

Jennifer Fay, *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene*

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The vision of the post-industrial sky was once infamously compared to the “color of television, tuned to a dead channel” (Gibson 1984, 3). But where those visions of a technologically mediated future eventually gave way to screens powered by fibre optic cables and wireless technology, today’s reality, as anyone recently looking to social media can see, is a much bleaker burning red. Wildfires in the Western United States—stretching from Southern California to Eastern Washington state, have engulfed the once clear Pacific sky in a soupy layer of smoke. The sun has been cast blood red, while entire towns—from Paradise, California to Medford, Oregon—are burned to the ground or evacuated, while helpless residents look on in fear. As if waiting around for the dystopia to emerge, its current arrival in a storm of glowing smoke seems to suggest a limit to prior conceptions of how ongoing environmental trends might emerge aesthetically. This arguably poses a problem for representations of climate change and can itself be seen reflected in the *Blade Runner* film franchise, its seminal film (1982) echoing the digital and concrete greys of a 1980s cyberpunk imaginary now giving way to the sandy orange of a warmed planet in its 2017 sequel (*Blade Runner: 2049*). But as Ian Bogost (2020)

recently noted, the ubiquity of the reds and oranges in images posted to social media during the 2020 West Coast wildfire season are less an authentic index of what is “really there” than a product of the way iPhone camera sensors are built to respond to the brightness of the natural light they pick up and automatically “correct.” And here we have the rub: as the early stages of the impact of climate change begin to be mediated on live screens and experienced in ever-increasing numbers, it seems representation yet again emerges as a philosophical problem and an exercise for culture writ large. Cinema might help point to what the unthinkable thing coming *looks like*, providing a visual language for making sense of the collapse of an all-encompassing Nature we only began taking seriously too late. But as a material technology, both in its celluloid and digital forms, cinema also actively participates in the worlding of an anthropogenic planet in which the line between a given Nature and human-built world has conceptually and literally collapsed.

Jennifer Fay’s compelling *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene* (2018) begins from this exact conjuncture. Her central argument is at first historical: that cinema and the Anthropocene are two inseparable phenomena, each of which emerge

both literally and epistemologically out of the nineteenth century Industrial Revolution through attempts to master time and space, or to preserve, protect, and expand human life or, in her words, that “[t]he Anthropocene is to natural science what cinema, especially early cinema, has been to human culture” (Fay 2018, 3). This provocative claim is, crucially, situated within Eugene Stoermer’s proposed geological periodization of the “Anthropocene,” in which human activity begins to impact the geological record at a level never before seen in history. It fits alongside what J.R. McNeill and Peter Engelke have called the “Great Acceleration,” or the mid-century point at which the rapid industrialization and speed of technological growth of civilization has resulted in a “coupling” of “the socioeconomic system with the biophysical earth” (Fay 2018, 11; also see McNeill and Engelke 2016). Film scholars here might begin to see why this proposed linkage of cinema and the Anthropocene—the late nineteenth century and 1945—is so crucial to Fay’s argument: rather than a simple historical rhyme on the timeline of history, Fay argues that the event of the Anthropocene and the emergence of cinema arrive with similar projects of collapsing the “distinction between a human-made world and a natural, given environment” (Fay 2018, 8). For what do films do, other than create and transform [a] world through human action, from sets to on-location shooting? And how might the desire to produce a more hospitable environment, both on screen and in nature, end up leading to the very emergence of the *inhospitable* in the end?

Fay’s approach here is a welcome

addition to recent work on the environmental humanities in film and media studies, approaches which in their disciplinary siloing all too often seem to elide what useful connections might be drawn between each. Fay herself, in the book’s final chapter on Siegfried Kracauer’s “extraterrestrial film theory,” describes this move between the material and the cultural as a “rejoinder, if not correction, to more recent aesthetic and ecocritical theory that moves beyond the fetishization of subjectivity, without abandoning sensual form or even love itself” (Fay 2018, 198). One might point here to ground-breaking work by scholars who draw attention to the geopolitics literally embedded in the heavy metals that make possible the celluloid frame, or the exploitation necessary for the production of the mined chip in the digital camera, alongside scholars still operating within a classical or contemporary film theory milieu that centers the importance of cinema as a cultural institution, a vehicle for re-presenting the world and making meaning.¹ However wide the gap between the materiality that constitutes the image and the image itself seems, to Fay, less a void than a constellation that can provide a useful tool for problematizing humanity’s relation to a changing environment and an increasingly unfamiliar future.

The work is expansive, which an initial reader might find incongruous. This is due in part to Fay’s intervention, which centers not on a corpus of “environmental” films documenting this or that climate phenomenon but rather this very dialectic between creation and destruction within Anthropocentric built or natural space. In five

sprawling chapters, Fay moves from construction of sets in early American silent comedy to the indexicality of nuclear test films, from the “social ecology” of film noir’s evocation of existential dread to the UFO in Jia Zhangke’s *Still Life* (2006) and the film theoretical work of Siegfried Kracauer. This scope is admittedly somewhat daunting, and Fay’s heterodox methodology might drive scholars in each previous camp to question precisely what through-line could unite such a complex approach. But Fay’s crucial insight is that the philosophical and political (and existential) problem posed by looming climate change unfolds across very similar lines. Rather than attempting to restore a world “out there,” Fay notes that our “always unnatural and unwelcoming environment” is always a “matter of production”: that any attempt to disentangle a Nature free from human intervention—albeit at a different scale—is a philosophical error (Fay 2018, 4–5). It is in this sense that the nature between cinema and the Anthropocene is made the most explicit: that both are historicizable events and technologies that produce their own “worlds” through attempts at making them more hospitable, leading to worlds which are, paradoxically, inhospitable (19).

