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SHIFTING PARADIGMS
FROM ENVIRONMENTALIST FILMS TO ECOCINEMA

PAULA WILLOQUET-MARICONDI

An idea, a relationship, can go extinct, just like an animal or a plant.—Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature*

The proliferation of international and domestic film festivals dedicated to environmentally oriented films attests to the crucial function of the emerging genre of ecocinema to "challenge and broaden audiences' perception and understanding of the complex world that surrounds us."[1] The annual Environmental Film Festival in Washington, DC, one of the largest, showcases a wide selection of fiction, documentary, and experimental films, with themes ranging from the vital connections between healthy food, fresh water, and the environment, to the patenting of genetically modified seeds, fresh water shortages and privatization, climate change, world hunger, and the impacts of globalization on indigenous peoples and environments.

While environmental film festivals educate viewers about a range of environmental issues, they also help bridge the gap between activist filmmakers, the general public, and educators. The Eckert College Environmental Films Festival, for example, integrates film screenings with discussion sessions lead by academic scholars. The Wild and Scenic Environmental Film Festival not only makes its films available for rental to the local community but also packages the best films of the festival for nationwide tours. The tours aim to "expose people to forward-thinking ideas and global awareness" through films that not only "highlight the concerns but [also] provide solutions."[2]

As the variety of subjects and approaches featured in the films showcased in these festivals grows, so does the understanding of what constitutes an "environment." For example, the Finger Lakes Environmental Film Festival markets itself more comprehensively than other festivals, as a "multimedia interarts extravaganza" that engages in larger global conversations about diverse issues such as "labor, war, health, disease, music, intellectual property, fine art, software, remix culture, economics,

archives, AIDS, women's rights and human rights."[3] This shifting and expanding conception of "environment" to include virtual and human-made environments—such as software and archives—can pose a challenge to narrowing the definition of ecocinema as a genre whose identifying characteristic is its focus on matters of environmental health and justice. Another challenge in defining this genre is the ease with which the prefix "eco" tends to get attached to words and concepts so as to "greenwash" them, casting over them an appealing aura of environmentalism and potentially making the notion of an "eco" cinema sometimes suspect. Should all films touching on issues relating to the environment be given this label? Should all "environments," including virtual ones, be given the same value and consideration as living ecosystems in regards to preservation and survival?

As Lewis Ulman has noted, virtual and material landscapes often inform and affect one another. As these two "worlds" become increasingly bound, we are compelled to define parameters for ethical and healthy relations between them. "If our virtual models of whatever sort are leading us into unhealthy relationships with our environment," writes Ulman, "then we need to change those models, not fantasize about abandoning virtuality" (355). By virtue of being *re-presentations* of the "real" world, films are a type of virtual environment that at the same time model for us ways of perceiving and engaging with material and organic environments. From this standpoint, as a specific type of environmentally oriented cinema, ecocinema can offer us alternative models for how to represent and engage with the natural world; these models have the potential to foster a healthier and more sustainable relationship to that world.

Thus, films whose overt intent is to educate and provoke personal and political action in response to environmental challenges must be distinguished from those films David Ingram calls "environmentalist." The prefix "eco" in ecocinema serves the specific function of reminding us of the Greek *oikos*, meaning "house" or "home." As the geo-ecologist and environmental ethicist Stan Rowe points out, the prefix "eco"

> has the double advantage of reminding humanity where it is domiciled, while expressing no prejudice in favour of organisms, hence no denigration of earth, water and air as less than organisms, as merely their environment. It implies equal importance among all components, while also implying that everything existing within the Ecosphere, including the human race, is a product of it, a subdivision of it, a part of it, and therefore less important than it. The Whole Home is the prime reality; all else within is fragmentary, disarticulated, lost, and meaningless until conceived and experienced in the context of the Ecosphere.

An important distinction I wish to establish between "environmentalist" films and ecocinema is the latter's consciousness-raising and activist intentions, as well as responsibility to heighten awareness about contemporary issues and practices affecting planetary health. Ecocinema overtly strives to inspire personal and political action on the part of viewers, stimulating our thinking so as to bring about concrete changes in the choices we make, daily and in the long run, as individuals and as societies, locally and globally. The capacity to choose consciously, with an awareness of the planetary consequences of our choices, is uniquely human. Ecocinema helps us examine our choices and question whether they are expressive of "ecological wisdom" or "ecological insanity," as Joseph Meeker puts it (163). "Human behavior," says Meeker, "has generally been guided by presumed metaphysical principles which have neglected to recognize that man is a species of animal whose welfare depends upon successful integration with the plants, animals, and land that make up his environment" (163). Ecocinema can assist us in redressing this shortsightedness.

