

# Rhetoric of Ecology in Visual Culture

## Retoryka ekologii w kulturze wizualnej

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### Cinema and Environment: The Arts of Noticing in the Anthropocene

#### Kino i środowisko: sztuka uważności w antropocenie

#### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to raise questions about how cinema can allow us to rethink our relationship with the environment in the context of what is known today as the Anthropocene. In the discussion, I chart the current debates about the ecological in the humanities, with a particular focus on new materialisms, to argue that cinema can be fruitfully thought of as part of what anthropologist Anna Tsing (2015) calls the “arts of noticing”. I then turn to a consideration of the potential influx of affect theories on ecocriticism and film studies, before sketching out possible approaches to studying film from an affective, new materialist and postanthropocentric perspective. These approaches might have wider implications for rhetorical perspectives on cinema, especially for those investigating emotional appeals.

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest podjęcie refleksji na temat tego, w jaki sposób kino może pozwolić nam przemyśleć nasze relacje ze środowiskiem w kontekście antropocenu. W artykule nakreślono aktualne debaty na temat ekologii toczone w obrębie humanistyki, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem nowych materializmów, w celu wykazania, że film może być rozumiany jako „sztuka uważności” (Tsing 2015). Następnie omówiono wpływ teorii afektu na ekokrytykę i filmoznawstwo, po czym wskazano na możliwe kierunki w badaniach filmoznawczych z perspektywy afektywnej, nowomaterialistycznej i postantropocentrycznej. Podejścia te mogą być przydatne dla badań nad retoryką filmu, zwłaszcza dla rozważań nad „odwoływaniem się do emocji” (*emotional appeals*).

#### Key words

cinema, affect, environment, aesthetics, Anthropocene, new materialisms  
kino, afekt, środowisko, estetyka, antropocen, nowe materializmy

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## **Cinema and Environment: The Arts of Noticing in the Anthropocene<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

Raising ecological awareness has become one of the most pressing issues of the twenty-first century. There is more than sufficient empirical data that confirm the correlation between the current state of the planet and the global nature of advanced capitalism, all the more pronounced during the present COVID-19 pandemic: the rapid increase of human population, species commodification, waste accumulation, toxic pollution, plastic contamination in oceans, rapid deforestation and loss of biodiversity, dubbed “the sixth extinction” (Kolbert 2014) due to its breath-taking magnitude, as well as global warming caused by the anthropogenic carbon dioxide emissions, which leads to increasing numbers of refugees and wars fought over depleting resources. The scholarly debates about the socio-economic roots of the environmental crisis have intensified in the last decade, often under the term “Anthropocene”, proposed by atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen and limnologist Eugene Stoermer to define a new geological epoch determined by the influence of human behaviour on earth’s ecosystems, and now readily embraced by philosophers and cultural theorists, who have redefined and problematized it in various ways. As Crutzen and Stoermer stated in their oft-quoted 2000 article, “mankind will remain a major geological force for many millennia, maybe millions of years, to come” (2000, 18). Since then, it has been argued that this understanding of the Anthropocene, and perhaps to an even greater extent of universal mankind, renders invisible asymmetries of existing power structures, as well as different degrees of responsibility and vulnerability (Chakrabarty 2009, Nixon 2011, Alaimo 2016, Yusoff 2018, Oppermann 2018). Other terms have been suggested in its place, such as Capitalocene or Plantationocene (Moore 2016, Haraway 2016) – to underscore distinct temporalities of exploitation built

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around colonial and capitalist processes of accumulation and dispossession – and, somewhat jokingly, Chthulucene (Haraway 2016)<sup>2</sup> – to articulate a more creative, speculative proposal, that would “make possible partial and robust biological-cultural-political-technological recuperation and recomposition” in the earth that is “full of refugees, human and not, without refuge” (Haraway 2016, 100-101). Rather than more scientific reports on human-caused devastation that reaffirm human exceptionalism, or apocalyptic tales of ecological catastrophes (Žižek 2010), what we need, as Donna Haraway suggests, are new “stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections” (Haraway 2016, 101).<sup>3</sup> That is, we need novel ways of thinking of, and imagining, our contact with the nonhuman, or even to dissolve the categorical divide between the human and the nonhuman.

The present article stems from these debates, while taking into consideration the critiques of the discourse on the Anthropocene. It aims to reflect on how contemporary cinema can allow us to rethink our relationship with the environment, by framing this question within the recent discussions on the ecological in the humanities, with a special emphasis on the lines of research in environmental humanities, critical posthumanisms, and new materialisms that propose new understandings of the relationship between humans and their nonhuman environment (Alaimo 2010, Barad 2007, Bennett 2010, Braidotti 2013, Haraway 2016, among others).<sup>4</sup> It articulates these discussions in relation to film theory and through the concept of affect,<sup>5</sup> which I argue opens up space for redirecting current debates within studies on cinema and environment. With a focus on what

2. In the context of media theory, it is also worth mentioning Jussi Parikka's *The Anthroscene* (2014), which addresses, among other issues, the mass extraction of rare metals and minerals with which new technologies are made. Parikka's work points to the wider ecological call for rendering visible the invisible – here the invisible is understood specifically as what is “obscene” or put “off scene”, including, for example, the colonial and neo-colonial infrastructures of toxic waste, which is always placed elsewhere, beyond our western eyes.

