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Ecocinema and Slow Cinema Spectatorship: The Politics of Viewing

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I Ecological Concerns

Ecocritical approaches to film and literature are trending topics in academia and beyond. Approaching (our) extinction in the anthropocene, we seem to have collectively taken a reflective turn in various cultural domains, including but not limited to popular cultural criticism, academic discourses, and artistic practices. Central to such debates is an existential longing to come to terms with our own finitude (individually and as a species), as well as wider ecological concerns related to the urgent sense of loss of biodiversity or, even more encompassing, life as such on our planet. Poignant too, is the consequent desire for action; attempts to avert the impending ecological crisis or to reduce its catastrophic consequences.

We see crises represented everywhere in popular fiction in literature, cinema, and other media. For instance, the genre of disaster movies taps into current fears of imminent ecological collapse (*The Day After Tomorrow*, dir. Roland Emmerich, 2004;

Don't Look Up, dir. Adam McKay, 2021; *Snowpiercer*, dir. Bong Joon-ho, 2013; *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, dir. Scott Derrickson, 2008). Or, take the cli-fi literary genre that similarly capitalises on the widespread fascination with and anxiety about the climate crisis (*American War*, Omar El Akkad, 2017; *The Water Knife*, Paolo Bacigalupi, 2015; *The Overstory*, Richard Powers, 2018; *Blackfish City*, Sam J Miller, 2018).

Artistic production is not the focus of this paper, though. Instead, it takes an interest in ecocritical discourses. Within academia, this takes place in burgeoning fields such as ecocriticism (Clark 2011; Garrard 2011; Haraway 2016; Hiltner 2015) and environmental aesthetics (Berleant 2010; Brady 2003, 2013; Carlson 2000, 2009; Morton 2007; Quigley and Slovic 2018). This article homes in more specifically on the debates on the topics of slow cinema and ecocinema, which converge on a shared concern with ecocritical effects these types of film are thought to have. Both discourses take spectatorship as the defining characteristic of both types of film alike, and both debates typically have a penchant for strong claims about the perceptual, doxastic, attitudinal, behavioural, and even socio-political powers of such films.

In this paper I will first unravel the tangle of variegated claims concerning slow and ecocinema (section 2). This meta-critical survey of the debate will then allow me to formulate four possible main critiques that could be posed against common claims concerning ecocinema spectatorship: an empirical lack, conceptual conflation, politicisation, and a simplistic communications model (section 3). Following this meta-critical analysis of the slow and ecocinema discourses, I will then move forward with making some programmatic proposals to leverage these criticisms in order to advance our thinking about the role of cinema and literature in ecocritical debates (section 4). The solutions I propose entail (1) refining the theoretical framework to be used for conceptualising effects of ecomedia use, which, in turn, (2) can inform avenues for future empirical research to substantiate claims about ecocinema spectatorship.

II On the Aesthetics and Politics of Viewing

While the main focus of this paper is the ecocinema debate, including an overview of the discourse of slow cinema can be revealing, as the similarities are striking. I thus engage in a *meta-critical* analysis of the ecocritical discourses of slow cinema and ecocinema.¹ As philosopher Martin Rossouw explains, in the context of his book on film-philosophy, such a project entails that

we take a critical step backwards from the practice of theorizing and interpreting films-as-philosophy, in order to pore over the practice itself: which assumptions about ‘philosophy’, exactly, do we bring to the notion of films doing philosophy? What are the various paths along which we analyze and interpret films-as-philosophy? And why do we want (or not want) films to ‘do’ philosophy in the first place? (2021, 3).²

If we substitute ‘film-as-philosophy’ with ecocriticism, we can immediately get a sense of the relevant motivations for and rewards of engaging in such a meta-theoretical endeavour. Similar questions concerning the project of ecocriticism seem warranted: what are the, often implicit and unacknowledged, assumptions and theoretical frameworks we bring with us as researchers, what are the unspoken aims of our academic practice, why do we want cinema and literature to do ecocriticism at all? While I do not presume that I am able to provide all the answers here (considering the limited scope of this paper), a meta-hermeneutical overview of the debates is nonetheless informative for addressing such questions. The value of such a meta-

1 I use the terms meta-critical, meta-theoretical, and meta-hermeneutic synonymously throughout this paper. On meta-theory, see Ritzer 2001; Zhao 2001. On meta-hermeneutics, see Korthals Altes 2014.

2 In their report on a previous version of this article, the anonymous reviewer rightly raised a valuable point concerning the burden of evidence for attributing unacknowledged assumptions of writers (in the case of this paper, ecocritics, and in the context of Rossouw’s book, film-philosophers). I.e., what evidence is there that allows the meta-critic to divine academics’ intentions in engaging in film-philosophy or any other academic disciplinary field of work; what can be known about ‘why’ writers theorize and interpret films in one way rather than another, if it is not observable or objectively present in the text? In response, I try to as much as possible to quote or paraphrase the writers that I engage with, in order to demonstrate what can be observed *in the texts* about their convictions (thus I refrain as much as possible from speculative, symptomatic reading and strive instead for ‘evidence-based’ reading).

theoretical project is twofold: ‘on the one hand, to *make better sense of*, and on the other to *give direction* to those theories that it takes as its subject matter’ (Rossouw 2021, 10).³

I notice at least two shared interests of both the slow and ecocinema debates: spectatorship and politics. But before I get to these discursive commonalities, I will first briefly introduce the concepts of slow cinema and eco cinema in terms of their respective aesthetics and thematics.

