

# Moving Environments: Affect, Emotion, and Ecocinema

Rachel  
Carson  
Center

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**Sponsors:** Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society

**Conveners:** Alexa Weik von Mossner (RCC/University of Fribourg), Arielle Helmick (RCC)

**Presenters:** Pat Brereton (Dublin City University), Sean Cubitt (University of Southampton), Johanna Feier (Dortmund University), Joe Heumann (Eastern Illinois University), David Ingram (Brunel University), Adrian Ivakhiv (University of Vermont), Angela Kreutz (University of Queensland), Robin Murray (Eastern Illinois University), Nicole Seymour (University of Louisville), Belinda Smaill (Monash University), Janet Walker (University of California, Santa Barbara), Alexa Weik von Mossner (RCC/University of Fribourg), Bart Welling (University of North Florida), David Whitley (Cambridge University)

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In 2006, *An Inconvenient Truth* made headlines and broke box office records with its dramatic analysis of global warming. But do “ecofilms” merely sell tickets and newspapers or can they actually mobilize their viewers for political change—and if so, which cinematic devices are effective? The Moving Environments workshop in July 2011 focused on precisely this question in bringing together scholars who have been actively examining how emotional and affective devices in film create meaning about the environment. Academics from the USA, Europe, and Australia gathered in Munich to present their diverse film readings and discuss theoretical cornerstones of ecofilm criticism.

The first panel, “Emotion, Cognition, and Ecocinema,” laid the groundwork for theories surrounding emotion and affect in films. **DAVID INGRAM**’s presentation, “Emotion, Affect, Cognition, and the Aesthetics of Ecofilm Criticism,” looked at cinematic emotion and affect from cognitivist, phenomenological, and Deleuzian perspectives. In his analysis of *Sleep Furiously*, the “least anthropocentric film” he has ever seen, Ingram expanded on these various theoretical considerations and argued for an aesthetic pluralism when analyzing what he called the “aesthetic register” in film in that not one style of film was deemed more effective—or affective—than another. **ALEXA WEIK VON MOSSNER** gave a presentation entitled, “Ecological Risk and Emotional Engagement in *The Age of*

*Stupid: A Cognitive Approach*,” in which she examined the ways in which ecological risk in film is presented. Climate change documentaries have played an important role in social and political debates on the topic as film both imagines risk and moves audiences. Yet, these documentaries are also confronted with a critical problem—how to best depict climate change—a problem whose consequences have not yet been fully realized. Weik von Mossner argued that Fannie Armstrong’s *The Age of Stupid* provides an interesting example as it establishes a strong cognitive link between current practices and future environmental problems. The discussion following these papers touched on issues such as the role of the audience in interpreting such films as well as the difference between art and Hollywood films in allowing for ecocritical readings.

In the second panel of the day, “Aesthetics, Affect, and Anthrobiogeomorphic Machines,” the presentations focused on the role of the senses and machines in film-making as well as on a meta-theoretical perspective for analyzing ecocritical messages in film. **SEAN CUBITT** in “Affect and Environment in Two Artists’ Films and a Video” analyzed several avant garde films from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s including *Dog Star Man* (1961-4) and *Wind Vane* (1972). His reading of these films considered technical aspects of the filmmaking process as well as the awareness of time in feature films versus avant garde films. In “The Anthrobiogeomorphic Machine: An Ecophilosophy of the Cinema,” **ADRIAN IVAKHIV** presented a framework that aims to encompass the moving image and the world at large—a process relational model of cinema. His theoretical perspective establishes the role of the viewers as a relational process and also offers insight into the three dimensions of the film world—the geomorphic, the anthropomorphic, and the biomorphic. Ivakhiv views his theory as an alternative to materialism, idealism, and dualism as it aims bring out the unique aspects of an ecological reading. Workshop participants then discussed the potentials and impacts of different technologies in film-making, especially with regards to using film or digital images; they also discussed the concept of ecophilosophy versus ecocinema and the uniqueness of movement in cinema and how this impacts their readings of films.