3. See also the concept of “Phonocene”, coined by the philosopher and ethologist Vinciane Despret as part of an immersive creation premiered in October 2020 for the opening event of Open City Thinking Biennale in Barcelona: <https://www.cccb.org/en/multimedia/videos/the-planets-voices/234586>.

4. As Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino observe (2018), “materialism is not exactly ‘new’ to ecocriticism, though it has taken on greater significance in recent years as new materialist projects develop” (7). New materialisms are associated with a series of publications appearing in the late 2000s that have shown a renewed interest in the agency of the matter and challenged the anthropocentric binary of “dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings)” (Bennett 2010, vi). Other key publications include Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), Diana Coole and Samantha Frost's *New Materialisms* (2010) and Stacy Alaimo's *Bodily Natures* (2010). The works of Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway have also been fundamental in the so-called material turn in ecocriticism. New materialisms have been, to date, primarily concerned with the written word, for example, works by Franz Kafka, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman or Ursula K. Le Guin. See Tobias Skiveren's (2020) exploration of the role of fictionality in this field. This paper, in turn, seeks to deepen new materialisms' aesthetic potentialities by applying their propositions to the realm of the cinematic. It also has theoretical affinities with current interest in the conjunction between cinema, meteorology and atmosphere (McKim 2015), as well as the long-standing debates on landscape in cinema (Lefebvre 2006).

5. There are several theoretical orientations to affect in film and media studies, with a slightly different set of concerns and methodologies. These include, among others, phenomenologies and post-phenomenologies of embodiment (Sobchack 1992, Barker 2009, Hansen 2015); theories of the haptic (Marks 2000) and (post-)cinematic affect (Shavriro 1993 and 2011, Del Río 2008) that draw on Deleuze; or approaches building on cognitive science in which embodiment and the affective dimensions of cinematic response play central roles (Plantinga 2009, Weik von Mossner 2017).

Alexa Weik von Mossner (2017) terms “affective ecologies”, I set out to explore cinema’s capacity to both convey the several crises we face today and to question hegemonic imaginaries of the Anthropocene by blurring the binary oppositions that, in spite of its promising contradictions, still underpin its discourse: human/animal, life/matter, subject/object, mind/body or culture/nature.

This paper is written from the initial stages of a research project that is in its earliest development;<sup>6</sup> therefore, its aim is not to provide conclusions, but to elicit the project’s preliminary questions and to contribute to the debate about the possibilities brought about by the adoption of affect in the context of scholarship on cinema and environment. In particular, its primary interests are in 1) how cinema can help us resituate in the Anthropocene and what film forms (in terms of narrative forms, genres, modes or aesthetic devices) respond to this climatic, social, and cultural reality 2) how the human and the nonhuman – conceived of as objects, landscapes, plants, animals, minerals, energy, flows, atmospheres, weather, and so on – are represented onscreen and how cinema makes their interacting agencies visible 3) how ecofilms affect us on a sensorial and cognitive level and what methodological tools and approaches can help us study them. The project’s point of departure, then, can be summarized in two critical concerns: on the one hand, the cinema’s formal capacity to destabilize the foundational dichotomies of the Anthropocene, and on the other, the discursive and affective impact of such representations.

Raising questions about cinema, affect, and ecological relatedness might have far-reaching implications for rhetorical perspectives on film. In *The Eloquent Screen*, Gilberto Perez considers film rhetoric as a meeting place for aesthetics and social concerns: “whereas poetics looks at the work and its construction, and the study of reception looks at the audience and its response, rhetoric looks at the way construction elicits response and the way the work works on the audience” (2019, xix). As Aristotle argued, we can be persuaded by evidence (logos), by the authority of the speaker (ethos), and by the emotional appeal (pathos), the rhetorical principle of *movere*. Cinema relies on all three modes of persuasion but, as Weik von Mossner suggests, the “filmic medium’s unique ability to appeal to the emotions might in the end be its greatest rhetorical strength” (2012, 157). Classical rhetoric’s concern with the centrality of emotion and identification to persuasion is relevant to the current considerations of how movies work on their viewers within both affect theory and ecocinematic frameworks. As Kenneth Burke (1966) argues, in his reflections on modern rhetoric, all persuasion rests on identification, and he notably extends this notion beyond personal or psychological

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6. For further information about the project and research group, see <https://www.ub.edu/adhuc/en/research-projects/cinema-and-environment-affective-ecologies-anthropocene>.

identification. His enlarged conception of identification can be correlated with film studies' interest in what films do to the viewers, how they move them or even move them to action. In effect, it could be argued that rhetorical perspectives, understood not in the dismissive, common sense as biased or motivated, but rather as focusing on "problems of appeal in the broadest sense" (Blakesley 2007, 2), are implicitly interwoven throughout the various film theories, especially those concerned with identification, as evidenced by feminist, psychoanalytic, and phenomenological approaches. This leads David Blakesley to argue that "film rhetoric – the visual and verbal signs and strategies that shape film experience – directs our attention in countless ways, but always with the aim of fostering identification and all that that complex phenomenon implies" (2007, 3). Taking a cue from phenomenological and cognitive frameworks, he observes that film identification goes beyond identification with the characters on screen; it is "more than merely imaginary, but has a physical, bodily basis as well" (7). Such an understanding of identification can be fruitful for ecological approaches to the moving image, especially when combined with affective ecocriticism as articulated in new materialisms, as I will show in due course. In turn, an affective and new materialist understanding of cinema can enrich the rhetorical analysis of emotional appeals in film on many levels. First, it can redirect the scholars' attention to the fictional films, which have been somewhat underrepresented in rhetorical studies, mainly concerned with the use of rhetoric in non-fiction films and documentaries. Second, with its focus on affect, this perspective can displace the rhetoric's customary emphasis on the role of logic and foster instead a much more explicit engagement with pathos (which until very recently has tended to garner only brief mention in rhetorical publications).<sup>7</sup> Finally, through its theorization of the identification with the nonhuman that relies on eco-cinematic affect, this approach can mitigate the anthropocentrism that has predominated in the analysis of rhetorical appeals.