Films falling within the genre of ecocinema can work on our perceptions of nature and of environmental issues through a variety of approaches. A lyrical and contemplative style can foster an appreciation for ecosystems and all of nature's constituents—air, water, earth, and organisms. Alternatively, ecocinema can deploy an overt activist approach to inspire our care, inform, educate, and motivate us to act on the knowledge they provide. These divergent approaches are exemplified, respectively, by the two films analyzed here: the independent experimental video *Riverglass: A Ballet in Four Seasons* (1997) and the environmental justice documentary *Power: One River Two Nations* (1996).[4] An understanding of the differences in the values reflected in these films helps distinguish ecocinema from environmentalist films; this distinction, in turn, helps us explore the contrasting values reflected by an anthropocentric and an ecocentric worldview.

SHIFTING PARADIGMS: FROM ANTHROPOCENTRISM TO ECOCENTRISM

The ecocentric values to be found in ecocinema constitute a paradigm shift, that is, a shift in the way we regard the place and function of humans on the planet and the way we value ecosystems. For many

environmental thinkers, this paradigm shift moves us from a narrow anthropocentric worldview to an earth-centered, or ecocentric, view in which the ecosphere, rather than merely the human sphere, is taken as the "center of *value* for humanity" (my emphasis; see Rowe).[5] My preference for the term "ecocentric," rather than the more common "biocentric," is based on Rowe's definition of the ecosphere as the "prime reality" comprising the four spheres—the atmosphere, the hydrosphere, the lithosphere, and the biosphere. As Rowe notes, "Humanity came into being within regional ecosystems—forest, savannah, grass-land, seashore—as symbiotic parts of them, co-evolved with them, inseparable from them, along with a host of companion organisms of equal merit and importance. Living things arose within the ecosystems that the Ecosphere comprises. Thus the truth: Life is a phenomenon of the Ecosphere."

In many respects, Darwinian evolutionary theory already was an expression of such a shift in understanding the place of humans on the planet. Darwinian and post-Darwinian science initiated the decentralization of humanity, both in relation to a hypothetical evolutionary "path" and in relation to all other life forms. It deteleologized evolution and helped undermine the idea of a progressive and cumulative development by noting that evolution occurs over both periods of stability and periods of dramatic transitions.

Neo-Darwinian theories of evolution also enlarged Darwin's concept of adaptation to mean coadaptation between organisms and their environment. The nineteenth-century model of evolution as competitive was replaced with a cooperative model that emphasizes coadaptation and symbiosis. Recognizing symbiosis as an evolutionary force, notes Fritjof Capra, "has profound philosophical implications. All larger organisms, including ourselves, are living testimonies to the fact that destructive practices do not work in the long run. In the end the aggressors always destroy themselves, making way for others who know how to cooperate and get along" (243).

In addition to its scientific roots in Darwinian theory and the science of ecology, ecocentrism's intellectual roots can be traced to various modern Western as well as traditional East Asian philosophies. Lawrence Buell, for example, provides a broad overview of the influence of certain continental philosophies, holistic environmental ethics, and Eastern philosophies/religions on the ecocentric ethos, singling out the writings of Aldo Leopold (land ethic), Arne Naess (deep ecology), Martin Heidegger (ontology), Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gaston Bachelard (phenomenology), Spinoza (ethical monism), as well as the influences of Gandhi and of Buddhism and Taoism.[6]

To speak of ecocentrism as an alternative to anthropocentrism seems paradoxical: the word itself reintroduces the spatial image of a "center," and the user of the term is, after all, human. How do humans speak on behalf of the ecosphere without being anthropocentric or anthropomorphic in this very act of speaking? This, argues Warwick Fox in *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology*, is the "anthropocentric fallacy," for even if all valuations are generated by humans, they need not be human-centered (21). The word "center" should not be taken to express a simple prioritizing.

Rather, ecocentrism denotes a shift in values that takes into consideration the well-being of the whole ecosphere, which *includes* humanity. There is no paradox, then, since humanity is part of the biotic community, one of the components of the ecosphere. But also, as Buell notes, "It is entirely possible without hypocrisy to maintain biocentric values in principle while recognizing that in practice these must be constrained by anthropocentric considerations, whether as a matter of strategy or as a matter of intractable human self-interestedness" (134). To be ecocentric, albeit in an "anthropogenic" or "anthropologic" way, makes sense and is perhaps inevitable. To be anthropocentrically biased in humanity's favor is in the long run, as Paul W. Taylor suggests, "irrational" (78).

