

Investigating Ecocinema through the Video Essay

Videographic Scholarship as an Environmental Media Studies Pedagogy

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Abstract

How can the video essay be deployed as a critical tool to analyse ecocinema and its relevance to the current environmental crisis? The Video Essay for Ecocinema course, held in the 2023 spring semester at the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio, introduced videographic techniques to investigate the topic of ecocinema and critically analyse ecological imaginaries. A heterogeneous bibliography of texts, films and video essays related to ecocinema presented key thematic concepts, including: visualizations of ecological scale(s); the role of affect in producing environmental consciousness; materialising intangible infrastructures and hidden "grey energies"; and the digital footprint of film and media industries. These concepts in turn served as the basis for a distinct series of videographic exercises that prepared students for their final videographic project. The results demonstrate the profound value of the video essay as a pedagogical practice that can provide students with the



tools to address such a challenging and multifaceted topic as the global environmental crisis.

Keywords: ecocinema, videographic criticism, pedagogy, environmental studies, film

Introduction

Over the past decade, the video essay has proven itself to be a vital component of film scholarship in the digital era, as it combines the twin disciplines of academia and filmmaking into a potent and multifaceted practice: for research, scholarship, publishing and pedagogy (Kiss 2020, 15). While videographic criticism originated in film and media studies, it also represents an exemplary mode of contemporary digital literacy that can be applied to a host of subjects. Video essays allow scholars and students to use the techniques and idioms of audiovisual media production to critically investigate cultural, political and scientific topics, as well as the ways in which these topics are represented in cinema and media. However, despite this enormous potential for the application of video essays, there has been a noticeable scarcity of video essays dealing with environmental topics. The emergence of videographic studies has until now been disassociated with a concurrent emergence of ecocinema over the past decade. As an introduction to the rich catalogue of virtuous examples of ecocriticism in the collection Ecocinema Theory and Practice 2, Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Seán Cubitt (2022) provide a summary of the current state of the art in ecocinema as follows:

Cinema has become unthinkable apart from its dependence on mining, electricity generation, and fabrication with their attendant pollution, on global logistical operations and supply chains with massive ecological footprints, on material and technical infrastructures with direct consequences in the physical world, and on the problem of waste.

In an effort to link these two fields of research, the seminar Video Essay Atelier for Econcinema was initiated in the spring semester of 2023 at the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio (AAM) in the

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Università della Svizzera italiana (USI). Following an initial offering of a video essay seminar at the AAM in 2022, the second iteration posed a question of how videographic criticism could be more deeply aligned with an architectural curriculum. The school offers a series of courses related to landscape and ecology; this, combined with our shared concern for the rising global environmental crisis, led us to imagine how video essays could be a tool to help students make sense of environmental questions to inform their architectural and spatial design practices throughout their careers.

Choosing to delve into the topic of ecocinema has provided us with a fertile ground to interact and enhance our complementary academic profiles. Kevin has been investigating topics in media and image ethics and ecology for several years, broadening his research perspective to question the production and reception of media and its impact on the environment. Through her doctoral thesis and related educational projects, Silvia studies elements of marginality and fragility in border landscapes, observing how cinema and audiovisual media perform as lens and litmus test for the transformation of territories. Integrating videographic practice into the context of an architecture academy enabled us to explore the topic of ecocinema from this dual perspective—examining the environment through film and, conversely, reflecting on the landscape through the cinematic lens. By incorporating videographic practices into our exploration of ecocinema, we investigated how the video essay can be a medium for interdisciplinary analysis, shedding light on the impact of media on the environment and cultivating viewers' ecocritical awareness on cinema. Through an extensive research period we curated a bibliography of texts, films and video essays related to ecocinema that offered sharp positions on key thematic concepts, including: visualizations of ecological scale(s); the role of affect in producing environmental consciousness; materializing intangible infrastructures and hidden "grey energies", understood as the invisible energy consumption and resource extraction upstream of the production processes in question; and the digital footprint of film and media industries. These specific texts are elaborated in the Methodology section.