In what follows, I chart the current debates about the ecology in the humanities to argue that cinema can be fruitfully thought of as part of what anthropologist Anna Tsing (2015) calls the "arts of noticing". I then turn to a consideration of the potential influx of affect theories on ecocriticism and film studies, before sketching out some possible ways of studying film from an affective, new materialist, and postanthropocentric perspective.<sup>8</sup> Rather than presenting a unique, coherent theoretical approach, I attempt to trace multiple paths for further exploration.

7. I thank Anna Bendrat for her helpful comments regarding rhetorical discussions of cinema and, in particular, for pointing out some of the gaps in the current rhetorical approaches to film. For a comprehensive overview of the scholarship on rhetoric and film, see the introduction to *The Terministic Screen* (Blakesley 2007).

8. In this article, I understand "post" in "postanthropocentric" or "posthuman" not as the end of humanity (in a sense of temporality, what comes *after* the human), but rather as indicating the historical constructedness of the category of the "human". See also Segarra (2021, 140).

## The arts of noticing

Any project needs to start with a careful consideration of its key concepts. In the context of what has been dubbed the Anthropocene, as noted earlier, itself a thorny term, the notion of “environment” has acquired additional complexity, not least because of its long-standing exclusion from human affairs. Media scholar Sean Cubitt (2019) argues “against environmentalism”, observing that “*environment* presumes something that environs and something envired. It seems safe to presume that the only ones talking about enviring are human and that the environment is the nonhuman that surrounds them”. As Cubitt (2019) adds, the concept of ecology is equally problematic: in its demand for considering the world as “a condition where everything connects with everything else”, it assumes that “there are things to connect”. But, “the truth is”, he argues, “that there are only connections, and the connections produce the ‘things.’”

In his critique Cubitt is, of course, not alone. Such radical rethinking of the traditional ecological models based on the concept of “environment” – or, even more prevalently, “nature” – is shared by several posthumanisms, animal studies, and new materialisms, that often emerge from feminist, postcolonial, and queer perspectives. The latter have consistently shown a strong interest in the materiality of difference while rejecting the supposedly universal humanism that underpins the discourses on the Anthropocene (Braidotti 2013). As Stacy Alaimo reminds us, the concept of “nature” should always be approached with suspicion, given that “it has long been enlisted to support racism, sexism, colonialism, homophobia, and essentialisms” (2016, 11). Timothy Morton (2009) goes so far as to argue for “ecology without Nature”, capitalizing Nature precisely to denaturalize it. Alaimo and Morton are not the first scholars to challenge the Cartesian demarcation between nature and culture, or between subject and object (see an impressive body of work on the topic by ecofeminist thinkers, for example Val Plumwood’s [2002] important writings on anthropocentrism).<sup>9</sup> However, in their new materialist approach, nature and culture are not only seen as profoundly interconnected, but inextricably enmeshed: we humans are in “a vast, sprawling mesh” (Morton 2010, 8) with viruses, bacteria, parasites, pollution and waste, on nano and hyper scales – an idea that is also conveyed in Haraway’s (2016) understanding of naturecultures and sympoietic being-with. Significantly, both Morton and Haraway underline the queer quality of human/nonhuman encounters, or, as Haraway (2016) puts it, of making kin, thus extending the notion of kinship not only beyond patriarchal heteronormativity (Butler 2002), but also beyond the species divides.<sup>10</sup>

9. See also *Par-delà nature et culture* (2005), written by Philippe Descola, a French anthropologist whose work influenced Haraway, among other thinkers.

10. In his “queer ecology” Morton calls for an intimate acceptance of “uncanny familiarity” and “erotics of coexistence”. He writes: “Loving the strange stranger has an excessive, unquantifiable, nonlinear, ‘queer’ quality” (2010, 79). Haraway (2016), in turn, advocates for making kin as “oddkin”.

Sometimes with the help of references to quantum physics,<sup>11</sup> the project of material ecocriticism sets out to rewrite the nature of “nature”, and the attendant understandings of agency that in western tradition tend to assign activity to human subjects and passivity to nonhuman objects. Jane Bennett’s influential argument for “a more *distributive* agency”, as a part of a larger call for dissolving “the onto-theological binaries of life/matter, human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic” (2010, ix-x, emphasis in original), points to ethico-political underpinnings of this endeavour: “Such a newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression, but it can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relationships” (13). Bennett’s “vital materialist theory of democracy” (108) is of interest for film scholars, who drawing on her critical apparatus have now begun to address cinema’s non-hierarchical attention to the interconnections across species (see McMahon 2014 and 2019).