Another way to approach the anthropocentric/ecocentric paradox, one taken by Joseph Meeker, is to acknowledge that human and nonhuman nature share certain qualities and interests, and that our survival interests are not in opposition to those of nonhuman nature, but are interconnected and interdependent with it. Rather than leading to an anthropomorphizing of nonhuman nature for the sake of promoting a narrow anthropocentric agenda, such recognition can help us put the "nature" back into the "human," and place human nature in a more harmonious relationship with the rest of nature, not at its center.

ECOCINEMA AND THE LIMITS OF ENVIRONMENTALIST FILMS

In his study of environmentalism and Hollywood, David Ingram defines environmentalist films as those in which environmental issues are central to the narrative but where the environment is merely another "topical issue" at Hollywood's disposal. Environmentalist films, argues Ingram, are "ideological agglomerations that draw on and perpetuate a range of contradictory discourses concerning the relationship between human beings and the environment" (viii).

While the degree to which these films might offer a "pro-environment," "pro-conservation," or "pro-sustainability" perspective varies greatly, their fundamental message is one that affirms rather than challenges the culture's fundamental anthropocentric ethos. As Ingram

notes, "Hollywood environmentalist movies often use their concerns with non-human nature, whether wilderness or wild animals, as a basis for speculation on human relationships, thereby making those concerns conform to Hollywood's commercial interest in anthropocentric, human interest stories" (10). Given Hollywood's commercial imperative, it is not surprising that ecocinema is more likely to reflect an independent and experimental approach to production, play at film festivals, art houses, and on public television, and often be distributed through the Internet or grassroots organizations.

Since the publication of Ingram's book, a number of environmentalist fiction films have been released that could well be included in that study and that fall short of fulfilling the goals of ecocinema outlined here. For example, Steven Soderbergh's *Erin Brockovich* (2000) was hailed by the press and audiences alike as offering a model of environmental activism. The film is structured around an environmental justice issue, and its female protagonist, played by Julia Roberts and based on the real-life Brockovich, does serve as a model of activism for audiences. However, by the end of the film, the contamination of soil, water, and human life that should have remained the focus of the narrative is upstaged by the individual courage and heroism of the main character and also by the material rewards that come with such heroism: the expensive downtown high-rise office, the shiny red gas-guzzling SUV, the $2 million in the bank, and, of course, the media fame.

It is not my intention to minimize the real-life Brockovich's dedication to raising awareness about water contamination and corporate malpractice; after all, we do need examples of people taking action in the face of corporate disregard for human and environmental health. But by the end of the movie, not only are the working-class affected families, bodies, and environments forgotten by the film but so is any serious discussion of a way of life that demands ever-increasing dependence on nonrenewal and polluting sources of energy, not to mention obscene profit margins. By focusing on Chromium 6—rather than the more widespread mercury contamination of rivers and streams, for example—the film exploits our fears only to reassure us that we have nothing to fear, as long as heroic individuals like Brockovich can be counted on.

In fact, our dependence on nonrenewable sources of energy, such as chlorine chemical plants and coal-fired power plants, is a significant contributor to the contamination of streams, wetlands, reservoirs, and lakes with mercury, and to global climate change. Scientific studies continue to show widespread mercury contamination in fish, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has issued fish consumption advisories because of mercury contamination for all but seven states. There are no Hollywood films about this.

One of the appeals of Hollywood films is that, striving to reach a broad audience and maximize box office receipts, they often and easily lend themselves to multiple and even conflicting readings. This is why, for example, Pat Brereton can argue that the "utopian ecological themes" that abound in Hollywood films "help to promote an ecological metanarrative, connecting humans with their environment" (12, 13). They also permit us to emphasize those aspects that resonate with our own concerns and sensibilities, our own ideological predispositions. The visual excesses in the representation of Erin Brockovich's body—she's beautiful, she's sexy, and she never wears the same outfit twice—are pleasing, and paradoxically serve to draw our attention to the body's vulnerability to toxic contamination. While the film links human and environmental damage, it does so by focusing our attention and investment on Brockovich's beautiful and healthy body, rather than on the "toxic bodies" of the affected community members.