We also recognized that our students had little to no background in video production. In past video essay workshops with students of varying videographic skill levels, an effective pedagogical model



was adapted from the Middlebury College Videographic Workshop designed by Jason Mittell and Christian Keathley (2023). The Middlebury approach consists of a series of short videographic exercises, each focused on a specific videographic technique to be practiced: editing, voiceover, onscreen text and graphics, and other methods for working with audiovisual material to express critical ideas (Mittell and Keathley 2023). Applying this pre-existing pedagogical method to the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio allowed the introduction of new, theme-specific exercises tailored to ecocinema and the unique skill set of architecture students. We adapted exercises from the Middlebury methods such as the Videographic PechaKucha, Voice-over, and Abstract Trailer, to offer generative approaches for exploring ecological themes in cinema. Additionally, we introduced novel exercises such as the Desktop Exploration and On-Camera Response that enabled students to locate their own subjective engagement in ecocinema research. The following provides a more detailed account of the innovative dimensions of the pedagogical model we devised.

Methodology

With the dual aims to teach both important theoretical concepts for ecocinema and practical techniques for videographic scholarship, the question arose of how to link the two together. Placing the list of primary theoretical texts alongside a set of videographic exercises, we noticed that certain essays paired well with specific exercises, such that the written content could be explored productively through a specific videographic technique. The following is an account of the weekly combination of primary texts and accompanying videographic exercises that occupied the first weeks of the course:

Exercise 1: Climate Fiction PechaKucha

To introduce the concept of ecocinema to the class, the video essay *Climate Fictions, Dystopias and Human Futures* by Julia Leyda and Kathleen Loock (2023) proved to be quite valuable. Not only is it one of the few videographic works on cinema and ecology that existed before our workshop, thus providing a useful model for what the final projects of the course could look like, as well as a sample of films to consider as "ecocinema," such as *The Day After Tomorrow*



(2004), *Interstellar* (2014) and *Don't Look Up* (2021). We assigned five films from the video essay from which students could select to perform a videographic PechaKucha. This task drew inspiration from a similar activity from the Middlebury workshop, in which ten short clips of six seconds are extracted, typically to highlight a recurring motif within the film.

Some results revealed unexpected elements driving a film's climate fiction narrative. A compilation of clips between a father and son duo in *The Day After Tomorrow* exposed an emotional core to the climate catastrophe scenario. Another PechaKucha on the disaster movie *Geostorm* (2017) highlighted an array of computer interfaces in the film that characters use to visualize and manage an environmental disaster, while also providing a cost-effective way for the film to give an appearance of blockbuster production values.

Exercise 2: Ecocinema Affective Voiceover

The PechaKucha exercise gave a first indication of the extent to which elements such as affect, tone, and genre can influence audience engagement with the ecological content of a film, a notion elaborated by the first critical reading of the seminar, Nicole Seymour's essay "Irony and contemporary ecocinema" (Weik von Mossner 2014, 61-78). The essay considers a range of affective and emotional registers found in ecologically themed documentaries such as *Food Inc.* (2006), *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and *Grizzly Man* (2005), and how affective elements are as influential as scientific research or logical argumentation in determining an audience's relationship to a film's ecological themes.

The text posed the possibility for the students to experiment with affect through voiceover. In this exercise students chose a clip from one of the documentaries in Seymour's essay and re-recorded its voiceover or dialogue. Several students reported discomfort in matching the emotional registers of ecocinema documentary voiceovers, making them sensitive to the degree to which affect is deployed in what might otherwise be perceived as informational content. One outstanding student exercise combined a re-recorded voiceover from *Grizzly Man*, in which the title character pleads for rain during a drought, with footage of a torrential downpour in *The Day After Tomorrow*. This juxtaposition demonstrated an appreciation for another dimension of Seymour's argu-

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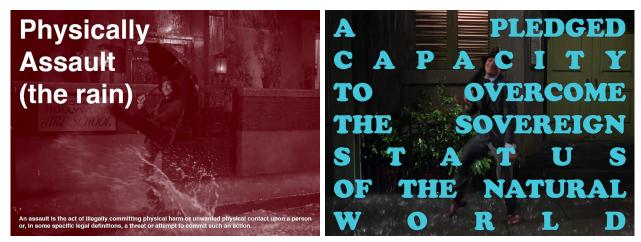


ment: that irony can function as an effective deployment of critical affect, by providing a critical space of detachment from which to engage with climate catastrophe.