In a similar critical move, and through her notion of trans-corporeality, that is, “the material interconnections between body, substance, and place” (2016, 77), Alaimo conjures an ethics of “*matter (or the matter)*” (2010, 2), which in her thinking encapsulates both concern and wonder. Karen Barad’s (2007) concept of “intra-active becoming”, the mutual constitution of entangled agency, is key in Alaimo’s articulation of her environmental ethics that “refuses to see the delineated shape of the human as distinct from the background of nature, and instead focuses on interfaces, interchanges, and transformative material/discursive practices” (2010, 142). While Alaimo looks at how works of fiction (initially literature) can help us become more attentive to the vulnerability of material bodies in an increasingly toxic ecology of invisible dangers, one can infer that cinema, and media more generally, constitutes a particularly useful means of capturing and imagining such trans-corporeal toxicities, that often happen below or beyond human-scaled perception (we could think, for instance, of how the *Chernobyl* TV mini-series has made the forces of radiation perceptible, employing a set of aesthetic strategies to mobilize a deeply affective experience, allowing the viewers to imagine “what it *feels like* to inhabit the atmospheres of contamination” [Nicolai Skiveren 2020, 72]). For Alaimo, noticing, or affectively identifying with, instances of one’s embeddedness in a world of trans-corporeal forces and relational interdependencies necessarily entails scale shifting, with all its ethical ramifications. Such retraining of attention questions the dominant discourses on the Anthropocene for, as Alaimo argues, “whatever the ‘anthro’ of the ‘anthropocene’ was, is, or will be, the anthropocene must be thought with the multitude of creatures” (2016, 143).

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11. See especially Karen Barad’s *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), which has greatly influenced material ecocriticism.

Alaimo's understanding of trans-corporeality in terms of affect, aesthetics, and ethics is resonant with Rosi Braidotti's ethical subject of "sustainable becoming" articulated in her posthuman philosophy,<sup>12</sup> as well as her Spinoza-inspired call for a *zoe*-centred egalitarianism: "a materialist, secular, and generative response to the opportunistic trans-species commodification of life that is the logic of advanced capitalism" (2013, 60). Braidotti's *zoe*-centred approach – where *zoe* refers to a dynamic, productive and immanent force that bypasses previously separated species and things – involves a recognition of "the constitutive affective ability of all entities to affect and be affected, to interrelate with human and non-human others" (2019, 169). This is not to suggest, as Haraway reminds us, "undifferentiated universal relatedness" (2016, 217), as "nothing is connected to everything; everything is connected to something" (31). What is more, our entanglements with the nonhuman are not necessarily harmonious: they can be intimate but also distant, at once risky and convivial, joyful and cruel, and above all, unpredictable.

Haraway's earlier reflection on entangled agencies of animals and humans in *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003) leads her to propose a praxis of care and response, conveyed in the hyphenated notion of "response-ability", which entails avoiding an "unprecedented looking away" (2016, 35). Crucially, Haraway links such praxis to the senses and not only accountability. More than compassion and emphatic relation – understood as an inner psychological state or a product of human intentionality, which necessarily presupposes hierarchy – care makes reference here to an open-ended practice, or possibility, that dissolves hierarchies between humans and the environment, and fractures "humanistic", and indeed paternalistic, ways of thinking implied in the idea of "caretaking". As Verena Conley argues in "The Care of the Possible", care encompasses the multiplicity of meanings, ranging from human anxiety, worry and struggle for survival to "solicitude – a caring for the earth and other human beings" (2016, 342).<sup>13</sup> It stands in opposition to neoliberal subject that, in the face of "worldwide peril", would respond "I could care less" (341). As Conley thinks through these issues, drawing on the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari that inspired the work of ecological thinkers like Bennett or Braidotti, among others,<sup>14</sup> she links care to sensation, matter, attentiveness, event, and affect (341), the latter understood not as individualized emotion, but rather, in a Spinozist fashion, as the increase or decrease in capacities for action, extended to the affective bodies of animals,

12. Braidotti understands "sustainable becoming" as practicing "a humble kind of hope, rooted in the ordinary micro-practices of everyday life: simple strategies to hold, sustain and map out thresholds of sustainable transformation" (2006, 278). Alaimo is, as she points out, less hopeful and more critical of the term "sustainability" (2016, 2).

13. More positive senses of care also include "having an inclination" or "fondness for", which brings to mind Adriana Cavarero's (2016) work on "unbalanced inclinations", as opposed to the stubborn verticality of the modern subject.

14. Other theorists addressed in the article are Brian Massumi, Isabelle Stengers, Mark Hansen and Jussi Parikka.

plants, and minerals (Bennett 2010, Braidotti 2013). Care, importantly, also entails “creative fabulation” (Conley 2016, 348), that is, producing new affects, perceptions, and sensitivities, often facilitated by technologies that can enhance our perceiving. This is vital because, as media ecocritics argue (Cubitt 2019, Hansen 2015), it is increasingly through media, cinema included, that the world is *sensed*. In other words, our affective relationships with the nonhuman are largely shaped and mediated by our engagement with technologies.

It is this understanding of care and the ethics of care that is also conveyed in Tsing’s (2015) concept of “arts of noticing”, put forward in her examination of the relationship between capitalist devastation and collaborative survival, and which the anthropologist understands as reorienting our attention “to other sites of promise and ruin” (18) by watching, sensing, and telling stories. Listening to and telling “a rush of stories” – which can never be “neatly summed up”, as their “scales do not nest neatly” (37) – implies “comb[ing] through the mess of existing worlds-in-the-making, looking for treasures – each distinctive and unlikely to be found again, at least in that form” (255). Like stories, so central to new materialist thinking, films can also work as “amplifiers” and “sensitizers” (Neimanis 2017, 59) that increase our attunement towards the world and our own posthuman becomings. With this in view, rather than raising ecological awareness, or “caring for an environment” (Bennett 2010, 111) in a traditional environmentalist sense, what is at stake here is an aestheticoethical paradigm (Guattari 2000), in which responsibility is a way of being attentive to “what can be prevented and, in the same gesture, to what can be invented” (Conley 2016, 352). If care and noticing are the opposite of *disregard* (a word that in its root points to the scarcity of look and concern), then one can ask how cinema, through its technical production of noticing, can put us into contact with the world, less to look *after* it than to relate and creatively engage *with* it.

