

INDIGENOUS ECO-VISIONS: THE ECOLOGICAL SENSIBILITIES OF FOURTH CINEMA

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Ethnographic cinema as a twentieth century EuroAmerican invention has played a significant part in telling the stories of indigenous people across the world (Columpar, Tobing-Rony, Huhndorf, Singer, Wood). Fourth Cinema, a product of the late twentieth century, is cinema *by* indigenous people (Barclay, Marubbio and Buffalohead; Raheja a and b, Schweninger, Singer). Maori filmmaker Barry Barclay defines Fourth Cinema as cinema controlled by Native communities on the “shore” as opposed to the “invaders” on “the ship’s deck” (Barclay 7). This definition highlights the activist role Fourth Cinema plays in indigenous political movements. By generating alternatives to the “invaders” ethnographic lens, Fourth Cinema becomes a means to counter a common history of indigenous people across the globe—that of the dispossession of their lands, culture, and traditional ecological knowledge systems.

I argue that understanding how indigenous people take (and/or are constrained from taking) the “camera in their own hands” (Barclay, 9) serves to enrich our understanding of environmental art and politics. Specifically, it enables us to address environmental scholarship’s recognition of “intersectionality”—the notion that race, gender, class, sexuality and other categories of social power structures influence ecological engagements (Pick and Narraway, 7). Keeping intersectionality in mind, this project considers the following key questions: How might engaging contemporary Fourth Cinema illuminate the eco-ethics and eco-aesthetics of communities that have long been sidelined, discriminated against, and often misrepresented in mainstream environmental discourse and action? What might we learn about the eco-potentials and struggles of Fourth Cinema efforts? Getting at the answers to these questions also enables us to consider cinema as “ecological machine”¹—how do its texts and contexts evoke understandings of indigenous, and more broadly, all human interaction with the material and symbolic worlds in which we are entangled?

As ecocinema studies burgeons as a field of inquiry (Ivakhiv; Gustaffson and Kaapa; Lu and Mi; Pick and Narraway; Rust, Monani, and Cubitt; Weik Von Mossner), a handful of ecocritical scholars have turned to Fourth Cinema as a potentially rich space for ecological insight (Adamson; Bozak; Monani; Monani and Brady). In *The Cinematic Footprint: Lights, Camera, Natural Resources* (2012), a treatise that investigates cinema’s material footprint, Nadia Bozak suggests that Fourth Cinema “points the way to cinema’s and Earth’s ecologically redemptive future” (15). Her claim is true for her example of the collective Inuit initiative, Isuma TV based in Nunavut, Canada, as this entity makes a self-conscious move to pay attention to “vital dimensions of sustainability” (192). However, the claim is bold if applied across the spectrum of all Fourth Cinema, which, as various scholars point to, is a broad array of film that engages indigeneity “by a plurality of means and to a variety of ends” (Columpar, xv; Wood; Marubbio and Buffalohead). Despite what Bozak seems to suggest not all Fourth Cinema is resource conscious (whether by choice and/or by necessity). Thus, unlike, Bozak, I hesitate to put the burden of ecological redemption on Fourth Cinema (or for that matter on any single categorized entity or group).

Despite these hesitations, I am nonetheless drawn to Bozak’s claim of Fourth Cinema’s potential in an ecologically redemptive future. Interviews with various indigenous filmmakers

¹ The idea of “ecological machine” first articulated by Adrian Ivakhiv in the “The Anthropogeomorphic Machine: Stalking the Zone of Cinema” (2011) is one that ecocinema studies embraces (see, for example, edited collections by Rust et al., Pick and Narraway, Weik von Mossner). The term suggests that cinema is both inescapably dependent on natural resources and through its unique audiovisual affect works to influence our imaginations, and potentially actions, towards the natural world. It implies cinema’s material and social embeddedness.

and critical engagement with their works at festival sites such as ImagineNATIVE in Toronto Canada, and the Smithsonian's Native Film and Video Center in New York City (Monani a, b, c, Monani and Brady) lead me to believe that Fourth Cinema often presents scenarios for possible alternatives to ecologically threatening EuroAmerican ideologies and practices. At the same time, there are complexities in how contemporary indigenous filmmaking engages, adapts, or resists EuroAmerican inscribed practices. The overall purpose of this project is to uncover some of the nuances of Fourth Cinema's eco-contours through an extensive and sustained focus on a variety of Fourth Cinema examples. In doing so, I hope to highlight indigenous eco-sensibilities that broaden and complicate any simple definition of ecological concern, indigenous identity, and political transformation.