*, the amount of content that deals with environmental issues is also growing, although "eco-friendly programming must still move past the stigma that its TV's equivalent of vegetables: it may be good for you, but it's not particularly entertaining." (Schneidera 2006)

One still cannot escape the feeling that this is so much greenwash, or at least way too little in relation to the size of the industry and the size of the problem. To every green star there is a flamboyant, preposterous consumerist set up as an object of idolisation and as a model for emulation for millions of people. One such idol is Tom Cruise, who has according to the British newspaper *The Guardian*, earned the nickname "emissions impossible" among the environmental lobby. Cruise "is reported to own three private jets – including a recent \$20m (£10m) purchase for wife Katie Holmes. There's a story, never denied by Cruise, that he sent one of those private jets just to pick up some groceries for Katie. But the good news is that the vegetables were organic." (Collinson 2007)

John Travolta's real-life eco-performance has also been less than stellar. He "once starred in a movie about bringing industrial polluters to justice, but in real life he probably has the biggest carbon footprint of any Hollywood star. He parks his personal Boeing 707 on his front lawn – next to his three Gulfstream jets and a Lear jet. Rather appropriately, he has called his home "Jumbolair". He's already logged 5,000 hours as a pilot - but he did at least put his skills to good use transporting food to victims of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans." (ibid.)

Cynically viewing this situation *Los Angeles Times* staff writer James Bates re-wrote some "green" tips for Hollywood megastars:

- "Order your assistant to take the Escalade to a gas station to make sure the tires are properly inflated.
- For your next movie, instruct your agent to ask for a trailer only twice the size of your co-stars instead of three times the size.
- Share a ride with at least one other executive or movie star on the Gulfstream V to Cannes.
- Have the most energy efficient Plasma TVs installed in each room of each of your homes.
- Use recycled paper when ordering 10 or more rewrites of a script.
- Use recycled paper for your complaint when you sue a studio over profit participation.
- Use recycled paper napkins in your private dining room.
- Lower the thermostat by 2 degrees at your winter home in Aspen.
- Cut the size of your posse by one to lighten the load when you roll in your Hummer.
- Have your assistant call a plumber to install a clean air filter in the air conditioner off your Malibu estate.
- Carpool to the Kabbalah Centre
- Take the Prius when driving to Santa Barbara for the weekend
- When firing assistants, do it by e-mail instead of making them drive into the office." (Bates 2007)

What is more, carbon offsetting is a problematic way of fighting climate change in any case. The carbon from a jet engine transporting a film crew goes to the atmosphere right now, while its capture in the form of new trees or new technology might – or might not – happen in ten, twenty years' time. According to the Conservation Fund one tree absorbs about 1.3 tonnes of carbon dioxide during a 70-year lifespan (Kotler 2006). For comparison, one Western consumer produces 2 to 6 tonnes of carbon dioxide from fossil fuel use alone – in one year (CDIAC 2003, <http://cdiac.ornl.gov/trends/emis/top2003.cap>).

Even if offsetting was an efficient way making a production green, what parts of the whole multimedia enterprise that the modern filmmaking is could actually be covered and controlled? Could all subcontractors that manufacture the tie-in products, such as toys, some in questionable conditions in the Third World countries, be really monitored in terms of their environmental performance? What about the various product placements and the companies behind them? How many productions can afford to put ecological conditions in their contracts with huge, rich multinational corporations such as Coca-Cola or McDonald's?

Finally, let's again assume that all this can be made real, that all parts of the film value-chain can be made truly, sustainably carbon neutral. Does any of it really matter, however, if the contents of the films themselves endorse conspicuous consumption, consumerist lifestyles and their attendant high-level carbon emissions? Films do not only sell themselves, they sell a variety of products. Therefore, in their texts, they rely on and endorse the consumerist culture and its basic idea that good life equals high consumption. What film franchises such as *Toy Story* or *Cars* (2006) gain in potentially green production methods (animation being done mostly in computer labs and other immaterial environments), they lose in their vast tie-in sales and in consumerist ideology embedded as self-evident way of life in their film texts. Biggest franchises of recent years, such as *Mission: Impossible*, *Spider-Man* and *Harry Potter*, incorporate the same ideology in their texts in much the same matter-of-fact style, while some others such as *The Fast and the Furious* franchise blow it into near-fetishistic proportions. And yet, as bleak as this picture might look, films can and do affect the viewers towards the other direction as well. This leads to the second large area of ecocritical film study, that of textual analysis.