Slow cinema is *formally* defined as ‘a field of cinema that shares common traits and aesthetics: an emphasis on the passage of time in the shot, an undramatic narrative or non-narrative mode, and a rigorous compositional form’ (Flanagan 2012, 5). De Luca and Jorge, in their editorial introduction to a seminal edited volume on slow cinema, similarly define it as ‘an unstructured film movement made up of disparate films and practices that are conceptualised as a grouping thanks to their *comparable style*’ (2016, 4, added emphasis).

Various authors have identified a list of stylistic tropes of slow cinema. Song Hwee Lim succinctly summarises: ‘a shared propensity towards a long-take, long-shot style, with very little happening in the films’ diegeses’ (2017, 182). Asbjørn Grønstad lists the following characteristics:

the long or super-long take, action unfolding in real time, framed tableau shots, hyperrealism, and de-dramatisation. [...] The use of ellipsis, minimal exposition, episodic progression, diluted causality, contingency, ambiguity, open endings, improvisation, location shooting and use of natural light (2016, 274, 276).

3 Considering this dual value of meta-theory, I agree with Rossouw that this meta-critical work is not ‘a sort of cop-out; as if to only examine the ethical conceptions of others, without committing to one of my own, is to break some unspoken code of honor’ (2021, 8). Moreover, I readily admit that the metacritic themselves also have a positionality and their own writing ethos and equally bring their own assumptions with them, of which they are not necessarily fully aware (and this is no different for me).

Jakob Boer has proposed a tripartite distinction to delineate features of formal slowness that conjointly and in various mixtures can make a film more or less slow: slowness in-, of-, and between-the-images (2016). These dimensions refer to, respectively, the stylistic strategies of mise-en-scène, cinematography, and editing. Filmmakers can, for instance, use a static camera or a slowly moving camera; emphasize slowness and stillness through image composition, they can employ long take cinematography rather than editing; and they have means to delay narrative progression.⁴

By now, a canon of “contemporary contemplative cinema” (CCC)—as this type of film is also known—has been established, including award winning directors like Béla Tarr, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Carlos Reygadas, Albert Serra, and Kelly Reichardt.⁵ Generally, the label slow cinema designates a type of minimalist art house film whose emergence is located roughly in the 1990’s.⁶

Ecocinema is most commonly defined not so much by its shared aesthetics, but mostly in terms of its thematic content as well as artistic aims. David Ingram proposes a broad definition as films ‘that can be interpreted as addressing ecological or environmental issues’ (2014, 23). Paula Willoquet Maricondi defines ecocinema ‘as a genre whose identifying characteristic is its focus on matters of environmental health and justice’ (2010: 44).⁷

4 For more stylistic analysis of slow cinema, see Çağlayan 2018; Flanagan 2008, 2012; Jaffe 2014; Lim 2014; Seeflen 2022.

5 For instance, see: <https://unspokencinema.blogspot.com/2023/03/final-results-2023-contemplative-cinema.html>; <https://unspokencinema.blogspot.com/2009/06/ccc-timeline-2008.html>.

6 Precursors to this more recent trend that employ similar aesthetic strategies of duration can be found in postwar American experimental film, European modernism, Italian Neorealism, European and Asian New Waves, ethnographic documentaries, and video art. See Flanagan 2012 for a historical genealogy of cinematic slowness. Karen Beckman, in an attempt to correct what she considers ‘normative amnesia,’ broadens the scope even further and additionally draws attention to ‘the intersecting histories and legacies of feminist, queer, and third cinema engagements with cinematic tempo’ (2016, 125, 127).

7 On ecocinema, see also: Rust et al. 2013, 2022; Fay 2018; Ingram 2000; Ivakhiv 2013; López et al. 2023; MacDonald 2013; Pick and Naraway 2013; Weik von Mossner 2014; Willoquet-Maricondi 2010.

In contrast to ecocinema, slow cinema ‘is not particularly known for any distinct themes’, according to some authors (Stańczyk 2021, 247). However, others do observe some thematic commonalities. For one, Giulia Tronconi observes a few narrative and thematic tropes: ‘quiet mundane activities, lack of communication and languidness of action distinguish the contemporary slow film’ (2023, 35). Indeed, alienation, ennui, existential crises, the inability to communicate and connect, marginal outsider figures in society, and poor, underprivileged and underrepresented characters, are common narrative and thematic traits found in many films by Tsai Ming-Liang, Pedro Costa, and Kelly Reichardt et cetera.

The debates have strong resonances also to the extent that slowness in ecocinema is sometimes thematised by authors as a relevant consideration and, vice versa, in the way that ecocritical content of slow cinema is sometimes highlighted by authors. For instance, Elio Garcia (2021, 2022) explicitly discusses ecocritical thematic content in conjunction with slow aesthetics in the films of Filipino director Lav Diaz. Similarly, Brian Jacobson (2024) also observes ecocritical effects in Ryusuke Hamaguchi’s film *Evil Does Not Exist* (2023).⁸ Typically, such claims entail variations on the thesis that slow cinema aesthetically challenges human perception and offers a non-anthropocentric view (Lam 2016; Remes 2016). Alternatively, ecocritical theorists also discuss slow aesthetics, though this is not that common. Jennifer Rauch, for instance, ties together slowness and ecomedia (2023).

