
REVIEW ESSAY

**Cinema and the Emergence of the
Environmental Humanities***

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Adrian Ivakhiv, *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2013), 418 pp, \$38.99 (pbk), ISBN: 978-1-55458-905-0.

Bron Taylor (ed.), *'Avatar' and Nature Spirituality* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2013), 367 pp, \$38.99 (pbk), ISBN: 978-1-55458-843-5.

The books under review here are both included in Wilfred Laurier University Press's Environmental Humanities Series. Scholars working in the environmental humanities explore the ways that the disciplines of history, philosophy, aesthetics, religious studies, literature, theater, film, and media studies—informed by the most recent research in the sciences of nature and sustainability—are crucial to addressing the anthropogenic factors contributing to extreme weather-related events (drought, fire, hurricanes) that are increasing in number around the world, and to understanding the consequences of melting glaciers that are contributing to widespread displacement in island and coastal communities where sea levels are rising. This innovative series contributes to the widening

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influence of the environmental humanities by exploring how film, literature, television, web-based media, and visual arts can be sites crucial to wider understanding of lived and imagined human–nonhuman relationships and identities.

Both of these books focus on film. *Ecologies of the Moving Image* is a capacious and authoritative ecophilosophy of the cinema by ecocritical film studies scholar and professor Adrian J. Ivakhiv. *Avatar and Nature Spirituality* is an edited collection by professor of religion and nature Bron Taylor that raises questions about the role of spirituality and film in raising awareness about the increasingly rapid environmental changes occurring in this time that a growing number of scientists are referring to as ‘the Anthropocene’. Both books intersect in their analyses of the highest-grossing blockbuster film to date, James Cameron’s *Avatar*; however, neither can be reduced simply to its analysis of this single film.

That said, it is exactly this distinctive point of intersection at which, in only a very few words, a reviewer can point to the individual and combined strengths of each book. But first, a quick disclaimer: because of my own scholarship on *Avatar*, which Bron Taylor discusses at length in his Epilogue, I was asked to write a back-cover blurb for *Avatar and Nature Spirituality* and provided a positive one. In rereading the book for *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, I now see even more clearly the ways in which Taylor’s work and that of his contributors are richer and more satisfying for having been informed by Adrian Ivakhiv’s research on cinema and the work that cinema *does* in the world. A paired reading of these two books makes clear why the editors published them in the same year and found them such a good fit for the series.

In his Prologue, Taylor, known for his formulation of the concept of ‘dark green religion’, or non-theistic forms of religion, and for his examination of the spiritual, ethical, and political dimensions of grassroots environmental movements, states that the aim of his work in the collection was to bring together a group of scholars who could gauge the cultural and spiritual significance of a film that is recognized not only as the highest-grossing blockbuster film of all time but for having created a community of fans so large that it might be described as a type of grassroots movement that needed further study if its reach and influence were ever to be understood. Given that *Avatar* has been controversial and even infamous for being dismissed by so many critics even before they viewed the film (because of its rumored ‘white messiah’ and ‘indigenous princess’ themes), Taylor wanted to know why this film was garnering so much attention among its ever-growing audience.

By taking the measure of the affective impact and the widely different and contrary conversations surrounding *Avatar*, Taylor and his contributors help to establish how the humanities, arts, and media play a key role in twenty-first-century understandings of human relationship to other species and to diverse environments. The chapters in this collection do not merely survey the critics or the responses to the film that typically appear in the press. Many of the chapters are based on fieldwork among diverse fans and communities of filmgoers. Contributors conduct their research in specific communities, such as Hawaii, or in open Internet forums dedicated to *Avatar*, or among film-goers who describe themselves as conservative or left-wing or US military personnel. Taylor is also interested in the film's reception among indigenous groups. Here, he references my essay, 'Indigenous Literatures, Multinaturalism, and *Avatar*', which offers evidence for the surprising and complex reasons why many indigenous and multi-ethnic groups, from South America to Africa, all under the pressures of egregious exploitation of their lands and resources, raised *Avatar* like a red flag to draw attention to extractive activities in their regions and used the film as a recruitment instrument to draw allies as diverse as documentary filmmakers, rock stars, international human-rights agencies, and NGOs to their causes (Adamson 2012). Taylor also draws the views of respected indigenous film critics such as Julie Good Fox and Daniel Heath Justice into his discussion. These critics do not dismiss the film based on superficial readings of 'Indian princesses' but delve into the film's complexities and contradictions. Indeed, Justice contributes a thoughtful Afterword to the collection that sums up what he considers to be the 'legacies' of *Avatar*. Each of these chapters suggests that one of the most important outcomes of popular films such as *Avatar* can be creating opportunities for people to come into innovative alliances around social justice, environmental, economic, political, ethical, and spiritual issues that have weighty import in ongoing struggles over how humans live now on their home planet and how they will imagine alternative and possibly more just futures.

