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Editorial

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Editorial

Abstract

The editorial frames a special issue that introduces Scandinavian cinema and media scholars to ecomedia studies and its potentials.

Keywords

ecomedia, scandinavia, ecocinema, cinema

Disciplines

Environmental Sciences | Film and Media Studies

Post-print. “Ecocritical Approaches to Scandinavian Visual Media.” Special Issue of *The Journal of Scandinavian Cinema*, 8.2 (2018): 77-82.

Editorial

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Imagine a young girl – approximately 9 years old – and her father in the mid-1980s. In the tropical languor of early evening in a house in a city in India, they are watching Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal* (1958), their faces bathed in the ghostly light and shadow emanating from the small cathode ray television set (rabbit ear antennae askew). They went together to the local video store to rent the film, and from their expressions it is apparent that they are entranced by this iconic portrayal of a medieval Crusader knight inviting Death to a chess game to stall the inevitable.

Much has been written about Bergman, including in the pages of this journal (Holmberg 2014; Larsson 2015; Lunde 2014). One theme amongst many that film critics note is how the legendary filmmaker uses the natural environment as social allegory in his films. For example, in a 1983 *New York Times* article, Michiko Kakutani writes, ‘Bergman’s Sweden... is a country given to atavistic rhythms and quickly shifting moods; a country of short, brilliant summers and long winters of despair’ (Kakutani 1983). Such sentiments capture what Pietari Kääpä notes is a propensity by critics and scholars of Nordic cinema to evoke ‘direct correlations between nation and nature’

(Kääpä 2014: 10). Yet, as Kääpä also points out in his insightful *Ecology and Contemporary Nordic Cinema: From Nation Building to Ecocosmopolitanism*, such understandings of ‘nature’ or the role of the environment in Nordic cinema is limited and requires further scrutiny. He writes:

the connection between nature and national identity is not a ‘natural’ one or in any sense economically or environmentally sustainable. By this I mean that national identity—especially when it comes to nature—is a constructed notion that depends on a range of factors to do with the global economy, geopolitics, transnational cultural flow and domestic consideration.

(Kääpä 2014: 11)

Kääpä’s words bring us back to the opening image of the child and her father watching *The Seventh Seal* in 1980’s India. On its own, this brief image does not tell us anything about the constructed quality of national identity, or nature, for that matter. However, it does give us a sense of cinema’s play in the global economy and transnational cultural flow. Cinema scholars have long been interested in cinema’s role in constructions of nation and concomitantly, the transnational dimensions of film cultures. However, Kääpä is one amongst a recent and burgeoning group of scholars who have begun to critically consider how these constructions complexly interface with those of ‘nature’

Kääpä, thus, can be recognized as an *ecocinema studies* scholar. Ecocinema studies is part of a broader twenty-first-century move within the humanities to articulate critically engaged responses to the ecological crises of our current moment: ecocriticism. Climate change in the Arctic, the difficult negotiation between dependence on fossil fuel and environmental concerns, degradation of the ocean, threats to non-human species, challenges to indigenous lifeways, and not least, long-standing and enduring cultural

enmeshment in wild geographies, have led to a particular Nordic permutation of ecocriticism. As a result, since the beginning of the new millennium, Nordic interest in the study of environmental humanities has burgeoned, producing programmes and study centres and research networks across the region. NIES (the Nordic Network for Interdisciplinary Environmental Studies) was founded in 2007 but had begun to coalesce even earlier, with a strong contingent of scholars based at Sweden's Royal Institute of Technology. That network has grown to include 120 scholars in all five Nordic countries, and inspired the formation of Bifrost, an 'intervention' on climate change that bridges scholars with community activists, business groups, and policy-makers. Launched in 2016, ENSCAN (the Ecocritical Network for Scandinavian Studies) is affiliated with the huge American parent organization ASLE (the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment). ENSCAN hosts workshops, shares information about publication and upcoming events, and plans to launch a new journal. The Seedbox at Linköping University in Sweden, The Greenhouse at the University of Stavanger in Norway, the Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Science, centres for Environmental Humanities at Oslo University and Aarhus University (Denmark) and the Circumpolar Observatory Group (part of Humanities for the Environment) are just a few of the vital institutions devoted to research, international networking, art practice and community outreach. Because Nordic universities and research groups often provide instruction and produce scholarship in English, these organizations and centres include scholars from around the world. Recent publications include *Contesting Environmental Imaginaries: Nature and Counternature in a Time of Global Change* (2017), a special issue of the Norwegian journal *Bøysen* (2017), *Mapping Cinematic Norths* (2016) and *Spaces in-between:*