Spectatorship: On the Perceptual Powers of Cinema

Beside such aesthetic and thematic definitions, slow cinema is also often associated with a form of *spectatorship* it is said to engender. Slow movies supposedly provoke a new way of seeing, or a distinct mode of viewing. Dwyer and Perkins note that slow cinema, according to many theorists, ‘gives rise to a more contemplative, intensive and embodied relationship between film and audience’. They conclude that, ‘collectively, these reflections on slow film construct an impression that the format

⁸ Jacobson builds on Scott MacDonald’s widely cited thesis of cinema’s perceptual training ground.

engenders a *different type of seeing*' (2018, 105-106, added emphasis). Jean Ma similarly observes 'modes of perceptual recalibration commonly claimed on behalf of slow cinema' (2022, 179). A case in point is eminent film scholar David Bordwell who has characterised the effects of slow cinema by 'the way they [...] structure our attention' (2011, n.p.).⁹ He contends that slow films are 'shifting our involvement from characters and situations to the manner of presentation,' resulting in a 'dynamic between story and style' (ibid.).¹⁰

If one compares these discursive tropes with common conceptions of ecocinema, the similarities are, again, hard to ignore. Like Dwyer and Perkins astutely point out the tenet of the slow cinema debate, Pietari Kääpä also observes that 'most studies in ecomedia make references to spectators and how they may or are even expected to respond to mediated stimuli' (2013, 108). For instance, according to Scott MacDonald, ecocinema aspires to 'reinvigorate their [viewers] perceptual capacities' (2013, 19). Willoquet-Maricondi makes similar claims, arguing that ecofilms challenge

our habits of perception, our ways of seeing, [...]transform our conditioned relationship to time by demanding that we be patient and appreciative of something to which we rarely lend our attention, [...] readjust our perception (2010, 52-53).

9 Of course, Bordwell would not write this if he had no empirical evidence to support his claim. In the article, he points to Tim Smith's eye tracking studies that map the ways films structure viewers' attention (Bordwell 2011). However, Smith did not test slow cinema in particular. Therefore, the common Bazinian claim about the supposed perceptual freedom slow cinema grants spectators (made by others, but not by Bordwell in this article) is a speculative hypothesis, even if it is inferred from empirical evidence. Note that Bordwell is more cautious and does not specify *in what ways* slow cinema structures out attention. I.e., he makes no unwarranted claim of *absolute* spectatorial freedom. Below, in section 3, I discuss an empirical study that put this hypothesis of slow cinema's viewing mode to the test.

10 Similar claims about slow cinema spectatorship have been made by others in various forms of phrasing: a spectatorial practice (Flanagan 2012), activity of viewing (Kuhn and Westwell 2020), mode of engagement (De Luca and Jorge 2016), viewing experience (De Luca 2013), way of looking (Çağlayan 2018), special kind of attention (Ferguson 1999), perceptual transformation (Rugo 2022), different economy of signification and attention (Balsom 2019), contemplative mode (Betz-Bornstein 2017; Jaffe 2014; Koepnick 2017; Taberham 2018), really looking (Fowler 2017), or a manner or way of seeing (Lim 2014; Betz-Bornstein 2017; Warner 2015).

These authors stand in for a broader tendency of ecocinema theorists to highlight spectatorship as a crucial component of this type of film.

Claims of new ways of seeing that cinema promotes, upon closer look, refer to a heterogeneous set of effects. In other words, authors vary considerably in what they *mean* when they postulate the new viewing modes that cinema engenders. In addition to the narrowly defined perceptual claims I outlined before, some writers also make broader and bolder arguments pertaining to epistemic, attitudinal, or even behavioural effects. In other words, the described effects pertain not just to film viewing, but to more encompassing transformations of subjective relations to our natural and cultural environments too. As authors do not always explicitly flag the varying extent and scope of their arguments, it is worthwhile making an effort to unpack such claims.

Concerning ecomedia, various authors claim that ‘they challenge audiences to view their relationship with nature anew’ (Kääpä 2013, 107). Scott MacDonald, for instance, argues that these films aim to ‘help to nurture a more environmentally progressive mindset’ (2013, 20). Willoquet-Maricondi make similar strong claims that ecocinema can

Inspire *personal and political action*, bring[s] about concrete *changes in the choices we make*, daily and in the long run, as individuals and as societies, locally and globally (2010, 45, added emphasis). [...]

Create the conditions for alternative modes of engaging with both cinema *and* with the natural world (ibid., 50). [...]

Help us shift and readjust our perception, and *therefore our actions*’ (ibid., 54, added emphasis).

These and other authors who endorse such a strong position thus closely connect various types of effects, claiming that modulations in our ways of seeing can lead to consequent changes in attitude, beliefs, and behaviour too. This amounts to a transformation of not just our way of seeing of the film-world but also of our *world view*.

Again, accounts of slow cinema are strikingly similar in this respect. Here too, the understandings of the spectatorial mode associated with slow cinema evidently vary considerably. Besides the previously discussed claims concerning the more literal, perceptual mode of viewing *films*, some authors likewise have expanded the concept to also include aftereffects on viewers in *everyday life*. Remember that Bordwell typified slow cinema's poetics in terms of its structuring of the viewer's attention. This is still a narrow claim about a cinematic viewing mode. However, he then seamlessly extends his argument into a subsequent and much stronger claim that these films not only change the way viewers look at films while they are at the cinema (or wherever they prefer to watch a film nowadays), but that 'for some viewers, me [Bordwell] included, they do more. They also ask you to transfer those viewing skills to life *outside* the theatre. They encourage you to find a *new way to look at our world*' (Bordwell 2011, added emphasis). In contrast to the weak claim about perceptual and/or affective and cognitive effects on individual viewers *during* reception, we could call this strong claim about effects on the relation to the lifeworld *post film-viewing* a claim of 'transformational ethics' of slow cinema (Rossouw 2021). Dwyer and Perkins explain that 'the spectator's agency becomes a key theme, with emphasis falling on the contemplative, creative and – ultimately – *redemptive power* of this activity' (2018, 105, added emphasis).¹¹ What Bordwell and others thus argue is not only that these films demand a particular type of viewing mode of their audience in their engagement with films; they also imbue films with the power to modulate viewers' whole sensorium in the context of everyday life too.¹²

11 Kevin Hamilton similarly speaks of a 'transformed sensorium' (Hamilton et al. 2019: 472).

Daniele Rugo contends that James Benning's films demand of the viewer a 'perceptual transformation, [...] a renewed interest and concern for the world (2022, 169-170, added emphasis). Daniel Dufournaud contends that slow films can 'defamiliarize the world beyond the screen' (2023, 214, added emphasis). Erika Balsom voices similar arguments about the perceptual effects of the experimental films of James Warhol and James Benning (2019, 2021).