Approaches for the analysis of Representations of Nature in Film Texts

The default point of departure for analysis of cinematic representations of any kind has been some form of cultural constructivism. Drawing from traditions of Marxism and cultural studies, it holds that (cinematic) representations are always already biased, that is, they are conditioned by the culture that has produced or given rise to them. The production process selects elements, emphasises one thing and downplays the other, and colours everything



Leonardo DiCaprio in Cannes in 2007. He promised to do his bit to fight climate change by cutting down his use of private jets and taking commercial flights whenever possible
Source: www.reuters.com

through different social prisms, such as gender, class, race, nationhood and so on. How these sensibilities affect the portrayal of nature in audiovisual media is of utmost importance, and it has been addressed for instance in ecofeminist criticism.

The issues are too complex and manifold to be included here in an exhaustive manner which is why I have picked out just few themes and restricted my comments on a rather general level. I will look at four different ways, or heuristics, according to which one might start to categorise nature on film. These are the concept(s) of national cinema, genres, terminology relating to mimesis and thematic weighting of nature portrayed. Rather than ready-made overarching theories all heuristics have their special uses, advantages and disadvantages which I try to point out. As for the definition of nature, no easy solutions can be found. For the purposes of the essay the nature simply excludes everything man-made that is inorganic (e.g. buildings, cars, roads) and includes the organic (e.g. flora and fauna, but also gardens, agricultural and pastoral landscapes). The humans themselves are a borderline case, and thus figure in some categorisations and not in others.

Concept(s) of national cinema

Lands, states, nations, peoples and ethnic groups, when engaged in filmmaking, leave subtle traces of their policies, views and ideologies on the product, some in explicit, some in more implicit, mediated ways. Therefore, dividing different representations of nature in terms of their national imagery and origins, would make sense. Different national ideologies and cultures and their views and effects on nature and environment could be analysed within this framework. Furthermore, the use of national natural heritage sites is of particular interest as it reveals the connections between the film and tourist industries and fleshes out what are thought to be the natural selling points of the given country.

In English heritage films such as Jane Austen and E.M. Forster adaptations (e.g. *Howards End*, 1992, *Pride and Prejudice*, 2005), the rolling green hills, meadows and lawns tap not only to the timelessness of the pastoral but also its specific English variation, especially when combined with stately homes and literary romance. For example, the landscapes of Lake District, one of the favourite tourist destinations in Northern England, are one of the key attractions in *Miss Potter* (2006), which otherwise is a bio pic. It could be argued that the changing locales of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and Pusan pond in *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* (2003) are at least in part designed to show off the topographies of China and South Korea respectively in a bid to woo tourists.

Difficulties arise with the definition of "the national" (see: Higson 2002, 52-3). Since so many films are now multinational undertakings, what constitutes a national film or a national landscape? How would this approach account for Hollywood films, which are, after all, the most widely scattered in terms of production and design? Is there an American view of nature, or is the Hollywood's view a kaleidoscopy of different locales designed to appeal the inhabitants, i.e. the consumers, of those locales? And what about the representations of nature that seem to recur regardless of the film's national origin?

Division by Genre

Landscapes and nature, animals and plants provide essential agents and backdrops for a number of genres, which can be seen as another basic tool when dividing the representation of nature in more compact categories. Prairies and deserts in Westerns (e.g. *The Searchers*, 1956), extreme weather (*The Perfect Storm*, 2000) and monstrous animals (*Anaconda*, 1997; television series *Lost*, 2005-) in disaster films, a certain "geographic" locales in adventure films, such as the Caribbean in the pirate films (*The Crimson Pirate*, 1952) and India and Pakistan in imperial adventure films (*Kim*, 1950; *North West Frontier*, 1959) form presences that define these films visually as well as generically. In children's animated films anthropomorphic animals frequently take leading roles (from *Bambi*, 1942 to *Finding Nemo*, 2003), while in dystopic science fiction films nature has been permanently damaged with serious consequences for the humankind (*Stalker*, 1979; *Silent Running*, 1972; *Blade Runner*, 1982). Many of these representations of nature, Westerns excluded, cross national borders and definitions to become generic rather than national features of these films.