In dialogue with these wider debates in the humanities, film studies has become increasingly concerned with understanding cinema as a vehicle for attending to the worlds beyond the anthropocentric or, as I argue building on Tsing (2015), as a realm that can cultivate “the arts of noticing”. This has materialized in a systematic theorization of different forms of ecocinema that defy the dominant watching habits and shift our perspective “from a narrow anthropocentric worldview to an earthcentered, or ecocentric, view” (Willoquet-Maricondi 2010, 46). Ecologically oriented approaches to cinema, especially those applied to experimental, independent, or “slow” films (De Luca and Barradas 2016), often reference Bazinian realism and Deleuzian time-image, two frameworks which seem particularly fitting for addressing the realm of the nonhuman, given their focus on non-hierarchical, and thus, potentially non-anthropocentric opening to the world (Pick 2011; McMahan 2019). With their call to consider new modes

of perception and affective attunement with the nonhuman (MacDonald 2004 and 2013), which can inspire care and concern (Willoquet-Maricondi 2010, 45), writings on ecocinema resonate deeply with new materialist reimaginings of non/human entanglements, as well as their concomitant considerations of attention, affect and noticing. Meanwhile, the burgeoning scholarship on cli-fi<sup>15</sup> and eco-disaster films, as well as ecotopian and ecodystopian texts more broadly, shows that Hollywood genres can also convey, and often problematise, environmental concerns. Challenging an overemphasis on cinematic techniques such as slow pacing and the long take as a “naturalized” form of ethical signification (Landreville 2019), several scholars highlight the affective potential of popular cinema for fostering ecopolitics, in both cognitive and affective terms.<sup>16</sup>

Although some film forms seem to open themselves to environmental concerns, and thus ecocritical analyses, more readily than others, in fact, as the breadth of the current ecocinema research demonstrates, any film can be read from an ecocritical perspective. The growing interest in these issues in film studies is attested to by the proliferation of concepts: in addition to ecocinema, these include climate trauma cinema (Kaplan 2016), eco-trauma cinema (Narine 2018), Anthropocenema (Kara 2016), and more recently, Haraway-inspired Chthulucinema (Uy and Brown 2020).<sup>17</sup> Rather than adding to these monikers, in what follows I propose to develop a conceptual framework that would allow for looking at cinema from an affective, new materialist and postanthropocentric perspective. Following on from John Landreville – who, in turn, draws on Lauren Berlant (2011) – ecocinema can be understood as “a pedagogy of worldly reciprocity” (2019, 4), which can imply both de-anthropocentric relatedness and de-anthropocentric withdrawal. In his illuminating analysis of Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life* (2011), which moves beyond the durational, contemplative approaches that have predominated in ecocinematic filmmaking, Landreville addresses the modes of attunement and

15. The term cli-fi makes reference to a loose genre that encompasses different media, such as literature, comics, film and television. Susanne Leikam and Julia Leyda usefully observe in their reflection on the current development of cli-fi within American Studies that, although tales of human interaction with nature and of changing climates date back to Native American creation stories and Greek mythology, cli-fi “sets itself apart from this large corpus of texts through its foregrounding of the human causation of climate change, its comprehensive engagement with the catastrophic result, and [...] the less spectacular, but equally harmful, structural, social, and environmental injustices inherent in anthropogenic modifications of the global climate famously termed ‘slow violence’ by Rob Nixon” (2017, 109-110).

16. See Ingram (2004) on environmentalism and Hollywood cinema; Carmichael (2005) on the Western; Brereton (2005) on the Western, road movies and science fiction; Rust and Soles (2014) on horror and O’Brien (2016) on the environmental sensibility of the New Hollywood. There is no agreement among scholars over the transformative potential of such films: whereas some criticize them as escapist or compensatory fantasies, others recognize that there is more ambiguity in how viewers can be inspired, and therefore, what counts as ecocinema (Rust and Monani 2013, 3). For instance, E. Ann Kaplan (2016) and Alexa Weik von Mossner (2017 and 2018) have shown how filming modes of storytelling in cli-fi, often relying on increased emotionalization, offer powerful ways of communicating climate change, and thus, potentially influence our behaviour. For a comprehensive overview of scholarship on ecocinema, see Rust and Monani (2013).

17. These terms mirror new designations in literary criticism, such as “climate change fiction, petrofiction, ecofiction, solarpunk, ecodrama, the risk novel, or Anthropocene fiction” (see Leikam and Leyda 2017, 111).

registers of reciprocity generated by camera movement and post-continuity editing, which delimit rather than enable “a deeper form of seeing” that is said to “disclose an authentic and otherwise occulted, “Nature”” (2019, 8). Such an opening to other cinematic techniques and visualities that foster a bodily, rather than purely visual, reciprocity with the world can be particularly fruitful for thinking about the nonhuman, especially when combined with theorizing our affective engagements with films, for example, through the much-discussed concept of affect.