12 It might be noted that both discourses could be situated in a broader and longer history of modernist art theories that have all made a case for the disruptive and defamiliarising powers of art. Such a historiographic project is, needless to say, well beyond the scope of this paper. Indeed, many writers explicitly frame slow cinema's aesthetics as *defamiliarising* (Çağlayan 2018; Dufournaud 2023, Remes 2015; Lim 2014; Wahlberg 2003). Dan Irving makes a case for the 'defamiliarizing aspect of slow TV' (2017, 243). In the field of art history, such a thesis is proposed by Helen Westgeest (2019, 2021). In literary theory, the relation between slowness and defamiliarisation is proposed by

Positioning Cinema: The Politics of Viewing

In addition to spectatorship, a common discursive denominator is the *politics* of viewing. Pietari Kääpä also notes that much of ecocriticism in media studies revolves around the question of the ‘socio-political role the media plays in influencing popular opinion on environmental issues’ (2012, 146). This usually takes an affirmative account of ways in ‘which film production can make an activist-critical contribution to ecopolitics’ (ibid.). For instance, Willoquet-Maricondi argues that ‘ecocinema has consciousness-raising and activist intentions. [...] [It] overtly strives to inspire personal and *political* action on the part of viewers’ (2010, 45, added emphasis). MacDonald’s claim of a more ‘environmentally progressive mindset’ also bears clear ethico-political connotations (2013, 20).

Slow cinema theories similarly stress the political dimensions of spectatorship. Song Hwee Lim, for one, contends that slow cinema promotes ‘new subjectivities that are *politically* committed to an ethos of slowness’ (2014, 33, added emphasis).

By valorizing temporal excess, this cinema proposes slowness as an alternative way for organizing our relationships to time, objects, and living things, *not just in film but also in life*. It is at once aesthetic practice and *political critique* (ibid., 32, added emphasis).

Asbjørn Grønstad suggests slowness is ‘inherently political’ and ‘obviously forms part of a much broader cultural project [...] whose driving impetus is also an act of resistance’ (2016, 277).¹³ In short, for these authors, slowness holds political potential due to its challenging of cultural norms of ordering temporality in both film production and reception, as well as everyday life. Similarly, for ecocritics, cinema’s politics pertains to its ability to raise awareness and change viewers’ mindset concerning ecological themes.

Caracciolo (2022), Lehtimäki et al. (2012), and Mingazova (2018). Cf. Turvey (2008), for a criticism of theories of the transformational or revelationist perceptual powers of cinema.

13 Similar ethico-political claims can be found in De Luca 2016; De Luca and Jorge 2016; Dufournaud 2023; Koehler 2012; Koutsourakis 2019; Salvato 2016; Schoonover 2016.

III A Double Deficiency

I hope to have convincingly demonstrated that these debates indeed converge on the central concern of spectatorship and that they tend to entail both aesthetic and ethico-political claims. While I do not wish to invalidate any and all of these claims per se, I propose there is a need for and value in taking a step back. This entails, *inter alia*, carefully examining various claims, providing more empirical evidence, and de-politicising the debates. When taking a step back, I see at least four (interrelated) problems that need to be adequately addressed in future research to be able to make a convincing and substantiated case for the value of ecocinema: lack of empiricism, conceptual conflation, politics, and subjectivity.

The Empirical Problem

Speculative claims about the effects of slow and ecocinema have their value of inspiring new ideas and proposing new venues for research. However, they can be considered unwarranted if they are too bold or generalising, and/or when they are not substantiated by empirical evidence. In that respect, Alexa Weik von Mossner observes about ecocinema studies that ‘unfortunately, empirical audience-response studies are still very limited’ (2014, 8). David Ingram similarly argues that many claims therefore depend on ‘unexamined assumptions about cinema spectatorship’ (2013, 47). Pietari Kääpä also notes that ‘the study of audience responses [...] remain somewhat ignored’ and therefore ‘requires further theoretical as well as empirical sophistication’ (2013, 108, 110).¹⁴ He rightly points out that, ‘considering the emphasis ecocinema

14 This empirical challenge is in no way unique to the ecocinema debate. Indeed, the history of the philosophy of media technologies is rife with heated debates about the effects of media. Typically, these comprise diametrically opposed conceptions of these effects. They can entail, on the one hand, techno-dystopian, alarmist accounts of the corrupt influence of new media (e.g., Plato on writing, or contemporary cultural criticism of ‘new’ media like TV (violence, pornography), video games (violence) or social media (communication, social isolation)). On the other hand, we can note techno-utopian discourses that champion the liberatory, empowering, democratizing potentials of new media. What these positions share is a lack of firm grounding in empirical evidence of either positive or negative effects. This is due to the fact that it is notoriously difficult to conclusively

scholars place on the socio-political role of cinema, it is surprising that audiences are still a largely neglected focus of study in the field' (2012, 145).¹⁵ Unfortunately, not much has changed in this respect since the decade or so ago that these authors made their observations regarding the state of empirical affairs in ecocinema studies. For instance, Rust et al., in the recent volume *Ecocinema: Theory and Practice 2* (2022), only make reference to the same not so recent works that I will discuss here.