The advantage of genre terminology is that many of them are widely recognised and used by both cinemagoers and the film industry. They incorporate clichés and iconic representations of nature, which make genres interesting and give rise to the questions of what kind of ideologies recur. For example, how is African nature portrayed in Tarzan and other adventure films? What uses and functions does it perform? How does it distort the reality of natural conditions in any given area? What kind of slants do the so called wild life films or environmentally progressive films bring to their representations of wilderness? With nature documentaries one might dissect the rhetorical ways in which the film tries to pass itself as the truth about the matter at hand or how it might try to politicise certain aspects of nature (e.g. *Planet Earth*, 2006).

There are of course some well-known problems with generic terminology. Genre films seldom exhibit just one genre, while multi-genre hybrids seem to be the industrial standard. Genres also change over time, which makes their already blurry borders even harder to define. (Altman 1999, 99, 123, 127, 136, 142, 208, 214. See also: Neale 2000). This in turn poses a



In *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* cars loom larger than human beings.
Source: www.rottentomatoes.com



Filming *Miss Potter* in the Lake District. The picture is taken from a website that promotes the area as a tourist attraction.
Source: www.visitcumbria.com

problem for categorisation: which films one should include in a sample of a certain genre? What criteria can one use, especially if the sample should cover several decades of changing generic history? One way is to focus on shorter periods of time and try to define and identify core and peripheral cases of that period as regards the nature film (Bordwell 1989, 148). One might also try to link this analysis with industrial history and look into generic issues during genuine production trends.

Mimetic Continuum

There are, however, many depictions of nature that fall outside the perimeter of genre films. Thus another tool is needed to complement the analysis alongside the national and the generic. In the Greek tradition, mimesis has been called the representation of nature, while Erich Auerbach widens it to cover the representation of reality (1968). Here, my intention is to link it with realism in order to create a following continuum regarding different representations of nature:

Documentary à
 Mimetic realism à
 Stylised and/or Magical realism à
 Fantasy

A number rules and caveats are in order. Firstly, the main purpose of the continuum is to describe how the loyalty to the real nature varies across different representations of nature. In effect, the bid for veracity decreases as one steps down the continuum. Secondly, the borders between categories are blurry and leaky and they can overlap with each other. Thirdly, one film seldom sits squarely in one of these categories, but slides and jumps along this continuum as ordered by the film's narrative and genre. Fourthly, this cinematic continuum does not float in a vacuum, it is surrounded by the realities of film industry, cinematic conventions and finally the larger cultural reality to which all the categories allude to and depend on. Some examples should clarify the idea

Documentary category has on its one end films dedicated to accurate portrayal of nature and films which comment on the processes of their own making (the DVD version of *Planet Earth*). However, as one nears mimetic realism, fictional aspects grow larger as in some grossly anthropomorphic *Avara luonto* (1984-) documentaries and in the puerile adventures of late Steve Irwin (*The Crocodile Hunter*, 1996-2004) and others. The fact that *The March of the Penguins* (2005), which is replete with fictional elements and humanistic projection, won the Academy Award for the Best Documentary, show how blurry the border between the documentary and mimetic realism really is.

Films in the category of mimetic realism differ from documentaries mainly because they rely on a different set of generic conventions in their construction, the main feature being the use of fictional characters. Within mimetic realism, nature is usually meant to resemble the real nature as authentically as possible. Rapids in *Koskenlaskijan morsian* (1937) or the hay fields and hay stacks in other Finnish films are meant to be loyal representations of their real counterparts. This does not preclude them from having national, gender, sexual and other connotations. Although films such as *Dante's Peak* (1997) or *Twister* (1996) refer to relatively rare and extreme events of nature they also strive for realism in order to increase the shock effect of the disasters they portray.