Following lunch, the discussions turned to the role of animals in ecofilms with the panel, “Anthropomorphism and the Non-Human.” **BART WELLING** took on one of the most popular forms of ecofilms—the animal documentary—with his presentation, “On the ‘Inexplicable Magic of Cinema’: Critical Anthropomorphism, Emotion, and the Wildness of Wildlife Films.” Welling exposed the constructed nature of many wildlife films which consciously aim to move their viewers by anthropomorphizing the animals—either on a superficial level, by subscribing human emotions to animals who mimic human gestures and expressions, or on an applied level, by theorizing about animal behavior in relation to human actions and emotions. In “Emotion, Non-Human Life, and Eco-Documentary: *Darwin’s Nightmare* and *The Cove*,” **BELINDA SMAILL** analyzed the role of emotions and their ability to confer value in two recent documentary films. According to Smaill, *The*

Cove constructs dolphins as “exceptional” animals which have a close relationship to humans and are therefore worthy of being saved. In contrast, *Darwin’s Nightmare* follows the story of the Nile perch which are depicted as having malevolently destroyed Lake Victoria and by extension the local communities which depend on the ecosystem for survival; the Nile perch serve as a metaphor for the social deterioration in the African communities. Smaill concluded that in both films animals are clearly being used to harness specific emotions and argued that viewers should consider the political ramifications of these types of documentaries. Following these presentations, participants discussed different rhetorical strategies for raising emotional connections to nature; the pros and cons of anthropomorphic film strategies; and the ethics and aesthetics of animal representation.

In the final panel of the first day, “Animal Rights and Eco-Extermination,” the theme of animal rights continued with another analysis of *The Cove* and *Darwin’s Nightmare* as well as a look at the representation of the buffalo in early Hollywood Westerns. **ROBIN MURRAY** in “Flipper? We’re Eating Flipper?: Documenting Animal Rights and Environmental Ethics at Sea” presented a contrasting analysis of *The Cove* and *Darwin’s Nightmare*. Murray concluded that *Darwin’s Nightmare* represented a wise use of environmental ethics and more effectively subverted anthropomorphism, but that *The Cove* was the only film that met its goal of causing widespread outrage and demands for change—precisely because it relied on anthropomorphic techniques to connect the viewers with the dolphins. By including violent scenes of slaughter, *The Cove* provided an emotional censure that, in Murray’s view, is missing in *Darwin’s Nightmare*. In a more historical analysis, **JOE HEUMANN** in “*The Last Hunt: An Exercise in Eco-Extermination*” looked at the depiction of buffalo annihilation in early Western films. He demonstrated how the buffalo represent an ideological conflict for the cowboys—they depend on the buffalo for their survival, yet the volume of killing as well as several overly violent scenes of mass buffalo annihilation serve as a form of critique for both the destruction of the buffalo as well as the systematic elimination of Native American tribes in the nineteenth century by the United States government. The diverse perspectives on dolphins, perch, and buffalo led to an animated debate on animal rights in terms of human rights—should all animals be treated equally to each other and to humans if all humans are not yet accorded the same rights?

The second day began with a panel, “Animation and Affect,” which turned the focus to animated feature films. In his paper, “Animation, Realism, and the Genre of Nature,” **DAVID WHITLEY** gave an in-depth reading of the relationship between the documentary *March of the Penguins* and the animated film inspired by this documentary, *Happy Feet*. Whitley explained how the *March of the Penguins* solves a crisis in nature by reconnecting it with innocence—in this case through the representation of the life cycle of the penguins as well as various “ceremonies of innocence” which rely on both symbolically pure landscapes (the ice) and the anthropomorphizing of penguin “rituals,”

such as the egg “dance” to transfer the egg from the female penguin’s feet to the male’s. The constructions in this documentary allowed for the development of *Happy Feet* which used the double fable of the main character, Mumble—who is both aligned with H.C. Anderson’s fairy-tale/fable of *The Ugly Duckling* and serves to create a new ecological moral narrative. In addition, the genre of the musical is also employed in order to allow humans and animals to communicate and heal the rift in nature that threatens the penguins’ existence. **PAT BRERETON’s** presentation, “Ecocinema and Affect: A Case Study of Pixar’s *UP* as a Smart Eco-Narrative,” continued in a similar strain as he analyzed the continuum between documentary and fictional affect and considered various techniques for keeping the environment at the center of a film. With his analysis of the animated film *UP*, Brereton focused on how Hollywood plays the “eco-game” in order to connect with the affective engagement of audiences; Brereton identified the eco-imaginaries in the film *UP*, but concluded by questioning whether audiences see the film as one about sustainability or rather merely a promotion of old-fashioned family values.