Like *Erin Brockovich*, the 2004 global warming disaster movie *The Day after Tomorrow* might be approached as a "purely escapist" experience, or as a reflection of the utopian ideals that for Brereton are potentially useful to the ecological cause (23). From an ecocritical standpoint, however, the film's reliance on dramatic exaggerations, instant consequences, and dazzling special effects; its absolute apocalyptic premise and minimal attention to science; and its emphasis on the individualistic heroic actions of the male protagonist upstage any real concern and engagement with the reality of global warming. In his analysis of the film, Ingram notes that

> environmental problems such as global warming, ozone pollution, industrial pollution . . . are usually slow to develop, not amenable to fast solutions and are often caused by factors both invisible and complex. None of these facts fit easily into the commercial formulae of Hollywood or mainstream narratives like *The Day after Tomorrow*, which favour human interest stories in which individual protagonists undergo a moral transformation or they resolve their problems through heroic actions in the final act.[7]

Moreover, Hollywood films such as this one have made environmental calamities "perversely attractive" but ultimately inconsequential, adds Ingram. Presenting environmental apocalypse in such melodramatic and spectacular ways, and placing the narrative focus on the he-

roic actions of one individual and on survivors rather than on the victims, serves to protect spectators from the causes and implications of the drama enacted on screen, which we can enjoy unproblematically. While we wait for scenarios like those in *The Day after Tomorrow* to unfold and for heroic individuals to come forth and save the day, shall we ignore the less spectacular, by Hollywood standards, but much more real and devastating impacts of human action on the ecosphere?

As a strategy for creating audience identification, the focus on a heroic individual is certainly effective and commonly used, even by documentaries. The global warming documentaries *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Everything's Cool* offer us compelling characters whom we are invited to trust, admire, identify with, and emulate. In *An Inconvenient Truth,* Al Gore deploys the Hollywood strategy of the "heroic" individual, casting himself in the role of seer and savior. While this is an aspect of the film that was met with mixed reactions, there is no denying that, generally, humans respond positively to other humans with whom we can identify and depend on for guidance, inspiration, and encouragement. But what happens when the "messenger" is a bear, a frog, an owl, an insect, an ecosystem, or dramatically altered weather patterns? How can film bring about concern for and identification with the nonhuman without anthropomorphizing it, essentially inviting us to cross species lines in order to connect and empathize?

In his study of ecologically oriented avant-garde and experimental cinema, Scott MacDonald defines ecocinema as a type of cinema able to provide "an evocation of the experience of being immersed in the natural world," or, alternatively, as creating "the illusion of preserving 'Nature'" (108). One of the functions that MacDonald attributes to avant-garde films in general, and one that certainly is reflected in ecocinema, is that of "a retraining of perception, as a way of offering an alternative to conventional media-spectatorship" (109). By prompting us to engage differently with representation, in part by acknowledging representation as such and by not confusing the technologically mediated "evocation of experience" with direct multisensorial experience, experimental and avant-garde ecocinema can help create the conditions for alternative modes of engaging with both cinema *and* with the natural world.

There are many approaches to retraining perception, and the films I single out here do so in different ways. The experimental video *Riverglass: A Ballet in Four Seasons* invites us to adopt a different relationship vis-à-vis the natural environment, of which we are a part and on which we depend for survival, by prompting us to adopt a different relationship to film spectatorship itself. *Riverglass* helps us practice a particular

form of ecocriticism; it invites us to question the implications of our traditional, culturally determined representations of natural features and elements. The environmental justice documentary *Power: One River Two Nations,* on the other hand, focuses on grassroots models of activist citizenship while also offering us alternative perspectives on human/nature relations.

LYRICAL ECOCINEMA: *RIVERGLASS: A BALLET IN FOUR SEASONS*

As we become more conscious of the ways nature tends to be represented, of how we process these representations, and of what we come to expect from representations of nature, we gain more sensitivity to the ideological origins and impacts of these representations on our lived relationships to people and places. How these relationships are understood and lived in turn directly informs our positions and responses to specific issues, from global warming and environmental contamination to the control of essential communal natural resources such as water.

In an essay entitled "Toward an Environmental Justice Ecocriticism," T. V. Reed argues that our aesthetic appreciation of nature, and of representations of nature in literature, photography, film, advertising, and the like, has paradoxically worked to veil the causes and effects of environmental degradation. I would like to explore further this problematic issue of the aesthetic appreciation of nature in representation, an issue linked to the function of technology in representing nature, by discussing the potential of a film such as *Riverglass: A Ballet in Four Seasons* to stimulate a shift in consciousness and in expectations about the natural world and our relationship to it.

Andrej Zdravic's *Riverglass* is a 41-minute-long lyrical video that visually immerses viewers into the crystal-clear emerald waters of the river Soča in Slovenia. The Soča has been described as the jewel of the Slovenian rivers; the Slovenian poet Simon Gregorčič called it the "lucid daughter of the mountains, graceful in all her natural beauty" in his poem "To the Soča."[8] *Riverglass* is not an activist, polemical, or political film. It does not deal with "issues" in the traditional sense. It is not about injustices. It has no human characters—except briefly at the end when we see in an extreme long shot what appears to be a small human figure waking across a shallow part of the river. It has no dialogue. It has no story. Or rather, it has no human-based story. The "story" it tells is of a different "nature."