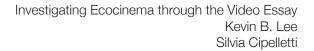
Exercise 3: Ecomaterialist Epigraph

Following the extensive accumulation of an ecocinema bibliography over the first two exercises, for the next round we chose to focus intensively on a single film production to introduce the ideological framework of ecomaterialism. We found an ideal case study in the essay "500,000 Kilowatts of Stardust: An Eco-Materialist Reframing of *Singin' in the Rain*" by Hunter Vaughan (Starosielski and Walker 2016, 36-61). As a rigorous retrospective examination of the ecological footprint that can be associated with the iconic Hollywood musical *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), the article reframes the film as a site of the film industry's systematic exploitation of natural resources: "how, both on- and off-screen, media use nature to produce culture".

As we intended for the next exercise to allow students to practice applying text and graphics on screen as a videographic technique, we saw this as an opportunity to establish direct relationships between Vaughan's text and *Singin' in the Rain*. We therefore assigned an ecomaterialist epigraph, in which students applied selected passages from Vaughan's essay to iconic scenes from the film. One of the outputs colourfully animates the text in an inspired choreography with the onscreen dance sequence. As if applying Nicole Sey-



Screenshots from "Singing in the Rain Text & Graphics", Tobias Quezado-Deccker, Marlene Fisher (01, 02)





mour's call for ironic affect to the epigraph, the arrangement and interpretation of text critically highlights hyperbolic aspects to Vaughan's ecomaterialist polemic, such as when he likens Gene Kelly's gleeful kicking and splashing in the rain to an act of physical assault on his environment. The exercises thus vividly provide an arena for the student to evaluate the strengths and shortcomings of textual arguments in direct relation to their media objects.

Exercise 4: Planetary Desktop Recording

Following typology, affect and materiality, the concept of visuality provided the next theoretical framework for ecocinema. Videographic criticism allows for a thorough exploration of the assumptions regarding perspective and point of view as implied in the role of a researcher, especially as mediated through audiovisual technologies. In the chapter "Sublime Earth" of his book *Planetary Cinema*, Tiago De Luca elaborates on the notion of the "technological sublime", offering a detailed account of the evolution of planetary cinema, from 19th century Panoramas and Georamas, to contemporary IMAX films such as *Blue Planet* (1990), *A Beautiful Planet* (2016) and *Earth* (2019) (De Luca 2021, 49-84). This journey through time in planetary iconography illustrates how "the sublime Anthropos enters into the field of visibility thanks to the sublimity of space technology."

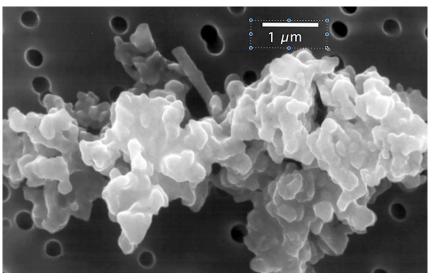


Screenshot from "Smartphone Investigation", Tobias Quezado-Deccker, Marlene Fisher, Renée Hendrix (03)





The films analyzed in De Luca's essay served as a starting point for students to explore possibilities of "technological sublime" through desktop recording. Videographic applications of desktop documentary engage with the spatio-temporal boundaries of online research as mediated through the desktop, touching on both the epistemology and ethics of online access. This exercise allowed for evocative investigations of Earth through the internet and spatial metamorphoses on a planetary scale, while at the same time providing an opportunity to broaden perspectives on the countless technical possibilities that the desktop tool offers for academic filmmaking. As an example, Cecile Xuetong Feng's desktop film Silice de Memoire (which has since screened at the Locarno and Pesaro international film festivals) unfolds as a contemplative journey through the digital realm—a poetic inquiry that transitions from abstract text-based searches to an ambient exploration of earthly and extraterrestrial mining.



Screenshot from "Silice de memoire", Cecilia Xuetong-Feng (04)

Exercise 5: Hidden Infrastructure On-Camera Response Having observed the generative effect of confronting text with image in the ecomaterialist epigraph, we sought to practice an alternative confrontation with text by introducing embodied filmic practices. For this purpose, we selected a text we felt could inspire an active engagement with physical environments, "Unsustainable



Cinema: Global Supply Chains", written by Sean Cubitt (Rust et al. 2023, 19-33). This complex essay examines the magnitude of the film industry's environmental and social impact, uncovering the depth of the invisible infrastructures of exploitation that operate beneath the planet's terrestrial and oceanic surfaces. The videographic exercise required students to record themselves on camera responding to the contents of the article, thus offering another example on how to apply critical theory to a media object, or rather, applying themselves as media objects responding to critical theory. Filming themselves served as a form of processing dense and complex written content, and articulating it into their own words.