With the second panel of the day, “Affect and Place,” the focus shifted to both documentary and art film depictions of space and place. In “Moving Home: Remodeling and Remediating the New NOLA,” **JANET WALKER** presented a thorough analysis of post-Hurricane Katrina documentaries about New Orleans. Walker discussed the implications of such documentaries with regard to whether they honor the victims or serve to retraumatize those who lost their homes; she then presented one documentary, *Right to Return: New Home Movies from the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> Ward*, which was rhetorically organized as a social and ecological critique based on environmental justice, yet also depended on emotional appeals to support residents returning home at any cost. Her final conclusions considered how to deal with such emotional films that do not always advocate environmentally sound practices. In the second paper, “Moving Pictures about Standing Still: Irony, Immobility, and Place-Based Cinema,” **NICOLE SEYMOUR** began by stating that ecocinema is largely lacking in unserious modes and suggested that irony can play a large role in critiquing its “doomsday” aspects. In her analysis of two filmmakers who employ a thoroughgoing irony in their films, Seymour demonstrated how irony can function as a vehicle to represent and reflect on human-nature relationships. In addition, irony can ultimately have a serious impact; according to Seymour, it is often more politically revealing than the “gloom and doom” techniques used in a great number of ecofilms.

The final panel of the workshop, “Ecocinema and Indigenous People,” took an in-depth look at ecocritical representations of native communities across the world. In “Warm Smiles on Cold Ice: An Ecocritical Reading of Alaska Natives in Films,” **JOHANNA FEIER** analyzed how films set in the far north aim to create a rapport between the viewers and the Arctic; she demonstrated the para-

dox of the representation of the north as both pristine and uninhabitable. Feier considered three films which feature indigenous characters—in all three, she reads the indigenous people as “translators” for their culture. Through the depiction of those who live in these “unlivable” environments, the north and the Arctic have emotional connotations which allow the landscape to convey meaning and gain value. **ANGELA KREUTZ’s** presentation, “A Visual Representation of Children’s Emotional Relationship with Place,” summarized her current research project in an aboriginal community in Australia in which she has been studying emotional place relationships among children. By using multiple methods, including having the children work with video cameras, Kreutz has been able to chart the psychological domain of the children and their relationship to their community. Her final project will rely on a hypermedia presentation, rather than the classical written thesis, in order to avoid proscribing narratives, reach different audiences, and provide an honest and ethical representation. The discussion following these papers revolved around the role of landscape in film, the difference between emotion and affect, and animal-inspired viewpoints. In addition, the impact of digital literacy and access to technology was discussed in relation to its impact on hypermedia; finally the participants inquired about the emotional relationship to the technology itself to see how the children not only connected with their homes but the cameras as well.

In the concluding discussion, several of the major themes of the workshop were taken up by the participants, including methods for critically interpreting anthropomorphic devices, the distinction between fictional and documentary affect, and the pressing need for more empirical research in the field of cine-ecocriticism. In addition, participants discussed the larger role of ecocriticism and ecofilm, in particular with regard to interdisciplinary research and readings of films. The participants determined that it was important to position their research closely within affect and emotion research. Finally, the impact—specifically, the political impact—of ecofilms was considered: do these films motivate political change and if so, which techniques are most effective? The workshop concluded with the participants establishing the goals of 1) centralizing affect and emotion in analysis; 2) shifting the conversation in ecocriticism to providing negotiated responses to films; 3) debating the term of ecocinema itself; and 4) more closely aligning ecocritical film research with other disciplines.

-- Arielle Helmick