### **Cinema and affective ecologies**

In *Atlas of Emotion*, Giuliana Bruno (2002) recalls that the Latin root of emotion links it to a moving force, as it stems from *emovere*, “an active verb composed of *movere*, ‘to move’, and *e*, ‘out’” (6). For its part, the etymology of the Greek word *kinema* (κίνημα), which encapsulates both motion and emotion, alludes to the cinema’s capacity to move, and crucially move us, “with its ability to render affects and, in turn, to affect” (7). Bruno employs the term “e(motion)” to refer to “the haptic affect of ‘transport’” (7) underpinning the viewing of the film, that is, the transference from one place to another. Likewise, in his process-relational account of cinema, *Ecologies of the Moving Image: Cinema, Affect, Nature* (2013), Adrian Ivakhiv conceptualizes the film experience as “a form of journeying” (2013, 8) that can inflect the viewer ecologically:

Cinematic moving images, through their melding of temporally sequenced visual display and sound, move us all the more forcefully. They take us on journeys – at least on metaphorical or metaphysical journeys – and through the movement they exhibit and elicit, they give shape to imagined or perceived worlds. Cinema is, in this sense, a form of world-production. In the process of creating worlds, films generate spaces of hereness and thereeness, a certain range of projected, potential, or experienced movements into and across those spaces, a certain set of optical, sensorial, and interperceptual relations, and a certain set of agential powers that relate, in some way, to our own power to act in the world. (23-24)

Cinema engenders new perceptual ecologies, and thus participates in worldbuilding. Considering films not so much for what they are as for what they do leads to several questions: What do particular films and their aesthetics do to the audience, how do they orient, disorient or reorient us, what do they make us feel? How do they take us on mental and affective journeys that reshape our understanding of life and death “on a damaged planet” (Tsing et al. 2017)? How do they reflect or challenge our complex relatedness to the nonhuman? What different relationships of cinematic identification, affinities, or embodiment do they create?

Alexa Weik von Mossner’s *Affective Ecologies* (2017), which examines the sensorial, emotional, and cognitive ramifications of environmental narratives

in American literature and film, is an important contribution to these debates. Her questions about the persuasive power of environmental narratives – that is, “how they invite us to care for human and nonhuman others who are put at risk” (3-4) – are, indeed, rhetorical questions. While Weik von Mossner’s theorization of affect is related to cognitive narratology and neuroscience, in consonance with the cognitive ecocritical approach that she proposes, her generative term of “affective ecologies” can be extended to other possible approaches within ecocriticism: as she herself points out, these include ecophenomenology, material ecocriticism, and ecocritical appropriations of affect theory (9). It is this enlarged understanding of affect that guides the present paper. In dialogue with the critical strands identified by Weik von Mossner, but applying these specifically to film studies, in what follows I delineate some other ways of addressing cinema from an ecological perspective, with a particular focus on what has been dubbed “the affective turn” in the humanities and social sciences (Clough 2007) and “the material turn” in ecocriticism (Iovino and Oppermann 2014).

There are several interrelated threads in the relatively simultaneous affective turn and the material turn as articulated in material ecocriticism. Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino argue that “while affect theorists have tended to prioritize affect within and in relation to bodies and to overlook the environment’s role in shaping it, ecocritics have too often neglected the affectivity of human bodies in their eagerness to champion greater attention to the more-than-human world” (2018, 3-4). Yet, in fact, both fields share a common ground: in line with affect theory, material ecocriticism underscores the processual nature of objects and environments, which are treated as “agents in generating and shaping affect”; in a similar way to the most recent strands in ecocriticism, affect theory “disrupts both discrete notions of embodied selfhood and static notions of environment” (8).

Indeed, affect theory, with its interest in flows between narratives, bodies, and environments, has much to offer to ecocriticism. Although often linked back to Raymond Williams’s (1977) concept of “structures of feeling”, today the notion of affect is frequently mobilized to address “those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), [...] those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and [...] the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves” (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 1). It is argued, especially in the Spinozist-Deleuzian line taken up by Brian Massumi (2002), that affect cannot be simply reduced to “discourse” or “emotion”, but rather goes beyond these categories. However, following feminist critiques of Massumi’s early work (2002), for example, those offered by Claire Hemmings (2005), Carolyn Pedwell and Anne Whitehead (2012), as well as Clara Fischer (2016), affect scholars have increasingly accentuated the

non-binary and fluid comprehension of the relationship between affect/emotion and thought/cognition. Though many of the affect scholars do not focus explicitly on environment, their key concepts and theories – Berlant’s (2011) cruel optimism, Heather Love’s (2007) feeling backwards, Sianne Ngai’s (2005) ugly feelings or Sara Ahmed’s (2006, 2010) queer phenomenology and “killjoy” emotions, to name only a few – seem to be particularly germane to ecocritical thinking, for example, through their consistent questioning of the subject/object divide or, as Bladow and Ladino note, through a shared postulate “to trace the trajectories of transcorporeal encounters that are intricate and dynamic” (2018, 8). And, I would add here, with their focus on “negative” and “dissident” affect(s) and sensibilities, they are particularly resonant with the critical project of queer ecology that unpacks normative sensibilities typically associated with environmentalism. “In addition to gloom and doom, [environmentalist sensibilities] include guilt, shame, didacticism, prescriptiveness, sentimentality, reverence, seriousness, sincerity, earnestness, sanctimony, self-righteousness, and wonder – as well as the heteronormativity and whiteness of the movement”, writes Nicole Seymour in *Bad Environmentalism* (2018, 4-5), arguing that not only seriousness, but also humour, irreverence, and dark irony can be useful for eco-activism.