However, the text proved to be more daunting for the students to understand than we expected. One exercise exemplifies the students' resistance to the complexity and abstraction of the text, which was due in part that it, unlike the other texts of the course, did not cite any audiovisual examples. The video expresses a longing for visual accessibility missing from the text, which the students' vide-



Screenshots from "Camera Reaction", Elsa Despoix, Francisco Noites de Oliveira (05, 06)



ographic response ironically was meant to provide. Indeed, the most audiovisually accomplished result was produced by two students who abandoned Cubitt's text in favor of a different essay from the collection, "Extraction and Wild Cinema in Africa" by Cajetan Iheka (Rust et al. 2023, 87-102). They apply the author's proposed analytical methodology to critique a set of popular music videos to convincing effect. The video incorporates techniques found in TikTok videos such as presenting the authors faces alongside the media objects being discussed, and first person perspective of the text being highlighted as it is being studied. These modes of embodiment effectively convey their experience of the research process, projecting onto the viewer as a shared experience of investigation.

Final project video essay

The progressive series of exercises, designed to teach fundamental technical concepts in videographic filmmaking in relation to key eco-cinema concepts, served as a preparatory phase for students to produce their own video essays as their final projects. Students were able to define their preferred topic, presenting it first in the form of a short trailer, as a videographic equivalent to an abstract for a final research paper. In some cases, the trailer itself amounted to a convincing work of videographic scholarship: one example explored the field of ecofeminism in cinema through a videographic compilation of the recurring themes and clichés that define female roles in ecofilms.



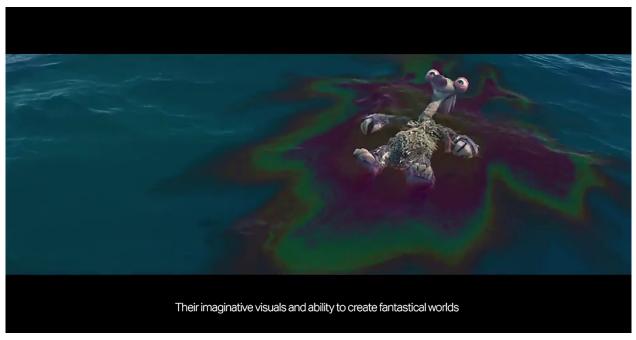
Screenshot from "Women in Ecofilm", Elsa Despoix (07)



A sample of the themes from the final videos reflect a fascinating diversity in how the students applied the ecocinema topic to their own lines of research:

- greenwashing in fast fashion media;
- the narrative strategies commonly employed in ecological awareness videos, as well as their dubious production practices;
- the role of trees in filmic adaptations of J.R.R. Tolkien's Hobbit films;
- a poetic anthology of a tree's life cycle and its transformation into books, combining embodied filmmaking with extracts from renowned films;
- the effect of science fiction cinema on the "orbital imperialism" of the emerging industries of outer space;
- the anthropomorphic appeal of penguins in ecocinema.

We were genuinely impressed by the degree of elaboration there was on the part of the students in applying the basic ecocinematic concepts presented in the class to specific topics of their own choosing.



Screenshot from "An Eco-sublime Approach for Unsustainable Production", Ioana Suciu and Stefan Costache (08)

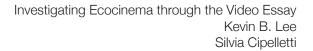


Among the most noteworthy outcomes, Ioana Suciu and Stefan Costache researched animated feature films with ecological narratives to study their thematic, aesthetic and affective properties. They argue persuasively that animation can activate a larger space for audiovisual imaginaries to engage environmental dilemmas than other forms of cinema can manage. However, the authors do not fail to refer to the forms of exploitation and precarious working conditions behind this industry, calling into question the extent to which ecoconscious animation masks the footprint of its own practices.