Empirical work on ecocinema in general is rare. In any case, I know of no empirical work so far that has investigated specifically the claim about the spectatorial retraining of perception ecocinema supposedly fosters, or that conclusively relates spectatorship to long term behavioural and worldview effects. But some studies that have been published already yielded interesting findings and therefore warrant a brief discussion (Brereton and Hong 2013; Kääpä 2012; Leiserowitz 2004; Nolan 2010).¹⁶ I want to flag though that the generalisability of the results of these few conducted empirical studies is in most cases limited due to factors like small sample size, non-representative samples, as well as demographic and cultural specificities of the research that was conducted in various local cultural contexts.¹⁷

The most well-known study on the reception of ecocinema comes from Anthony Leiserowitz (2004). The research investigated the impact of the blockbuster disaster movie *The Day After Tomorrow* (Roland Emmerich, 2004) on U.S. public climate change 'risk perceptions, conceptual models, behavioral intentions, and political preferences' (Leiserowitz 2004, 26).¹⁸ The study, conducted with a representative sample of the U.S. population, confirmed a 'considerable influence' on the various factors that were investigated to the extent that moviegoers were 'more

establish a *causality* between media use and (individual and social) effects.

15 Brereton and Hong agree: 'few critical theories actually look for concrete evidence to explain audience pleasures. [...] Little work is done on empirical analysis of actual audiences' perceptions and interpretations' (2013, 172).

16 Readers interested in the theoretical and methodological details of these studies are advised to resort to the concerning publications, as a thorough discussion of the validity of the results are beyond the scope of this paper.

17 Audience studies on ecocinema, according to Kääpä, 'mostly focus on culturally restricted contexts and evade the transnational scale of environmental communications' (2012, 148).

18 A study on the impact of the film *The Day After Tomorrow* in the German context has been published by Reusswig et al. (2004).

likely to perceive global warming as a threat, to be willing to act as consumers and citizens to mitigate this threat, and to translate their heightened concern into political action' (ibid., 31). While these are valid results, some criticism could be raised. It remains unclear, for instance, whether these effects are temporary or more sustainable (ibid., 35). Moreover, the study investigated perceptions and intentions (as opposed to actions), and thus does not measure actual effects on behaviour. What is more, the number of viewers of the film relative to the entire population was too small to have a significant impact on the whole U.S. population, and the degree to which the film impacted viewers also differed considerably (ibid., 31).¹⁹ Finally, and importantly, the authors point to the importance of context, viz., the critical role of mass media in the reception of a film and hence the effects a film has (ibid., 32. I will elaborate on contexts of film viewing shortly below in section 4). Such a confounding variable problematizes a straightforward causal claim of the impact of the film on viewers. Still, the study nicely demonstrates that even a Hollywood blockbuster fiction film *can* have a substantial impact on a large general audience.

Notwithstanding said issues with generalisability, the results of such studies enable corroborating, nuancing, or even disproving the received wisdom about ecocinema spectatorship. The results of Brereton and Hong's study, for instance, according to the authors themselves, 'are significant as they seem to contradict some of the more abstract and high culturalist articulations of scholars like Willoquet-Maricondi and MacDonald' (2013, 186). That is to say, the high-low cultural distinction ecocritical theorists like Willoquet-Maricondi and MacDonald make does not hold, as the empirical study showed no significant differences between reception of various types of environmental films (ibid.).

19 So, this is a matter of the reach of the film, rather than the generalisability of the results. As the effects of the film on a representative sample are statistically significant, it can be expected that, had the whole U.S. population watched the film (and would all contextual factors have remained the same), the effects measured in the study would therefore have impacted the whole society similarly. However, again, it could be countered that at least a part of those viewers who went to see the film arguably had a pre-existing concern with the climate crisis that mediated the measured effects.

Slow cinema studies suffer from the same lack of empirical knowledge about the often associated viewing mode. Tessa Dwyer and Claire Perkins have conducted an eye tracking study that forms the sole peer-reviewed publication that presents empirical work on slow cinema spectatorship (2018). They put the common claim about attentional freedom of slow cinema spectators to the empirical test. They found that the viewer's gaze is only relatively autonomous within the constraints posed by the film's style. In other words, even slow cinema's long take cinematography structures viewers' attention in various ways, e.g, through movement on screen, of the camera, or the composition (specifically human bodies and faces on screen). This counterintuitive finding clearly demonstrates the value of and need for more empirical work on the attentional and perceptual effects films have on viewers²⁰. Additionally, a sociological study of slow TV reception in Norway is provided by Puijk (2020). This study mostly employs quantitative data (surveys) and its focus is on attitudes and motivations for watching, as well as the theme of national identity of audiences in Norway.²¹

In sum, both slow and ecocinema reception are in need of further empirical investigation in order to substantiate aesthetic, spectatorial, and political claims about the effects of such films on their audiences. To be sure, I do not suggest that all theoretical work should be replaced with empirical research. Instead, I make a case for a *pluralist liberalism* of research approaches which also recognizes the complementary value of both conceptual exploration as well as doing the important empirical work that enables corroborating, nuancing, adding to and expanding on or

20 A small critical note here is that the researchers operationalised attention in terms of eye movements and rests, i.e., where and for how long viewers look at the image. This is arguably a reductionist approach that does not fully capture the more complex phenomenon of attention as such.