Perhaps the closest to posthuman and postanthropocentric ecological thought are non-representational theories of affect proposed by geographers such as Ben Anderson (2009) or Nigel Thrift (2008), whose reflections on affective atmospheres, conceptualized as “spatially discharged affective qualities that are autonomous from the bodies that they emerge from, enable and perish with” (Anderson 2009, 80), appear especially environmentally oriented. For scholars like Berlant, who draw on this understanding of atmosphere, affect and aesthetics are crucial to grasping the conditions of the historical present (2011, 10). When read in the context of the current ecological crisis, Berlant’s argument for tracing “an emerging set of aesthetic conventions that make a claim to affective realism derived from embodied, affective rhythms of survival” is compelling, especially if such rhythms are extended beyond the anthropocentric. Aesthetics is for Berlant closely related to our experience of the world, as it allows us to “rehabilitate our sensorium by taking in new material” (2011, 12) – an argument which is deeply resonant with the critical strands in film studies that intersect, on the one hand, with affect theory, and on the other, with a phenomenological comprehension of the body.

The affective turn has proven highly generative in film studies, with its own critical methods and genealogies, from Deleuzian haptic visuality to phenomenological approaches to film experience drawn from the thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Focalizing on the affective dimension of film viewing, scholars like Vivian

Sobchack, Steven Shaviro, Laura Marks, Jennifer Barker, and Elena del Río have responded critically to the ocularcentric paradigm put forward by psychoanalytic and ideological film criticism, arguing instead for a somatic, embodied, and multi-sensory perception. While coinciding in some notable aspects – both Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze challenge deterministic understandings of the body as fully conditioned by the workings of cultural and social systems – the accounts of the cinematic experience based on these philosophies are underpinned by different models of movement and affect.<sup>18</sup> Notwithstanding the differences, all of these approaches stress “powers of relation and affection, whether these powers are referred to phenomenological ideas on reciprocity/reversibility between subject and object, or whether they are derived from the intense connectivity among bodies that characterizes a Spinozist/Deleuzian affective body” (Del Río 2008, 116), and in this sense, they can provide significant tools for thinking about the nonhuman in cinema. In particular, they open up a path to question the visual objectification of the environment and its nonhuman inhabitants, which – just like the female body in the classical cinema of Hollywood – have been relegated to the position of to-be-looked-at-ness (see Mulvey [1975], as well as John Berger’s [1980] reflections on “looking at animals”).

All of these considerations suggest that this is an opportune moment to enmesh material ecocriticism with affect studies and film theory more deliberately.<sup>19</sup> Sobchack’s discussion of the cinematic treatment of “modes of embodied existence” (1992, 5) and “carnal thoughts” (2004), Marks’s (2000) reflections on a tactile relationship between the viewer and the image that can displace the optical objectification, or Barker’s (2009) notion of kinaesthetic co-habitation based on her useful extension of the haptic mode of embodied spectatorship from skin towards musculature and the viscera, are all in tune with ecocinematic and new materialist call for sensuous aesthetics. Formulating film viewing in terms of modes of embodied spectatorship, affective connectivity or a phenomenological sharing of lived time seems apposite when addressing the nonhuman worlds, because it invites us to think about the film and the viewer’s body “as intimately related but not identical, caught up in a relationship of intersubjectivity and

18. As Elena del Río puts it, “while for Merleau-Ponty movement and affect are subjective phenomena arising out of an intentional and individuated rapport with the world, Deleuze regards the kinetic and the affective as material flows whose individuation and exchange do not rest upon subjectified intentions, but rather upon the workings of a nonorganic, anonymous vitality” (2008, 115).

19. Weik von Mossner observes: “while film scholars outside of ecocriticism have produced an impressive body of work on the emotional aspects of film viewing using psychoanalytic, phenomenological, Deleuzian, and cognitivist frameworks, there has been relatively little interest in these studies in the affective and emotional impact of cinematic representations of natural environments, which are often understood as a metaphor for interior psychic worlds or as backdrop for the development of character and narrative” (2014, 4). Her edited collection, *Moving Environments: Affect, Emotion, Ecology, and Film* (2014), sets out to redress this theoretical imbalance. For example, in his contribution to this book, David Ingram argues for a combination of cognitivist and phenomenological approaches in discussions of our engagement with ecocinema.

co-constitution” (Barker 2009, 12-13). Marks’s and Barker’s work on mimesis, as a form of yielding to, rather than dominating, the environment, comes close to a potentially ecological understanding of cinema and the moving image more generally. Likewise, the concept of cinematic affect (Shaviro 1993, 2010), for example, as applied to horror cinema and other “body genres” (Williams 1991, Clover 1992, Creed 1993), extends the comprehension of film experience beyond identification with the protagonists to encompass affective scenarios created by movements, sounds, spaces, colours, textures, and rhythms. This comprehension of film experience points not only to how cinematic worlds and viewers become with each other, but also, in Butler’s words, how they are “undone by each other” (2004, 19). In other words, we go to the movies not to validate, but rather to lose our identities, to realize that we are porous, vulnerable and “holed” (Segarra 2014).