Another standout, Carlo and Franco Serra's final video essay offered an original ecocritical reading of the most renowned Vietnam War movies, highlighting the production details of landscapes, lifeforms and laborers exploited for the sake of producing images of mass destruction presented as prestige cinema. Their final video was especially gratifying as Carlo and Franco were among the students who initially expressed misgivings about the course even as they committed to it. Among their doubts were the relevance of ecocinema to their own interests (genre cinema, in the case of Carlo and Franco), and the merits of dedicating an entire semester to pro-



Screenshot from "The Footprint of Vietnam War Movies", Carlo Federico Serra, Franco Enrico Serra (09)





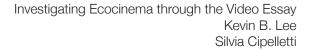
ducing video essays on ecological topics, which they feared might be too narrow a thematic focus. Both in their breadth of topics and depth of research, the final videos bore out the relevance of ecocinema for each of the students and the capacity for it to produce fascinating videographic scholarship.

Discussion

Seriousness is not the only affective trajectory possible in ecocinema. I argue, in fact, that the political project of ecocinema demands "unserious" affective modes such as irony, self-parody, and playfulness. (Seymour 2014, 61-78)

This quote from Nicole Seymour serves as a fitting account of our own experience teaching the Video Essay Atelier for Ecocinema seminar. As non-specialists in environmental studies instructing students who were not trained in filmmaking, we relied on a videographic teaching method that could foster a spirit of mutual exploration, allowing ourselves as a collective to engage environmental topics with a sense of experimentation, discovery and play. The course followed the ethos described by Liz Greene, to teach the student, not the subject, modelling ways for them to make their own connections to the topic of ecocinema. Greene writes, "My role in facilitating these sessions is to try and help students make connections, offering a way in to consider the context of these discussions" (Greene 2020, 15).

Similarly, by linking videographic techniques for editing, voice, text, desktop recording, and self-presentation to ecological concepts such as climate fiction imaginaries, ecocinema affect, eco-materialism, scales of visualization, and hidden media infrastructures, we could provide a model for how students could make their own inspired connections between theory and practice. This open and exploratory method was crucial for overcoming stigmas of seriousness that often surround environmental topics, allowing students to find their own situated positions in the topic, as practiced through their voices, words, or on-screen appearances. By applying the concepts they learned to their individual interests, the students collectively mapped out a range of topics that resonated with them.





It was not long after the course completed that many of the videos found their way to the public, at a programme of student films as well as a masterclass on ecocinema, curated by the International Conservatory of Audiovisual Sciences (CISA) and the Locarno Filmmaker Academy, respectively, both presented at the 2023 Locarno Film Festival. The video essays drew interest seemingly by sheer virtue of their subject matter; in an increasingly crowded landscape of video essays preoccupied with cinephile pop culture topics, these videos stood out. The ecological focus of these video essays led one audience member to question the ecological implications of video essays themselves, inextricably connected to a larger crisis of media overproduction and consumption. At the same time, the audience was struck by how the video essays presented provoked a greater consciousness about one's own role in the production and circulation of media content, whether in questioning what topics were in need of more attention that video essays could serve, or about the exhaustive effects of media activity on material resources and the environment. One audience member representing the film industry wondered if video essays could provide a set of best practices for successful ecocinema narratives. At the same time, it was posed that video essays themselves may embody an ecocinema practice, as they entail the reuse of existing media, a form of mediatic composting that makes greater use of the intellectual and aesthetic resources to be found within a work of media.

This last observation points at a crucial factor that may define video essays as eco-cinema, not in form, but in practice, in a time when, as argued by Sean Cubitt, "digital production, distribution and exhibition are placing tremendous strains on human and nonhuman alike". Jean-Luc Godard famously formulated that it is less important to make political films, but to make films politically; similarly, the video essay can stand as a media ecological practice, not merely by virtue of exploring ecological topics, but by enacting an ethos of ecological sensitivity and responsibility to media objects in their production and circulation. Adopting an eco-materialist perspective, one can consider the video essay as a revolutionary practice that repurposes and upcycles content within the ongoing context of media overproduction and waste. Additionally, the video essay does not need to support the establishment of a canon of films that can be designated as ecocinema, but practice a way of viewing



any and all films and media through an eco-conscious lens. One can follow the example of Thom Anderson's seminal feature-length videographic exploration of Los Angeles in cinema, *Los Angeles Plays Itself*, which was part of the viewing syllabus for the seminar. Just as Anderson's film treats fiction features filmed in Los Angeles as incidental documentary footage of the city, one can take films of all genres, origins and contexts, from overt ecological documentaries to Hollywood blockbusters, animated films and B-movies commonly dismissed as "trash." Through the video essay, all of these materials become the soil from which to cultivate an eco-conscious media practice.

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