21 Slow TV differs in some crucial aspects from slow cinema, so the findings of Puijk's study cannot automatically be extended from the former to the latter. The elements of liveness, factuality, participation, and the associations with national identity, make slow TV a distinct genre that is markedly different from slow cinema, even though they share some formal properties (2020). The most important difference in the forms of audience reception of respectively slow cinema and slow TV is conceptualised by Puijk in terms of John Ellis' distinction between 'the gaze' and 'the glance' (ibid., 180). Puijk writes that 'the results show that most people had not given high levels of concentration to the programmes' (ibid.). In other words, people watch with a 'glance' rather than a 'gaze', which entails a 'less concentrated mode of viewing' (ibid.).

perhaps even disproving (aspects of) theories of slow and eco cinema spectatorship. This also means that I don't suggest that empirical data necessarily hold epistemic authority over conceptual knowledge. I do not wish to establish a hierarchy, but rather point out how both can be made productive and that they mutually rely on and benefit from each other. Claiming otherwise would testify to an epistemologically naive, positivist scientism (Gitelman 2013; Ridder et al. 2018). In the best case, a feedback loop occurs between theory and empiricism.

Slippery Slopes: Types and Scopes of Effects

As I already demonstrated earlier in this paper (section 2, 'spectatorship'), accounts of spectatorship differ with respect to the various types of effects they describe, as well as their scope. In the literature, it is possible to distinguish between types of perceptual/affective, cognitive or epistemic (attitudinal and doxastic), and behavioural effects. Particularly the last category of changes in action remains difficult to empirically measure. Brereton and Hong stress 'the difference between creating awareness and changing behaviour' (2013, 187). So, while their study confirms that people believe in 'the tremendous power of films in highlighting important environmental issues and affecting change across both fiction and non-fiction films', there still also 'remains a *disconnect* between values and actions' (ibid., 186, 188, added emphasis). In short, where films might raise ecological awareness, this does not mean that this automatically and necessarily leads to change in behaviour.

Related to this, it is necessary to clearly consider the differing scope of various claims about slow and ecocinema spectatorship, distinguishing between temporary and local, *individual* impact a film might have during reception, on the one hand, and aftereffects that extend beyond the viewing of a film, on the other hand. Additionally, it seems relevant to then also distinguish between short-term and long-term aftereffects. Brereton and Hong warn that 'one has to wonder if such environmental awareness and apparent behavioural change can be maintained across a long-term basis and how can we investigate and measure their effects over time' (2013, 187).

Finally, it would be beneficial to more clearly distinguish between aforementioned individual and collective or *social* effects, and to conceptualise the extent to which these might be related causally. For this, it would be needed to plausibly argue how individual effects might lead to social change. In this respect, Tia DeNora warns against the risk of a ‘strategy of divining social significance from the work itself’ (2000, 3). She identifies a ‘*theoretical shortcut* taken by semiotic analysts as they slide from readings of works to discussions of the social impact of those works’ (ibid. 22, added emphasis). Lack of specificity about the presumed scope of the effects of slow and ecocinema, in terms of both their (individual or social) reach and longevity, hampers the appeal and persuasive force of any case made for their beneficial potential.

The Politicisation of Viewing

The recurring references to spectatorship arguably testify to unquestioned assumptions about what ecocinema is and what it is *for*. Seen from a meta-critical perspective, theories of ways of seeing and modes of viewing are not-or not only-descriptive denominators of the phenomenology of slow and ecocinema spectatorship; they are also, and perhaps even more so, normative appraisals of it. In their practice of theorizing, academics also *do* something to their object of study. Pansy Duncan insightfully points out that such accounts

‘are doing something as well as describing something. [...] [Scholarship] serves to burnish the value of spectatorship – and, through association, the value of scholarship about spectatorship – by affording spectatorship the “moral value” our culture accords to work in general (2024, n.p.).

The new perceptions and modes of seeing that slow and ecocinema are thought to provoke, have become relevant objects of study for academic research *because* they are deemed by critics and academics as good, worthy, and valuable. Through the mediation of spectatorship, such films are able to do what academics want them to

do. In that sense, and also in relation to the previous point concerning a lack of empirical evidence, the debates are suffused with what David Ingram cunningly characterised as ‘wishful thinking’ (2013, 47). As I suggested in the introduction, a central concern of many of the popular and critical debates about the anthropocene and the contemporary climate crisis is the desire for *action*. With my meta-hermeneutic discussion of the politics of viewing (section 2, ‘positioning cinema’), I have demonstrated that much academic work on both slow and ecocinema is indeed explicitly committed to an ecocritical *ethos* of social and political action. In other words, ecocritical academics posit that ecomedia *should* have political effects. By focusing predominantly on just one possible type of effect (behavioural/attitudinal), critics run the risk of normatively favouring such a type of response as the right or most appropriate one, and consequently overlooking other potential types of gratification slow and ecocinema might hold for their audiences (e.g., aesthetic pleasure). This then potentially results in the simplification of art’s complexity and ambiguity and consequent multiplicity of responses. This politicisation of slow and ecocinema effectively amounts to a simplistic and *instrumental* understanding of art as a means communication—which brings me to my fourth and final issue.

Simplistic Media Communications Model

Another issue with many ecocritical theories is their tendency to essentially conceive meaning from the film text alone, thus missing out on the influence of the *context* of reception. Film theorist D.N. Rodowick warns against the common assumption of ‘*an intrinsic and intractable relation between texts and their spectators*, regardless of the historical or social context of that relation’ (cited in Ingram 2013, 47, added emphasis). In other words, writers offer ‘an ideological critique of the film as a text, instead of any real engagement with the ways audiences appropriate its messages’ (Kääpä 2012 147). It revolves around ‘*hypothetical impact of the texts*’ (ibid., added emphasis).

We can discern at least two contextual factors that potentially influence reception of film texts: the institutional context and viewers’ socio-cultural variations.

David Ingram again perceptively points out that ‘*institutional* factors are inhibiting the kind of ecocinema MacDonald and Willoquet wish to advocate’ (2013, 57, added emphasis). In other words, the impact of the type of artistic ecocinema productions they discuss, will be inherently limited due to their restricted audience reach (I will get back to that soon, in section 4).