It is the book’s first and final chapters where Fay most explicitly unites her materialist and classical film-theoretical approach. In doing so, she draws attention not only to the way these contemporary debates in the environmental humanities might be complementary, but rather, how any sober analysis of film and media for a changing climate must take up both problems as constitutive of one another.

Crucially, she does this by returning to film history itself. Cinema here must not be thought of as merely “representing” a collapsing Enlightenment Nature wholly outside of human culture—for as Fay argues, films themselves quite literally produce *artificial*, human-made worlds that themselves can be “undone by the force of human activity” in films such as Buster Keaton’s *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928), or mid-century nuclear bomb test films produced by the US Air Force in the American Southwest (Fay 2018, 4). These are films that not only *depict* the destruction of their diegeses, but actually stage their destruction as lived events in a manufactured world that is quite literally the same as our own.

In order to make this argument, Fay rests on a central claim: that cinema emerges parallel to the historical event of the Anthropocene, situated precisely alongside the nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution, and both carrying with them echoes of distinct material and conceptual practices of worlding. But what if that periodization is incorrect? Recent critiques of the notion of a distinct geological period called the “Anthropocene” have been leveled by leftist thinkers from Donna Haraway to Jason Moore, the latter of whom proposed what he suggests as a more useful concept of the “Capitalocene” in an attempt to draw attention to the *specifically capitalist* way in which the organization of human societies and nature has driven the planet to its current ecological crisis, rather than the more abstract “human action” (Moore 2017). Crucial to Moore’s periodization is a not simply a claim that the planet has undergone immense and accelerating change after the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century—it certainly has. But

rather, Moore argues these ecological transformations cannot be thought of separate from earlier transformations of the world system beginning with the rise of European colonization in the mid-fifteenth century (Moore 2017, 3). In this sense, Fay’s notion that the attempt to “make the planet more welcoming, secure, and productive for human flourishing” seems to tell us more about the paradox of contemporary liberal responses to piecemeal climate reform in the wake of increasing precarity than it does the roots of the crisis, which to Moore emerged out of a particular shift in the world system, not increasing material production. As Fay even argues, others who still find value in the term Anthropocene themselves begin the periodization elsewhere, such as a recent move to date the epoch’s emergence in 1945, precisely after the detonation of the Trinity A-bomb (Zalasiewicz et al. 2015). Which one is it? Fay’s middle two chapters on US Air Force nuclear test films and Film Noir are strengthened by this later periodization, suggesting something of a historical rupture around the Second World War that leads not only to the material and epistemological effects of what she calls “atomic inhumanism” in postwar cinema, but also for the use of cinema to help spectators “train for death” in a postwar world (Fay 2018, 83, 97).

Fittingly, this latter periodization also helps Fay make use of Kracauer’s postwar film theory in her reading of actualities from early expeditions to Antarctica in the book’s final chapter. Here, as she notes, Kracauer made a turn following the war to “redeem experience...(and) rescue some form of subjectivity after the disastrous historical events of totalitarianism and author-

itarian rule” (Fay 2018, 178). In short, rather than imagining ourselves as the products of myth and tradition, cinema provides an opportunity to see how we are “inheritors of a contingent and fragmented reality that film reflects back to us” (179). The distinct alienness of Antarctica as described in these films nevertheless provides for Fay a conceptual tool for thinking through the sensual and humanistic response to an increasingly inhospitable world, much in the same way her early chapters combine material and representational readings of early cinema. But this notion of a somewhat paradoxically humanist and materialist answer to the problem of an inhospitable world seems at odds with her earlier periodization that finds itself in the nineteenth century. Because Fay moves from Buster Keaton to Jia Zhangke, from documentary to *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), one might want to ask what it is about the Anthropocene that connects these later twentieth century moments to her claim about early cinema in the book’s first chapter. What kind of worlding, either cinematic or epistemological, would emerge with a different periodization of the Anthropocene? Does cinema lose its link to this project if the Anthropocene is thought of outside the Industrial Revolution, before or after? This is not to suggest Fay provides no answer to these questions. But by decoupling cinema’s mode of collapsing the artificial and real world from that of the Anthropocene itself, the very material questions of what cinema is, and what it can do, return again to the forefront. Can we locate in the cinematic the storm Keaton actually produced on set that day, or is it only in the frame of the image? What will happen, she asks, if materi-

al remnants of our film culture outlive us, and are left to be perceived by some post-human ocean dwelling octopus deep in the future? I'm not sure we can even conceivably think about the "image" at that point.

Ultimately, these provocative questions opened up by Fay's text are the book's most productive contribution to the field. Readers looking for a text on "eco-cinema" or environmental films might be taken aback by Fay's conceptual through line, but those deeply interested in the stakes of what cinema can offer for a changing planet—an epistemological problem not unlike that of climate change itself—will find much of value in its pages.

Notes

1. For the former, see Nadia Bozak, *The Cinematic Footprint: Lights Camera, Natural Resource* (2012), and Thomas Pringle, "Photographed by the Earth: War and media in light of nuclear events" (2014), both of which draw attention to the natural resources required to produce the cinematic image as well as other related "imaging" technologies such as nuclear fallout. Relatedly, Stephen Rust, Salma Nonani, and Sean Cubitt's 2013 "Ecocinema Theory and Practice" reader outlines what they call the field of "eco-film criticism," and adds to a materialist approach a concern with aesthetics.

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