However, the demands that the film's length and approach make of viewers are polemical and political: they are the product of a political action because they are transformative of our perceptions and aware-

ness of nature; they reframe our experience of ourselves as consumers of representations of nature and as members of the biotic community that includes us and the river. By challenging our habits of perception, our ways of seeing—including our relationship to real and filmic time as well as our expectations about the representation of nature—*Riverglass* opens up a space in which we might meditate on our relationship to the natural world and how that world has come to function in representation, and in reality.

MacDonald has pointed out that film viewers are conditioned to experience beautiful landscapes as "*not* something deserving of sustained attention or commitment" (113). *Riverglass* challenges this conditioning by giving us nothing else on which to focus our attention for 41 minutes but the flow of the river, from within the river, through the span of the four seasons. In these 41 minutes, either the river comes to matter or it does not; and *Riverglass* compels us to make that choice, and to acknowledge it as a choice.

At the same time, *Riverglass* does not allow us to forget that we are watching a recorded, manufactured image of the river—although it does not idealize the technology that produced the images as films generally do, overtly or covertly. A glass box that houses the camera is revealed whenever the water level of the river changes, as the seasons change, as the snow melts, as the summer storms disturb the often quiet flow of the river. We see the water sliding down the transparent walls of the box. At times, we see both the inside of the river and the river's surroundings in a split-screen effect created by the glass box and the water, not by special effects or editing, giving us an opportunity to reestablish our bearings temporally and spatially.

Riverglass transforms our conditioned relationship to time by demanding that we be patient and appreciative of something to which we rarely lend our attention. It asks us to see the river in its own terms, not in ours; to experience the river for itself, not for what resources it can provide us. It challenges our conditioned relationship to space as well by making us uncomfortably aware of the dark screening room, the chairs we sit on, the sometimes restless audience. But we are also captivated by the space represented in the film—the river, in all its clarity and calm, its energy and vitality.

Riverglass creates the conditions for an exploration of a different kind of relation to the nonhuman world, what wildlife ecologist and writer Aldo Leopold defined as a relationship founded on a land ethic that enlarges the boundaries of the community to include the land, in the broadest sense. This land ethic, says Leopold, "changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it" (240).

Riverglass does this subtly and indirectly: by slowing down time; by demanding that we notice the "insignificant" details of the life of the river; by suggesting to us, through its self-reflexive elements, that there is no dichotomy between the river as "object" and the human as "subject"; by proposing that our experience of the river in the film is an expression of "being-in-nature." The making of *Riverglass* did not require that nature adapt to our needs. *Riverglass* gives us breathtaking views of nothing but details, not only skipping the sweeping landscape vistas found in most nature films but also not assigning a role or function to the landscape.

Riverglass is as close to a cinematic rendition of nature writing as I have seen. It is a metaphorical expression of the symbiotic relationship between people and nature, a relationship that need not be exploitative or invasive of nature in a damaging way, but that suggests instead the possibility of a healthy exchange and coexistence. *Riverglass* is a visual evocation of the deep ecological insight expressed by Canadian geneticist David Suzuki, following his initial encounter with First Nations people:

> When I first encountered First Nations people, I was struck by the way they referred to the earth as their "mother." They would tell me things like: we are made of the four sacred elements—earth, air, fire, and water. And as I reflected on that, I realized we framed the environmental problem the wrong way. There's no environment "out there" and we have to interact with it. We are the environment, because we are the Earth. And we're made by the four sacred elements—earth, air, fire, and water. And that's not meant in a metaphorical or poetic way of speaking. They mean that in the most scientifically profound way. And for me, that began a whole shift in the way that I looked at the issues that confront us and the way we live on this planet.[9]

Shifting the way we look at what we call the "environment," the way we see our own position in relation to the rest of the biotic community, is fundamental to bringing about a shift in the way we live. That is essentially what *Riverglass* compels us to do: readjust our perception.

Perhaps the central predicament that the study of representations enables us to address, as we address specific manifestations of social and environmental degradation and injustice, is that of perception—or misperception. We have erected a social structure, a civilization, based

on a perceptual error regarding the place of humans within the biotic community. Since the visual arts deal in matters of perceptions and representations, they might help us regain a proper perspective. *Riverglass* exemplifies how ecocinema can help us shift and readjust our perceptions, and therefore our actions, in directions that are more environmentally sound—that is, that are sustaining and affirming of all life. This is one of the activist functions open to ecocinema.