Besides institutional embedding of films, *viewers’ attitudes* related to their demographic variations pose another contextual factor that impacts the meaning a film text takes in specific domains of reception. David Ingram cautions that viewers’ personal dispositions are a potentially confounding factor in establishing correlations or even causal connections between films and effects. Following media psychologist Ed Tan, Ingram argues that ‘the predisposition of the viewer is a vital determinant of his or her responses’ (2013, 47). Effects can take hold only ‘if the viewer is sufficiently predisposed’ (ibid., 48). Otherwise, ‘if the audience for eco-films is self-selecting in this way, such films may only be preaching to the converted’ (ibid.).²² Findings of an audience study by Pietari Kääpä confirm that pre-existing interest and dispositions of viewers mediate the doxastic and attitudinal effect of ecocinema (2012). In other words, he found that individuals with a pre-existing interest in ecological issues are more likely to adopt the spectatorial mode described in the ecocinema literature (i.e., environmental awareness and action).

IV Ecocinema’s Future

In short, we need to ask ourselves: *if* we would want to make the case about possible salutary perceptual, worldview, and behavioural effects of both slow and ecocinema, *how* would we theoretically frame and empirical ground this? In this final part of the paper, I will formulate some proposals for ways of conceptually and empirically addressing such questions in future research.

²² Brereton and Hong also caution that ‘audiences’ predisposition’ are impacted by factors such as ‘their socioeconomic circumstances, together with their age and educational profile’ and ‘developed critical literacy’ (2013, 180).

As I mentioned before, many critics and academics have adopted a simplistic or reductionist model that explains effects merely from texts and their aesthetics that leaves the impact of contextual factors out of consideration. Hence, a more nuanced and more complex theory to model the effects of media use is needed.

This would entail proper consideration of *contextual* factors in addition to textual or formal analysis of film to account for various effects.²³ It is important to ‘take into account the major role cultural specificity plays in audience responses’ (Kääpä 2012, 146). This includes considering the ‘plurality of reading positions and [...] uses of ecocinema’ (ibid., 145). In other words, research needs to ‘focus on the ways audiences use ecocinema and generate meanings based on what they *appropriate* from the texts’ (ibid., 147, added emphasis). Rather than making assumptions about an ideal spectatorial response couched in textual analysis, it is imperative to take into consideration ways in which audiences use, appropriate, or actualise media to generate meaning.

In the field of documentary film studies, a comprehensive proposal for a multidimensional theoretical framework for studying patterns of reception has recently been formulated by Jens Eder and Catalin Brylla (Eder and Brylla 2024. See also Eder 2023; Eder and Klonk 2017).²⁴ They propose a tripartite ‘theoretical framework [...] based on the interplay between film form, film practice and audience behaviour in specific social, cultural and political contexts’ in order to map the various factors that ‘influence, generate and sustain the impact of documentary films’ (Eder and Brylla 2024). Building on work in media psychology, Eder elsewhere argues that

23 I want to emphasise, again, that both text and context play their parts in the reception of ecomedia. Thus, I wish to avoid essentialist extremes that leave one or the other factor out of consideration. Put differently, I propose that audiences’ interpretations of ecomedia arise out of the interaction between, on the one hand, the enabling and limiting features of a film’s aesthetics, and, on the other hand, the viewer’s engagement with or actualisation of those formal features. J.J. Gibson’s theory of *affordances* captures such entanglement of subject and object well (2015 [1979]).

24 Another helpful framework of three ecologies of the moving images (material, perceptual, and social) is provided by Adrian Ivakhiv (2013).

film's political impact is thus more complex and diverse than most film theories or empirical studies suggest. Like any media effects, it is mostly social, cumulative, indirect, and transactional (2023, 106).

He likens the process of filmic effects to an evolving network with various nodes. The impact of (eco)cinema is hence complex, multidimensional, and emerges over time in sometimes unexpected ways. His general model of documentary films could also be applied (with perhaps some necessary adaptations) to both fiction and nonfiction ecocinema.

With such a framework in place, it becomes evident how the contexts of production, distribution, and reception conjointly constitute the meaning films take and the impact they have on viewers. They can be both limiting and enabling factors in the life of an art work. While an experimental work of ecocinema that is displayed in a museum or art gallery (e.g, a film or video installation of James Benning, Peter Hutton, or Sharon Lockhart) might have substantial aesthetic or artistic merits for a select audience, the proposed theoretical framework informs us that such works can be expected to have only limited impact on the general population due to their limited reach caused by traditional distribution channels (art galleries, museums). Moreover, such 'high art' requires a significant degree of knowledge or cultural capital from viewers, which further limits its reach. Vice versa, while a blockbuster movie might reach a wide audience, the economic incentive to appeal to a broad audience likely means that the content of the work itself is tailored to that audience in a way that it arguably confirms audiences' knowledge and beliefs rather than challenging them. In the former case the impact of the work is high but limited due to its constrained reach, while the latter work has big reach but low impact. Hence, there is a trade-off between impact and reach.²⁵

25 Kääpä also notes that the limited reach of art house cinema limits potential for 'ecologicalism (its potential for generating critical thinking on ecological issues)' (2012, 160). This therefore 'challenge[s] the utopianism of many academic frameworks' (ibid.). Eder, in this respect, distinguishes between two political stances on documentary films (reformist and radical), and their aesthetic choices and consequences on their respective reach and impacts on audiences (2023, 109-110).