Cultural and Political Perspectives on Environmental Discourse (2015). In Norway, the Norwegian Writers' Climate Campaign offers a platform for authors and other artists to 'participate in a much needed democratic process to act against the overheating of our planet' (<https://forfatternesklimaaksjon.no/>).

As part of this broader move in the environmental humanities and Nordic initiatives, ecocinema studies demonstrates a vibrant site for theoretical and methodological discussions being taken up and expanded on by Scandinavian studies scholars like Kääpä and others in this collection. While early ecocinema scholarship drew on ethical, aesthetic and political considerations to define ecocinema as a specific type of film – slow cinema (MacDonald 2004 or independent 'cinema with an ecological consciousness' (Lu and Mi 2010: 2; see also Willoquet-Maricondi 2010), today's scholarship acknowledges *all* cinema as forms of ecocinema. Such an understanding recognizes that 'from production to distribution to consumption and recirculation, the cinematic experience is inescapably embedded in ecological webs' (Rust and Monani 2012: 2). Cinema's expressions of 'nature' are, as Kääpä suggests, enmeshed in broader sociocultural contexts of meaning-making. Cinema is also materially dependent on the environment (for example, in the making, use and disposal of the cathode ray television or the video cassette cited in the opening example; see also Bozak 2011. Following what Sean Cubitt eloquently describes as cinema's entangled triad of *physis-polis-techne* or nature-society-technology (Cubitt 2005: 4), ecocinema scholars are acutely attentive to how cinema straddles human and non-human worlds.

In explicating cinema's ecological embeddedness, like Kääpä (and the contributors to this collection), today's ecocinema scholars are interested in

deconstructing any notions of cinema as uncritically ‘natural’ or normalized. Through theories of ideological positioning and critique (Hageman 2012; Monani 2014; Monani 2016), affect and audience reception (Ingram 2012; Tong 2013; Weik von Mossner 2014), film history and post-human materialities (Ivakhiv 2013; O’Brien 2016), scholars complicate and deepen our understandings of ‘nature’ as mediated both on-screen and off. Thus, returning to the opening example again, ecocinema scholarship’s critical engagement with it can be diverse as well as theoretically intersectional. One can read the dialectic interaction of the on-screen messages of *The Seventh Seal*’s depiction of Sweden’s ‘nature’ with its Indian audience not only through frames of (trans)national histories and presents, but also through contexts of critical race theory and/or gender. Within these readings, one might wonder at the similarities and differences evoked between the potential meanings being assigned to ‘nature’ by the *New York Times* reviewer and the Indian audience, both situated in the 1980s. Equally important, many ecocinema scholars ask: what might one learn about cinema’s relation to the environment by tracing the material contours of *physis* (for example, the impact of, and on, specific geographic locations in shooting the film), *polis* (e.g., the corporeal and affective responses of audience viewers), and *techne* (e.g., the role and agency of technologies used in production, distribution, consumption and post-consumption)? Might one learn, as Kääpä suggests, that cinema is anything but ‘environmentally sustainable’?