ACTIVIST ECOCINEMA: *POWER: ONE RIVER TWO NATIONS*

The perceptual habits and ideologies that define nature in aesthetic and utilitarian terms (nature as beautiful and nature as mere resource and raw material) are the same ones that have historically defined indigenous peoples and lands as invisible and underdeveloped. The opening images of Magnus Isacsson's 1996 documentary, *Power: One River Two Nations*, enact a critique of this ideology by giving us a bird's-eye view of the Northern Quebec territory that reminds us of how film has traditionally supported the rhetoric of "Native invisibility," casting the land and its people as remnants of a forgotten, wild, and desolate frontier, needing to be rescued from underdevelopment. This portrayal is immediately challenged by the caption asserting that "most of the world's great rivers have been dammed and destroyed by hydroelectric projects," by the choice of traditional music, and by the montage sequence juxtaposing Canadian premier Robert Bourassa's statements in support of the hydroelectric project and shots of a group of Cree on a speed boat, flying their native flag. As one critic has noted, "Native film must establish a different visual rhetoric of sovereignty. The presentation of a map of Cree and Inuit land alone will not establish it as a human habitat."[10]

Funded by the National Film Board of Canada, Telefilm, and TV Ontario, and made by nonindigenous filmmakers, this film chronicles the events that led to the Cree's defeat of Hydro-Québec's plan to establish a new hydroelectric plant on the Great Whale River; however, more important, in the process of documenting these events, the film asks us to rethink our understanding of land: not as scenic landscape or economic resource, but as *place* and as intimately linked to culture, identity, and survival.

This film is also an example of the role of activist media in the service of indigenous struggles for self-determination. The camera becomes a witness and an agent for change in the transnational political struggle that culminates in New York governor Mario Cuomo's decision, in 1992, to cancel the $17 billion contract to buy electricity from Hydro-Québec. The film specifically addresses a nonindigenous audience; to that end, it effectively uses symbolic events such as the Earth Day celebration, and known political figures such as Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and New York state assemblyman Bill Hoyt, both of whom demanded that a certifiable environmental impact statement be done on the project. One of the film's challenges is to make its Western audience sympathetic to the plight of a people who, for many in the industrialized world, simply do not exist. One New York state representative is reported to have said that before this issue came to his attention, he had never even heard of the Cree. As Assemblyman Hoyt explains in the film in a 1990 statement issued on the steps of the New York state legislature in Albany, "To many New Yorkers and Americans, it's way out there. And what's there? Tundra, muskeg, a couple of Black Spruce trees?"

To the extent that indigenous populations do exist in the minds of Western audiences, they are often perceived as either unfortunate or misguided in their resistance to the inevitability of development, usually defined in economic and technological terms. In this case, Hydro-Québec is the instrument for emancipation and progress, and the Cree are an obstacle to progress. As a representative of Québec Manufacturers' Association put it in the film, "Fifteen thousand people are holding hostage the rest of the province and its economic development." An alternative way to understand "development" would be to assess the environmental impact of technological innovations. For example, writing about the impact of the James Bay I project on the La Grande reservoir system, Winona LaDuke points out that the resulting mercury contamination from large amounts of vegetation decay is six times safe levels. "About two-thirds of the people downstream from the reservoirs have mercury contamination in their bodies—some at thirty times the acceptable level" (103).

The other challenge that *Power* faces, and perhaps the film's greatest challenge, is to evoke a different kind of understanding of human relationship to land: land as not merely territory or resource, but as a cultural, political, historical space and the sacred repository of culture, identity, and (bio)diversity. This approach to understanding our relation to the nonhuman world echoes Aldo Leopold's call for a land ethic. Whether the film succeeds in evoking this relationship has been a matter of debate. One commentator notes that the film's visual rhetoric is closer to that of mainstream environmentalist films, where "landscapes are depicted as pristine wilderness, and a few shots of the extraordinary harshness of the winter seem to echo the prejudices of the south that Northern Quebec does indeed remain the uninhabitable, untamable frontier."[11]

But this critique of the film's appeal to images of "pristine wilderness" fails to take into account other elements in the film, elements that infuse these images with a different meaning. For instance, the film consistently shows the interdependence of people and land, visually and verbally, as in a segment where a Cree woman explains through a voice-over that "the land is our connection to re-strengthening our spirit as a people. The more land is destroyed, the more our spirit is destroyed." The woman's voice is accompanied by the sounds of drums and Native chanting, and by visual elements that evoke this interconnection; the film joins her words to a montage of aerial views of the land, in all its expansiveness and diversity. At one point in the segment the woman's voice is overlaid with the sound of running water as the camera cuts to a close-up of a body of water.