Terms stylised and/or magical realism refer to those elusive moments when otherwise authentic pictures of nature get clearly invested with meanings other than those found in the real nature. In the television series *Lost*, the island forest develops a mysterious, monstrous hue that is never fully explained. In *Apocalypse Now* (1979) the journey up the jungle river becomes a metaphor for soul searching and darker sides of human nature, while in *Blueberry* (2004) the mental inner space of the main character dissolves into the larger environment. In short, in magical realism's milder form, authentic, realistic pictures are laden with meaning and its stronger form the realistic features are bent for the purposes of the narrative.

In addition of imaginatively altering or bypassing the laws of nature, fantasy differs from strong magical realism in that it is not located in the past or present or reality. Thus, science fiction films depicting the future (*Soylent Green*, 1973; *Wonderful Days*, 2003), fantasy films set in imaginary realms (*Willow*, 1988; *The Lord of the Rings I-III*, 2001-3) or films about dream worlds or dreaming (*The Company of the Wolves*, 1984; *Akira Kurosawa's Dreams*, 1990; *Pan's Labyrinth*, 2006) are here put under the fantasy category.

Thematic Weighing Continuum

The degree of authenticity goes only so far in describing the representations of nature on film. It seems reasonable that there should also be some way of talking about the general weight given to the natural themes in any given film. One could call this the thematic weighting continuum, which might look like this:

Nature negligible or non-existent à
 Nature performing an important, yet passive role à

Nature performing an important, active role à
Nature is the central issue of the narrative

Rules and caveats similar to the mimetic continuum apply here as well. Any given film may slide to and fro on this scale according to the needs and phases of its narrative; there is seldom a film that is thoroughly and monotonously about just one of these categories. As the adjective-laden language implies the categories themselves blur at the borders and are in the need of more specific definition in later research.

The films that belong to the first category are probably quite obvious. These include mainly urban dramas, thrillers, science fiction and so on, which limit themselves to urban, human-built environments and issues. Some of the most clear-cut examples would include the *Robocop* trilogy, *The Fast and the Furious* franchise, *Die Hard* series, *Lethal Weapon* series and *Toy Story* series. The body of films in this category is huge, probably comprising the majority of mainstream films. *Variety*'s box-office top 20s from 1990 to present certainly points to this conclusion.

In the second category nature is usually brought in as a wow-factor, as a spectacle. Great landscapes and aerial photography bring added production value to the film, while the connection to the narrative might be rather thin. For example, Zhang Yimou's *Hero* (2002) and *The House of Flying Daggers* (2004) and Terence Malick's *Badlands* (1973) and *Days of Heaven* (1978) frequently deploy breath-taking scenery and yet the landscapes do not form an active agent in the story. Through their repeated presence they might attain larger metaphorical meanings that are indeed important and enriching to the narrative, but on the level of explicit meanings (Bordwell 1989, 8) they are passive and mostly left to the background. Of course, these passive elements can become obstacles and critical challenges that are central to the narrative as is the case with the river in *Deliverance* (1972), mountains in *Cliffhanger* (1993) and the desert island in *Cast Away* (2000).

Nature performing an active role means that it is no longer just a passive backdrop but an agent that directly and actively affects the characters and thus forms an important part of the narrative. Many films focusing on natural disasters (e.g. *Earthquake*, 1974; *Volcano*, 1997) belong to this category, no matter how ridiculous their premises might be (*Armageddon*, 1998; *The Core*, 2003). Films featuring dangerous animals (*The Jaws* series; *Alien* series; *Jurassic Park* series; *Arachnophobia*, 1990) and not-so-dangerous animals (e.g. *Lassie* series; *Free Willy* series) form a large subset of this category containing both "real" and imaginary beasts. Films with nothing but anthropomorphic animals, such as *Shark's Tale* (2004), *The March of the Penguins*, and most Disney animations, represent this category in an extreme form: all active roles are taken over by (seemingly, superficially) non-human agents.

Although the last category might seem problematic in that it implies only a degree of difference, not a difference in kind, compared to the third category, I wanted to make films, that are principally and primarily about nature and environmental issues a category of their own. In these films nature and/or ecological issues are at the heart of the narrative and are explicitly discussed in the film. In effect, this group of films is more or less convergent with those discussed by Ingram and Braudy, although they exclude documentaries from their samples.