Such ecocritical approaches that interrogate cinema’s ecological relationalities with the world bring cinema studies into conversation with the ‘ontological turn’ of twenty-first-century environmentalism – a turn that, as many of the essays in this collection suggest, usefully break down Cartesian binaries between human and non-

human that have been propagated by Eurowestern power across the globe for over 500 years. As the various articles in this special issue demonstrate, dissolving such binaries might better prepare us to confront and cope with the complexities of our extraordinary ecological crises – be they of planetary climate change, or localized environmental harm and injustices. The ravages of colonialism, industrial decay and climate change come into especially stark focus in the experience of the indigenous people of the North, the Sámi, who have their home in the northern reaches of Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Kola Peninsula. Their traditional livelihoods – reindeer and sheep herding, coastal fishing and trapping – brought them into intimate relationship with animals and a rugged landscape of mountains and swift rivers, which is reflected in traditional Sámi singing (the *joik*), folklore and graphic art. As the Sámi confront the degradation of the northern landscape and struggle to maintain connection to their cultural past, their art and their political voice have found new expression in film and video. Kelsey Fuller's piece in this issue discusses the music videos of Swedish Sámi musician Sofia Jannok and her protest, through images and three languages (Sámi, Swedish and English) against the destruction of Sápmi, the homeland of her people. Fuller demonstrates how the genre of the music video can expose an international audience to the situation of a marginalized people at the periphery of Europe, but can also act as a catalyst for the people themselves. Cheryl Fish focuses in her article on another Swedish Sámi artist, filmmaker Liselotta Wajstedt, from Kiruna, Sweden's northernmost town. Kiruna, an important iron mining centre, was faced with the necessity of moving its downtown several miles away in order to avoid the danger of cave-ins caused by the mine. Wajstedt's films, strongly autobiographical in content, focus on the mine and its impact on the people of Sápmi, and in particular chart the trauma of

dislocation. Like the iron mines of Kiruna, the Norwegian oil extraction operations have left their mark on the land and peoples of the region. Julia Leyda's contribution to the collection unpacks the dystopian thriller and Norway's most expensive television programme to date, *Okkupert (Occupied, 2015–present)* with attention to the dilemmas of the oil industry's impact on Nordic society – from the prosperity it affords the country to its role in climate catastrophe. She demonstrates how *Occupied* melds the long familiar Norwegian 'occupation drama' genre with that of cli-fi (climate fiction) to draw on collective historical memories while simultaneously speculating on Anthropocene anxieties and futurities.

Two of the essays of this special issue, one by Krister Noheden and the other by Torsten Bøgh Thomsen, deal with the dark ecology of one of Denmark's most (in)famous art film directors: Lars von Trier. At first glance, von Trier's work seems to have little to do with the work of the Sámi artists discussed above or the pointed message of *Occupied*. But rather than addressing environmental issues directly, von Trier's films conjure non-human environments that overturn any Romantic notions of a green utopia. As Noheden notes, von Trier's 'despair and irony, anchored in a modernist distrust of reason, may be attuned to the conditions of the Anthropocene.' In Thomsen's and Noheden's readings of von Trier, we see how even films that at first glance have no ecocritical engagement in fact do engage with ecological crises on a deeper level. Each article eloquently reminds us of the rich mesh of *physis-polis-techne* by drawing attention to von Trier's aesthetic choices that bring cinema's psychological and physiological eco-impacts vividly into view. This departure from explicit environmentalism is taken further in the article by Pietari Kääpä and Kate Moffat, in which they engage racial and ethnic representations in

Nordic cinema through the concept of the 'ecotone'. Expanding limited understandings of the 'ecotone' as transitional spaces that merge the human with the environment, they demonstrate how Nordic cinema's 'ecotones' are ideologically loaded to consolidate both anthropocentric and sociopolitical hegemony. This theoretical move shows how cinema plays a role in positioning the marginalized 'other' in Scandinavia as ecologically precarious, which brings us back around, by a different path, to the situation of the Sámi.

In all, the collection of articles in this special issue represents a range of thinking about cinema and 'nature', one that urges an expansive notion of 'ecocinema.' It encourages future ecocinematic research to move in many directions, addressing films and the work of filmmaking in any genre or location. The long tradition of Scandinavian cinema and visual culture, from the silent era to the present, offers a rich field for future investigation.

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1. Kui-Wai Chu's 'Ecocinema' entry in the 2017 version of the Oxford Bibliography of Media Studies provides a good overview of the field's current state.

2. Kääpä's most recent publication *Environmental Management of the Media: Policy, Industry, Practice* tackles the notion of Nordic sustainability from a new materialism perspective head on.

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