This is not to say that ecocinema re-enacts “some universally haptic sense of the world that is registered as bodily flesh” (Berlant 2011, 197). Queer theory’s focus on *multiple* ways of being-in-the-world and, therefore, differences in our perceptive encounters with objects (and cinema), has challenged the existence of such “universal” structures. Bearing in mind these important considerations, one can nevertheless think of ecocinema as inviting the viewer to take up particular orientations towards the nonhuman beings, for example, by going beyond the dominant “ways of seeing” based on the subject/object divide. That is, as fostering not only looking *at*, but also looking *sideways* or, to use Libe García Zarranz’s (2020) evocative formulation, *feeling sideways*, which she understands, in the context of racialized queer and trans bodies, as a form of “sustainable affect”.

From this perspective, it would be tempting to celebrate sensory-driven cinema and tactile vocabulary as inherent to the sustainable, “caressing gaze” (Marks 2000), in contrast to the objectifying, optical viewing, epitomized according to some scholars by films such as *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* (2018), part of the transmedia Anthropocene Project which investigates human influence on the state of the earth. As Selmin Kara (2020) notes, this project leans on a visual rhetoric that reinstates a transcendental perspective in representation, what Haraway (1991) famously calls “the gaze from nowhere”, and thus perpetuates the binary opposition of nature and culture and its underlying power relations.<sup>20</sup> Yet it could also be argued that such distanced cinematic framing can offer an affective, rather than purely contemplative or transcendental, worldly resonance, or at the very least it prompts a de-anthropocentric/de-anthropocentralizing looking, if only by virtue of rescaling our perception. In other words, distance, like proximity, can also sharpen the viewers’ sensory awareness. Furthermore, I believe it is

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20. As Alaimo also argues, “prevalent visual depictions of the anthropocene emphasize the colossal scale of anthropogenic impact by zooming out – up and away from the planet” (2016, 145).

necessary to complement the affective/phenomenological/haptic frameworks with the multiple material-semiotic modes of interpretation to address questions of power and domination, which are always involved in any cinematic work. This critical move is motivated by the belief that, as Alaimo argues, “the immediacy of phenomenology [...] does not enable trans-corporeal mappings of networks of risk, harm, culpability and responsibility within which ordinary Western citizens and consumers find themselves” (2016, 3).

More important still, as Eugenie Brinkema (2014, xiv) argues, discussions of cinematic affect should not be divorced from those of form and representation. Though there is no space to elaborate on this in detail, reading for film form can involve addressing cinematic techniques such as the grammar of scale switching,<sup>21</sup> realized through the combination of extreme long shots with close-ups, which seems highly relevant given that matters of scale and perspective are so dramatically at stake in the Anthropocene (Alaimo 2016, Oppermann 2018); cinematic distribution of attention (Bennett 2010) through the composition of the frame, use of sound or extended durational formats; the use of dissolves as a form of non-anthropocentric merging of bodies and landscape (Alaimo 2016); highly mobile camerawork and fragmentary editing of post-continuity that engender reciprocity as a matter “not of grasping but of dwelling” (Cavell quoted in Landreville 2019, 3);<sup>22</sup> or techniques of digital cinema such as colour grading and special effects that contribute to the posthumanist visual aesthetic, for example, in sci-fi blockbusters that grapple with environmental and interspecies relationality (Uy and Brown 2020). This is not to imply a direct correlation between environmental concerns and a single, specific set of aesthetic devices or ecopoetics in film. Rather than proposing a taxonomy of “eco” tropes or stylistic features, it is more fruitful to address each film text according to its own particularities and, we might say, its moving ecologies – generic modes, the context of production, distribution, and reception, as well as formal questions such as mise-en-scène, framing, editing, and sound – and from there raise questions about how cinema can become a reflexive *and* affective tool that can open up space for imagining and being with/in the world.

### Final note

The ecological call “to stretch our modes and sites of awareness, sensitivity, and attachment” (Connolly 2013, 49) to the world by artistic, and more particularly

21. For example in films by Claire Denis (McMahon 2014), Andrea Arnold (Lawrence 2016 and Paszkiewicz 2021) or Kelly Reichardt (Chavez 2021).

22. See also Bowers (2018) on the new materialism of *Leviathan*, directed by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel (2012).

cinematic, means has become acute in the Anthropocene. This is not to argue for the cinema's inherently transformative potential. Traditionally considered as creating a sense of distance and control over what is being seen (be it women, racialized Others, landscape, animals, or plants), the cinematic apparatus can reinforce, rather than dissolve, anthropocentrism. In much the same way, film analysis, or, more specifically, reading for film rhetoric, can reproduce an anthropocentric interpretation of meaning making: the humans are the ones who are actively reading the nonhuman, the vitality of which is flattened on screen and often figured as a simple background for the human agency. However, as James Leo Cahill writes, "the cinema may be an anthropomorphic machine, but this does not necessarily make it an anthropocentric machine" (2013, 76). Indeed, as I have hoped to illustrate, films can "perform disanthropocentrically" (Alaimo 2016, 6), if only by prompting us to come to terms "with the fragility of things" (Connolly 2013, 12) and to "resist the ideological forces of disconnection" (Alaimo 2010, 142). This does not mean that by simply watching films we can restore our broken reciprocity with "nature" as a romanticised space of anti-modernity, or re-forge a more "authentic" relationship with the "environment". What is more, the depth and the obscurity (Parikka 2014) of entanglements between digital media, colonial histories of exploitation, neoliberalism, and ecological catastrophes should not be evacuated from the scene. Ultimately, a focus on the affective-ethical dimension of perception opens questions about how cinema can expand its visuality beyond the human and push anthropos off centre – questions which are central to this project.

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