This segment is bracketed by two moments that illustrate the complexity both of the situation the Cree face today and of the relations within the larger Cree community. The film thus avoids lapsing into a simplistic and romanticized portrayal of the Cree as "noble savages," showing instead the inner conflicts and disagreements over self-determination that they face as a "unified nation" struggling to survive, coexist with, and respond to the pressures of another nation striving to meet its growing energy needs.[12]

The scene immediately preceding the one referenced above shows Grand Chief Matthew Coon Come signing a controversial agreement consenting to additional flooding in the James Bay area, where Hydro-Québec had built the first project in 1975. In return, the Cree would receive $50 million in compensation. In reaching this compromise—thus preserving the land by the Great Whale River that would have been affected by the construction of James Bay II—the Grand Chief further sacrifices a river he says is "already dead" in order to safeguard the Cree Nation's mission to continue working to preserve their land. A paradox, no doubt, but one that the Cree have been faced with since England took possession of their territory in 1670. The scene that follows the segment suggesting the intimate connection between people and land shows the community in the town of Chisasibi chanting and performing dance rituals while demonstrators display signs linking genocide to ecocide, denouncing mercury contamination of water, land, and animals, and proclaiming that the "Earth does not belong to man. Man belongs to the Earth."[13]

While the film does not overtly challenge the developed world's unquestioned dependence on increasing amounts of energy, it creates a space in which we might begin to examine our Western conception

of progress and the values that inform our relations to the nonhuman world. Since we can no longer deny the impact of water, soil, and air contamination, as well as of climate change, on the ability of ecosystems to sustain life, why is it such a challenge for the developed world to acknowledge that for us, too, "the land is our connection to re-strengthening our spirit as a people"?

The constructions of dams and of hydroelectric projects, such as the James Bay project, are but two examples of the overexploitation of river systems affecting communities all over the world, in developed and developing countries. In 2002 Maude Barlow and Tony Clarke published *Blue Gold: The Battle against Corporate Theft of the World's Water,* a devastating account of the looming global water shortages that would make it "the most threatening ecological, economic, and political crisis of the twenty-first century" (from the book's jacket).[14] Calling for a new water ethic, and noting the acute plight of indigenous peoples who "have been disproportionately hurt by the construction of megadams and water diversion projects" (215), Barlow and Clarke echo the ethical worldview of the Cree Nation: that their fate as a people is bound to the fate of the land, the ecosystem on which they (and we) depend materially and spiritually. "Water is also a foundation of spiritual life for Indigenous peoples—a further reason that their proprietary interest in waters on their traditional lands must be respected, say Barlow and Clarke" (215–16).[15]

Power is exemplary of the overt activist potential of ecocinema to document (and also to intervene in) communal action for the preservation of self-determination and local control over communal rights. It urges a reconsideration of what constitutes a community, of what it means to belong to the human and biotic community. This film confronts us with a clash between cultures, worldviews, and perceptions of nature. It invites us to understand culture as more than a matter of racial and ethnic differences, but as a matter of differences in values that either promote or hinder the ability of human communities and environments to secure a sustainable future.

We cannot isolate ecosystems from their relation to society and culture, and vice versa. We also cannot ignore the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on Native people, people of color, and poor people. As Reed notes, "Any serious environmentalist must now realize that for decades the worst forms of environmental degradation have been enabled by governmental and corporate policies of dumping problems on communities of color, poor whites, and Third World" (146).

If we are to enter a sustainable environmental era, we must acknowl-

edge the ways in which human relationships with the land are mediated by cultural norms and practices, including the practice of cinema, and are bound to power dynamics in relation to gender, race, ethnicity, and class. Films such as *Riverglass* and *Power* prompt us to respond to the values, beliefs, and patterns at work in the films as well as in the culture at large, particularly when those patterns are counter to an ecologically sound and sustainable way of being-in-the-world.

NOTES

Part of this essay was first published in "Ecocinema as Environmental Activism," *Mid-Atlantic Almanack* 16 (2007): 125–45, and is used here with permission.