Documentaries that focus on nature, such as Jacques Cousteau's *Le Monde du Silence* (1956) and *Le Monde sans soleil* (1964) or larger frame work of ecology, such as *Darwin's Nightmare* (2004) and *Crude Impact* (2006), obviously belong to this category. As regards fictional films, the foregrounding of conservation issues (e.g. *Gorillas in the Mist*, 1988; *Amazon*, 1990), environmental catastrophes (*The Day after Tomorrow*) are a part and parcel of this category as are Godfrey Reggio's trilogy of montage films, *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982), *Powaqqatsi* (1988), and *Naqoyqatsi* (2002). Some less obvious, more urbane films would include court dramas such as *Erin Brockovich* (2000), comedies such as *Fierce Creatures* (1997) and thrillers such as *On Deadly Ground* (1994).

National, generic, mimetic and thematic analyses are just four tools that can be used as the starting grid when dividing the representation of nature in smaller units. They are not meant to be mutually exclusive, rather, they complement each other. The topic is huge, but I hope that these sketches have begun to flesh out some broad trends in the big picture that is nature on film. There is, however, even larger frame work in which the interaction of nature and cinema can be considered. In the last section, I will briefly outline some thoughts on universal, common human nature and how the knowledge of that can further our understanding of cinema.

Human Nature and the Ecology of Cinema

Cultural constructivism referred to in the previous section can only go so far in explaining the appeal cinema. The limitations surface when one reviews a certain form of cultural constructivism, which could be defined as its radical or reductionist version. Proponents of this view would hold that the representations are nothing but cultural constructions, and that they are always nothing but context-dependant creations, and that explanation for the appeal of certain images is always nothing but cultural and historical. While in its moderate form (take away the "nothing but") constructivism clearly makes sense, some of the more outre statements of the radical view can be rebutted with evidence from other sciences, namely those of anthropology, physiology, cognitive and evolutionary psychology. Crucially, there



Humanoid penguins in *The March of the Penguins*.

Source: www.raincitystory.com



Bamboo forest forms a strikingly graphic backdrop for the kung fu ballet in *The House of Flying Daggers*.

Source: www.rottentomatoes.com

seems to be some traits and features that are shared by all peoples across the globe that are not reducible to cultural contexts and that can help us understand the allure of cinema and the images of nature it conveys.

Drawing together findings of dozens of individual studies from across the globe, anthropologist Donald E. Brown claims that there are dozens of traits or propensities that are found in nearly all human cultures (Brown 1991, 5-6; Pinker 2002, 435-9). These include play, narrative and myths, all of which provide the necessary ground work for understanding a narrative medium such as cinema. (The evidence of cinema's near-universal accessibility can in turn be found in the research done in Africa by Renee Hobbs *et al* [1988, 50-60]). According to Brown, there is also a universal interest towards living entities and towards things that look as if they were living. This trait might well lie behind the general appeal of cinema, which, after all, captures reality more accurately than any other visual art form.

Some of these traits and other, physiological yet equally universal features have been acknowledged in the field of cognitive and ecological film theory. Joseph D. Anderson writes that his "*efforts will be directed toward placing cognitive science in relationship to the film medium, and I shall describe a metatheory that can encompass both. I call this metatheory ecological because it attempts to place film production and spectatorship in a natural context. That is, the perception and comprehension of motion pictures is regarded as a subset of perception and comprehension in general, and the workings of the perceptual systems and the mind of the spectator are viewed in the context of their evolutionary development.*" (1998, 10)

He then goes on to explain how the film technology takes advantage of human brain anatomy (e.g. the flicker fusion threshold, the illusion of motion), which is universal and a product of evolution. Other researchers have taken up similar themes. David Bordwell, who has introduced many concepts of cognitive psychology to the film theory, has analysed the borders between conventions and contingent universals that relate to some well-known cinematic devices such as shot-reverse shot (1996b, 87-107, esp. 91-4), Ed Tan and Carl Plantinga have analysed the usage of human face in films with reference to universal basic emotions (anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, surprise and contempt) (Tan 2007, 5-27; Plantinga 1999, 239-258), while Torben Grodal has used evolutionary psychology in order to analyse and explain representations and the attractions of love and desire in cinema (2004, 26-46). All in all, this approach could be seen as falling under the wide church of ecocriticism, since it deals with natural elements, that is, common, universal human nature and its relation to cinema. Crucially, it seems that this approach does have strong explanatory power regarding many aspects that concern cinema's general comprehension and appeal, especially when compared with other, more rigorously constructivist approaches.

