

RSA Arts & Ecology

in partnership with Arts Council England present

Towards an Eco-Cinema

Wednesday 28 September (evening) and Thursday 29 September (all day)

Watershed, Bristol, 2005

Film and Ecology Conference briefing

As you will know, the RSA hosted a conference to launch their arts and ecology initiative early in the summer. I was asked to organise a second event with a focus on film. My thinking was that in the last 100 years a primary source of information about ecological issues has come from the moving image, primarily documentary film and television but also narrative cinema. More recently artists and experimental film-makers have also got involved in these debates. In an essay¹ from which we draw the title of our conference, film historian Scott MacDonald draws our attention to a renewed interest in the natural world in avant-garde and experimental cinema which has developed at the moment when more than ever that world is under threat.

Taking my cue from a particularly thought provoking presentation at the last RSA conference on Felix Guattari's notion of 3 ecologies² ('the environment, social relations and human subjectivity') I want to insist on two often opposed axes - on the one hand the need for information on which to base informed decisions, on the other, subjective and emotional investments in the economy of the moving image that can take one in quite a different direction, to the domains of what Guattari refers to as 'sensibility and desire'. His argument is that one has to develop a micro-politics at the same as a macro one. It's not just a question of behaving ecologically responsibly, whether at an individual or societal level, but also of asking uncomfortable questions about the way the overdeveloped world, of which we are all beneficiaries, contributes to the divisions and inequalities we seek to address.³

At the last conference I was particularly struck by the reaction to the presentation by Dr David King, HMG's principal scientific advisor, whose impressive presentation was accompanied by chilling statistics. Many in the audience were quite horrified at the picture he was presenting; however most of his material was already in the public domain and the topic of various news and documentary presentations on television. This raised for me a question about effective communication - perhaps the mainstream media communicate less about content and more about context - about our immersion in the flow of television. One can have the impression of

¹ "Towards an Eco-Cinema", Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment 11.2 (Summer 2004)

² Felix Guattari, The Three Ecologies, London: Athlone 2000

being informed but a simple presentation by an eminent scientist can demonstrate that this is not the case.

I am a curator and writer in the area of contemporary art, particularly moving image work, with a long experience in film studies, history and theory. I have also produced a few projects, both fiction and documentary. The 1970s film studies which I grew up with paid a lot of attention to the issue of the audience's unconscious investment in the institution of cinema (and television). These media were seen as a privileged place for the formation of subjectivity both individual and collective. I don't want to dwell on these issues now except to say that the ideological analysis of mainstream cinema is still an important project, and we need to question the good faith of those mainstream movies which apparently deal with topical environmental issues while in fact returning us to familiar strategies and tropes of narrative itself. This is not to say that films like Silkwood (1983) for example did not play an important role in focusing attention on issues of nuclear power, however they do so within an emotional economy which all too often leaves the audience as a passive and increasingly desperate spectator. A similar comment could be made about Darwin's Nightmare (2005) which will be screened alongside the conference. David Ingram (author of 'Greenscreen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema') will address some of these issues in his presentation.

Paula Willoquet-Maricondi (editor of forthcoming volume of essays on eco-criticism and film) explores debates concerning a range of alternative and oppositional approaches both by artist and documentary film makers to these issues. My personal sense is that we are witnessing something of a tragic repetition of 19th century debates concerning man's place in nature viz 'Tennyson's 'Nature red in Tooth and Claw' - as we grapple with the 21st century consequences of the revolution in science and philosophy which began 150 years ago. It is difficult to accept that Christian fundamentalism can still be questioning Darwin's notion of evolution or that even social democrat governments do not have a firmer grip on the depredations and devastation wrought by what we might call post-modern capital. Our conference cannot address these issues in their totality. However I think we will be able to trace something of a return to these issues in the various approaches that Paula will be discussing.

The structure of the conference is divided into two blocks: one, already mentioned, concerning the role of film, television and the artist's film; the other attempting to provide a range of perspectives on issues of water resources. In the process of planning this conference I felt that we could not take on the whole range of environmental issues that we are all currently preoccupied with, but that water - with its range of symbolic connotations as well as its role as supporter of life on the planet - would be an obvious place to start.

The film Lagos-Koolhaas is about the process of getting to know one of the great cities of the world, and one that is suffering from intense environmental stress. While the film does not dwell on water supply per se, the scale of environmental pollution in this coastal city is plain for all to see. Our discussion here will focus on what an

architect and film-maker are doing with this material and how it connects for example to themes of urbanism and governmentality broached in the Documenta11 conference held in Lagos at the time the film was being made in 2002.

I also considered screening a range of documentary film which in one way or another can retrospectively be seen as evidence both of a developing ecological consciousness as well as of the precursors of the environmental issues we now face. Joris Ivens' cinema for example encompasses the celebration of 1930s soviet industrialisation (Komsomol (1931)) as well as films about natural processes such as Pour le Mistral (1965) and A tale of the Wind (1989). If I have time I will refer to some of these and other examples in my introduction.

As an indication of how far we have (and have not) come I have chosen to present some extracts of an American TV programme Rachel Carson's Silent Spring (1993). Carson as you will probably know was a best selling author (The Sea around us, 1951) who in the 1960s almost single handedly took on the US pharmaceutical industry and achieved a major reduction in the use of organic insecticides which she showed were working their way up the food chain with devastating effect. There are images in the film which are horrific, and the reaction of big business then has many parallels to that in GW Bush's America today - the interests of capital over-riding the needs of human life itself! Though rather conventionally made, this programme is now a document of the beginning of the current environmental movement and something of an encouragement to those who still believe in the possibility of individual agency effecting social and political change.

In the morning panel session we wanted to present a range of voices all in one way or another linked to issues of development and water (a concern that the RSA is hoping to develop further when participating in a conference on this issue in Accra, Ghana). Equally we wanted to ensure that the audience had enough of the basic science to appreciate both the importance of H₂O to living things, as well as the vulnerability of ecosystems when faced with changes in water tables or water-borne pollution for example.

As a producer working with the BBC Natural History Film Unit, Jeremy Bristow is well-placed to introduce both his work as a documentary film-maker as well as comment on the BBC's engagement in this area. I am sure the tensions between narrative drive and entertainment versus producing innovative and informed documentaries in the best tradition of the British Documentary movement will emerge in the course of Jeremy's presentation. Tim Collins who has written on environmental aesthetics and the complex notions of nature at work in art today will represent the voice of the committed artist researcher concerned with pressing social issues and the role that artistic practice can play.

We have invited artist and film-maker Andrej Zdravic to present his film Riverglass- A river ballet in four seasons (1997) concerned with presenting the 'materiality' of the river Soca. A symbol of importance in Slovenian culture, the film presents the force and clarity of the water from the point of view of the river itself, a Gaian

perspective possibly. In its content and development of specialist filming equipment it recalls other film-makers landscape interventions (for instance Michael Snow's La Region Centrale (1970)).

The choice of Bristol for the venue for this conference is overdetermined in many ways. Bristol has a legacy both of natural history film-making and as one of the early centres of the UK conservation movement (Peter Scott's Slimbridge wildfowl reserve). It has an active environmental constituency viz the Wildscreen and Communicate conferences, and we offer an open screening linked to the conference at a pre-launch event at The Cube, Bristol on Tuesday. Bristol is also home to the UK Environment agency as well as the AHRB which is promoting research in Arts and Ecology in the HE Academy. We hope that this varied constituency will lead to a lively debate informed by the contribution of our panelists and presenters!

Mark Nash