In *Ecologies of the Moving Image*, Ivakhiv also considers the powerful effects and affects of *Avatar* as he explores how realistic it is to expect any concrete societal or environmental outcomes from 'fandom'. Audiences, he insists, recognize science fiction films set on other planets for what they are: fantasy. Not many people will walk out of the theater with the conviction that we must, say, find another planet and move there. Clearly, the more urgent aim of Ivakhiv's research is to build a theoretical framework for understanding the power of cinema both to reveal 'the world' and to create new ways of seeing that world. As he writes in his Foreword, cinema—the art of the moving image—comes closest to

depicting reality because it is always in motion, always in the process of becoming. This theme—that movement and moving images ‘produce worlds’ by making imaginative alternatives available to us while at the same time re-constituting the world itself because they provide new images, sounds, and symbols, and thus new ways to think about ‘reality’—is the larger goal of this analysis.

In the sixth chapter, Ivakhiv smartly suggests that a film is not only what happens between the dimming and turning up again of the lights, it is also about what might happen among fans in their discussions, dreams, and lives. In some cases, fandom can have an effect. Some fans have walked out of *Avatar* feeling good about something that can be found on *this* planet, or feeling that their struggles—for instance, against mining companies in India or Peru or against Israeli occupation of the Occupied Territories—are mirrored by the Na’vi struggles against the kind of corporate Empire depicted in *Avatar*. Ivakhiv concludes that while some films, including *Avatar*, may grossly oversimplify the world’s complex political dynamics, they may also present ‘opportunities for activists to stake their own cases’ and moreover, that ‘fandom, once triggered, may set off on its own trajectories’, which may include turning viewers into something more, perhaps individuals or members of groups that might seek to propel beneficial change in the world (2013: 294).

However, as already noted, *Ecologies of the Moving Image* cannot be reduced to its reading of one film. Indeed, Ivakhiv’s grasp of ecocinema as a body of work is truly impressive. It would be hard to find a film with any hint of an environmental theme that he does not mention and discuss. His analysis moves seamlessly from Cooper and Schoedsack’s *King Kong* (1933, RKO Radio Pictures), Trumbull’s *Silent Running* (1972, Universal Pictures), Fleischer’s *Soylent Green* (1973, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer), Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977, Columbia Pictures), Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* (1979, Mosfilm), and Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982, Warner Brothers), to Stanton’s *Wall-E* (2008, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures) and Malick’s *The Tree of Life* (2011, Fox Searchlight Pictures). As the subtitle of the book suggests, a central point of Ivakhiv’s argument is that ecocinema *does things*. Films with themes that are ‘environmental’ are capable of becoming ‘affectively generative’ in their capacity to elicit heightened perceptions about human ‘orientation to the socio-ecological’ (2013: 300). To explain what films do and how they are capable of literally changing a viewer’s affect, Ivakhiv draws primarily on the theories of Whitehead and Peirce (with Deleuze and Guattari, Heidegger, Bergson, Latour, and others in the background) and builds on the work of film theorists like Cubitt, Zizek, Shaviro, and others. His purpose is to account for the ways cinema moves viewers in ways that

reshape their imaginative worlds, their understandings of themselves, their lives, and their relations with the physical Earth and cosmos.

Both Ivakhiv's and Taylor's books and a growing number of other publications in the environmental humanities are strongly supporting the growth of extensive global networks that are emerging in the US, UK, Australia, China, India, Korea, Scandinavia, and Taiwan to explore how humanists will work across the disciplines to solve the complex problems facing humans in the Anthropocene. Nurtured first by the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) and the Australian Academy for the Humanities, and more recently by the International Social Science Council and the Consortium for Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI), these organizations are becoming the 'spokes' of global research 'hubs' that are employing innovative new forms of the humanities (digital, public) as an imaginative force for thinking about the ongoing evolutionary transformations of the world and its inhabitants (Braidotti et al. 2013; Nye et al. 2013: 22-28).

Both Ivakhiv's and Taylor's books prove the value of a series focused on the Environmental Humanities. Both focus on the affective impacts and real world effects of ecocinema as they pursue the mission set by the series editors to explore the grand questions that have always been at the center of the humanities, including, 'who we think we are, how we relate to others, and how we live in the world' (Wilfred Laurier University Press 2013).

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