There is another, and much more speculative way in which human universals could be deployed in ecocritical research of cinema. As regards nature, Brown lists the categorization of animals, plants, spaces and weather and the ability to adapt to different environments among the universal human traits. These could be linked to what ecologist Edward O. Wilson has called biophilia hypothesis. According to the hypothesis one common human characteristic is not just interest, but affection, even love towards living things and systems. He writes: "*Biophilia, if it exists, and I believe it exists, is the innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms. Innate means hereditary and hence part of ultimate human nature.*" (Wilson 1993, 31)

Shadowed by different phobias there seems to be also philiias towards nature, which would explain our fondness with parks, zoos, house plants, gardens and pets. These manifestations are of course mediated and coloured by different cultures (proximate causes), but the ultimate cause behind it could be an evolutionary one. Philia towards flora, fauna, environment and life in general helps to sustain life and thus humans as well, which makes biophilia an evolutionarily advantageous trait (ibid. 32). Some other natural propensities, such as status-seeking and selfish resource consumption, can, however, override biophilia, as seems to be the case in the contemporary Western societies.

How could biophilia be related to film? In his article on aesthetic universals art philosopher Denis Dutton points out that certain kind of landscapes seem to have global appeal. Drawing on research done by Orians and Heerwagen on young children not yet too much conditioned by their cultures, he concludes that a landscape featuring open spaces, trees, water, greenery, flowers and variegated cloud patters holds most appeal across cultures. This can in turn be explained by evolutionary development: an ability to recognize a resource-rich, good living environment is an evolutionary advantage (Dutton 2001, 207-8).

These results were humorously re-created by artist Vitali Komar and Alexander Melamid, who used opinion poll information in order to paint "best-liked" landscapes in different countries across the globe. In the end, the landscapes ended up resembling each other quite a lot – all in concordance with the features in Dutton's list (see: http://www.komarandmelamid.org/chronology/1994_1997_peoples/index.htm). Could a similar experiment and research be done in cinema? Could universally appealing images of landscapes, animals, habitats and ecologies be identified more or less similar forms across the cinematic cultures? It certainly seems an enticing proposal.

Epilogue

In this essay I introduced one way of dividing the field of ecocriticism in smaller chunks.



Plane animals? Anthropomorphised hogs a la Disney in Lion King 2.
Source: www.mpimages.net



Nature and culture juxtaposed in Koyaanisqatsi.
Source: www.spiritofbaraka.com

These were the ecocritical study of film production, which could focus on environmental auditing of the film industry; textual analysis, which could focus on the representations of nature in cinema in at least four interlinked ways (national cinema, genre study, mimetic continuum, thematic continuum); and the ecology of cinema, that is, the research on the frameworks that nature impose on cinema via evolutionary developed human nature. The methods and issues introduced should be thought of as a set of tools, which compliment, not subvert, one another. The approaches are not delineated in rigorous enough fashion and they are not exhaustive but they do represent one way of structuring the target field of ecocriticism using a bunch of small-scale theories and methodological tools rather than any overarching and overtly political theories. As such, it should bring into focus the full richness of the field without subjugating its constituent parts any pre-determined, catch-all thought-patterns.

Harri Kilpi

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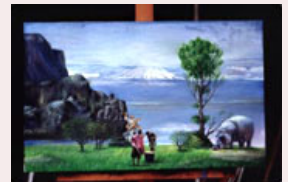
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France's Most Wanted Painting. By Komar and Melamid.



Kenya's Most Wanted Painting. By Komar and Melamid

Source: www.komarandmelamid.org

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