One of the advantages of Eder's and Brylla's comprehensive framework is that it also provides opportunity for concrete actions to work towards optimal impact of film. In the previous hypothetical example of an audiovisual gallery installation, this might take the form of interventions in the domains of education (hosting an artist talk or introduction by an expert), inclusivity (reaching more diverse audiences), distribution (making a work more widely available on/offline), and so on. Relevant contexts to consider would be the institutional embedding of film, including practices of production, distribution, as well as reception of film. To maximize the impact of ecocinema, it would ideally be positioned in a conducive network of education, screening, and public debate.²⁶

In addition to including institutional contextual factors that impact reception, it is also crucial to more clearly distinguish various types of effects at different scales, and to investigate relations between these various, heterogeneous effects. I propose to differentiate between perceptual/affective, cognitive or epistemic (attitudinal/beliefs), and behavioural effects on individual viewers. Moreover, I suggest distinguishing these individual effects from the broader socio-political impact of ecocinema. The crux will be to conceptualise *how* these variegated types of effects relate to each other. How does looking at aesthetic representations of nature in art impact individual and social awareness of the real natural environment? How does such a renewed awareness consequently lead to changes in attitudes and then also lead to increased action? With such conceptual distinctions in place, it also becomes possible to more clearly distinguish and flag the extent or scope of one's claims concerning the various effects of ecocinema. Endorsing a weak claim of individual and short-lived effects during reception, does not mean one also has to subscribe to a

²⁶ Kääpä also points to the importance of conducive educational contexts to maximize the learning effects of ecocinema: 'using film as a stand-alone pedagogical tool may not be enough' (2012, 159). Another advantage of the proposed research framework, with its due attention to contextual factors, is that it enables researchers to chart and segment various audiences of ecocinema. If the aim is to maximize the impact of ecocinema, then it seems imperative to democratise ecocinema and open it up to audiences outside of and beyond the traditional institutions of the art house cinema and the filmfestival (De Valck 2007; De Valck et al. 2016; De Valck and Damiens 2023; Johnson 2024; Wong 2011). 'This would also take us from an ethics of spectatorship relevant predominantly to the economically privileged to one open to all and therefore more deserving of its name' (Cooper 2023, 43).

stronger position that posits sustainable social effects. Making such local and specific claims ultimately strengthens the credibility and power of ecocriticism.

These conceptual frameworks should then, in turn, inform the adoption of research frameworks suited to *empirically* explore these variegated effects. If one's interest lies with individual perceptual, affective, and mental/cognitive effect of viewers during reception, the explanatory framework of cognitive psychology or the descriptive approach of phenomenology are well-suited approaches.²⁷ If the researcher's emphasis lies more on the societal impact of film, media sociology or anthropology would be appropriate disciplines, considering their typical focus on demographic factors and social meaning.

For guidance on how to do this, we can resort to audience studies in the field of *media psychology*, a framework that has already incorporated such insights into research practice (Oliver et al. 2019; Staiger 2000, 2005; Valkenburg et al. 2016). Also in *sociology* and *cultural studies*, the importance of context for understanding reception is widely acknowledged and taken into account (DeNora 2000; Felski 2008; Hutcheon 2012; Radway 1991). The sociology of arts in particular provides useful models for mapping and consequently improving the individual and societal impact of ecocinema (Alexander 2021; Van Maanen 2009).

To summarise, I have identified spectatorship as a recurrent trope around which the debates about both slow cinema and ecocinema converge. A meta-theoretical survey of the literature enabled me to uncover how authors in both discourses commonly attribute a viewing mode or a distinct way of seeing to these two types of film. Furthermore, I observed that authors make varying weak and strong claims with respect to the scope of such spectatorial transformations, including different types of perceptual, doxastic, and behavioural effects for individuals, as well as more encompassing changes in social domains. Claims concerning these various effects, I

²⁷ Research can also adopt a mixed-method approach that combines the two approaches (e.g., neurophenomenology), which enables triangulation of data types. See Sinnerbrink (2019) for a proposal to combine phenomenology and cognitivism in film studies.

suggested, testify to the ecocritical ethos of critics and academics. This entails that they attribute ethico-political powers to both slow and ecocinema, which, in turn, also functions to embellish their own work of film criticism and academic scholarship with a sense of urgency and legitimacy.

I have made the case that despite this emphasis on assumed spectatorial effects, paradoxically, in both debates, surprisingly little audience research has been conducted to empirically substantiate presumed audience responses. Academics and critics tend to make implicit rather than explicit assumptions about an ideal or hypothetical spectator. More often than not, this ideal spectator is modelled after the critic or academic him- or herself.

In response to this conceptual deficiency, empirical lack, and politicising of ecocinema spectatorship, I suggested to take a step back and I have proposed (1) the implementation of a conceptual framework that is mindful of both textual and contextual factors that both enable and limit individual and social impact of slow and ecocinema, and I made a programmatic call for (2) conducting more empirical audience research. The suggested *theoretical* framework encourages researchers to take into account the varied ways in which audiences appropriate ecomedia texts in various contexts of reception, and to discern various types of effects and their respective scales of impact. The *empirical* proposal is significant for ecocritics working in literary and film theory, as it challenges them to learn from and engage in fruitful interdisciplinary cooperative research with colleagues in adjacent fields like art sociology and media psychology. In making this proposal, I wish to emphasise how the theoretical work of ecocritical thinkers can productively contribute to such interdisciplinary research: analysis of the formal features and thematic content of the film text, as well as providing conceptual clarity and precision, are just two of the possible ways in which academics can contribute to advancing knowledge of ecocinema spectatorship.

The fruits of such theoretical and empirical labour, in turn, could inform applied fields like arts curation and education that also have a distinct role to play in

facilitating conducive conditions for enhancing the type of attitudinal and behavioural effects ecocritics envision for eco cinema and literature. If this academic project takes hold, we will be able to make more convincing claims about the ways in which the spectatorial effects of ecomedia can contribute to enhancing awareness of, care for, and action towards ecological preservation.

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