1. From the Washington, DC, Environmental Film Festival, quoted in "Wild Film News" (http://www.wildfilmnews.org/calendar.php).
   "Wild Film News" provides a calendar of environmental film festivals around the world.
2. See http://www.wildandscenicfilmfestival.org/.
3. See http://www.ithaca.edu/fleff/.
4. *Power: One River Two Nations* may be acquired through Forum 5 Inc., 5505 St. Laurent Blvd., Suite 3008, Montreal, QC H2T 1S6 Canada. *Riverglass: A Ballet in Four Seasons* is available through Canyon Cinema at http://www.canyoncinema.com/.
   Portions of this material were presented at the conference "Arts and Ecology: Toward an Eco-cinema," Bristol, UK, 28–29 September 2005.
5. For succinct and clear definitions of the terms anthropocentrism, biocentrism, and ecocentrism, see the "Glossary of Selected Terms" in Buell 134–35, 137–38. Anthropocentrism posits the interests of humans as having priority over those of nonhumans; biocentrism acknowledges that all organisms, humans included, are part of a larger web of life or biotic community "whose interests must constrain or direct or govern the human interest" (134); ecocentrism posits the interest of the ecosphere as primary over those of individual species and "points to the interlinkage of the organismal and the inanimate" (137).
6. For an overview of the convergences between Deep Ecology and other ecocentric modes of thought, see Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985).
7. From a talk by David Ingram at the conference "Arts and Ecology: Toward an Eco-cinema," Bristol, UK, 28–29 September 2005.
8. Quoted in http://www.vlada.si/en/about_slovenia/geography/waters_in_slovenia/rivers_the_mellifuous_eyes_of_slovenia/print.html (retrieved 20 November 2009).
9. From *It's Not Just Empty Space*, a 30-minute video directed by Tony Papa as part of the second season of *Natural Heroes*, the national television series of independently produced films on the environment; see http://www.greentreks.org/naturalheroes/season2/notjustemptyspace.asp.
10. I thank Michelle Stewart for bringing this film to my attention and for sharing her unpublished essay "*Power* and the Representation of Sovereignty," which I have taken the liberty to quote.
11. Ibid.
12. While archeological evidence estimates that the Cree's presence in the region extends back 3,500 years, some historians believe they were the first people to occupy the northern region as far back as 8,000 or 9,000 years ago. Until the mid-twentieth century, they were a nomadic hunting and gathering culture occupying a land area of approximately 133,158 square miles. Estimated to have a population of about 5,000 from the time Europeans first started keeping records, today the 12,000 Cree occupy nine communities. The Cree have survived modern times through a series of adaptations, starting in 1670 when King Charles of England transferred the lands to his cousin Prince Rupert. The lands were transferred to the Government of Canada in 1868 and to Québec in 1898. For an overview of the Cree's past and present in the region, see "The Crees of Yesterday and Today," http://www.gcc.ca/pdf/TRD000000002.pdf.
13. The relationship between the Cree and Hydro-Québec is quite different today than it was at the time the film was made, although internal disagreements continue to exist. Under the leadership of their current Grand Chief, Ted Moses, the Cree have entered into agreements with Hydro-Québec on two new hydro projects, the EM-1 and EM-1A/Rupert, as part of a larger development deal signed in 2002. Divisions in the community continue, as nearly one-third voted against the 2002 agreement with Québec, and advocacy groups such as Rupert Reverence continue to oppose the damming of the Rupert River. I would like to thank Kreg Ettenger from the Department of Geography and Anthropology at the University of Southern Maine for helping me understand the intricacies of the situation. Professor Ettenger is working on a project to document the Cree cultural heritage of the area that will be flooded.
14. Since the publication of this book, a number of books and films on water scarcity and privatization have been released. One of the most comprehensive examinations of the global water crisis I have seen so far is *FLOW: For the Love of Water*, directed by Irena Salina (http://www.flowthefilm.com/index.php). See also *Blue Gold: World Water Wars* (2008), directed by Sam Boso (http://www.bluegold-worldwaterwars.com/) and based on the book *Blue Gold* (2002) by Maude Barlow and Tony Clarke. For an excellent resource on water issues, including an up-to-date listing of water-related documentaries and books, see http://waterfortheages.org/.
15. These are the sentiments expressed in Articles 25 and 26 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted by the Human Rights Council on June 29, 2006, by a vote of 30 in favor, 2 against, and 12

abstentions, with Canada voting against it. The United States is not a member of the Human Rights Council. Article 25 states: "Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual and material relationship with the lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources which they have traditionally owned or otherwise occupied or used, and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard." Article 26 states: "Indigenous peoples have the right to own, develop, control and use the lands and territories, including the total environment of the lands, air, waters, coastal seas, sea-ice, flora and fauna and other resources which they have traditionally owned or otherwise occupied or used. This includes the right to the full recognition of their laws, traditions and customs, land-tenure systems and institutions for the development and management of resources, and the right to effective measures by States to prevent any interference with, alienation of or encroachment upon these rights." See "Resolution and Declaration," http://www2.ohchr.org/english/issues/indigenous/declaration.htm.

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