

Seeing Ecology and Seeing as Ecology: On Brereton's
Hollywood Utopia and the Andersons' *Moving Image Theory*

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Joseph D. Anderson & Barbara Fisher Anderson (eds.) (2005)
Moving Image Theory: Ecological Considerations
Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
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Pat Brereton (2005)
Hollywood Utopia: Ecology in Contemporary American Cinema
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Brereton's *Hollywood Utopia* and the Andersons' edited volume, *Moving Image Theory*, both revolve around conceptions of ecology. Although they both start with this concept as central, each utilises it in drastically different ways. However, what might be more interesting than the very different ways that the concept of ecology is used in each book, is the significant overlap in theoretical results; both books conclude by finding that the concept of ecology puts great pressure upon contemporary theoretical stances popular in the academy.

Pat Brereton looks to 'feel good' Hollywood films in order to investigate theoretical issues in contemporary ecological thought. Through careful plot analysis and 'thick'

description of film imagery, combined with an exposition of theories such as those offered by Aldo Leopold (1887-1948), deep ecologists, eco-feminism and cyborg theory, ecological theories are related in various ways to mainstream Hollywood blockbusters. Brereton's claim is that through a careful reading of such films one can see 'core ecological values and ideas portrayed in vivid form' (11). In fact, rather than offering an 'ideological critique' of Hollywood films which is suspicious of their naturalism and narrative expectations, the aim of *Hollywood Utopia* is to utilise Hollywood's unapologetic utopian aesthetic and show the visual content to be a fertile area for investigation of ecological theory. The basic idea is pretty simple. First, Brereton claims that even if the standard ideological critiques are largely correct – in claiming that Hollywood productions are constrained and ideologically formulaic – there is still a 'surplus or excess of meaning that is not explained by so-called ideological critics' (22-3). In this case, "nature" and its co-present ecological sensibility can evoke a potentially subversive, even utopian, presence as opposed to the "cultural logic" of contemporary Hollywood film' (185). Furthermore, it is precisely because the Hollywood movie is so unapologetic and relentless in its narration of various ecological ideals that it makes such an effective tool for investigation of ecological theory. It is because of its straightforward ideological content that 'popular commercial film can sow the seeds of utopian ideals and values which can simultaneously serve the ecological cause' (23). In fact, this unapologetic quality of the Hollywood narrative can serve as a therapeutic tool because of the reluctance on the part of academics to promote any positive ideals: 'While academic theory has enormous difficulty articulating, much less legitimising, various foundational beliefs, Hollywood has no qualms whatsoever in promoting them' (35). In other words, Hollywood movies are valuable as artefacts for 'seeing ecology', not only for the surplus meanings that they carry but cannot fully control, but also, perhaps more importantly, because the stories are so ideologically determinant and affirmative in their utopian content that they rigorously play out the various options.

To pair ecological theory with Hollywood film does, strangely, seem very natural. This can be seen by comparing the standard theory of Hollywood style with standard theories of ecology. While the film theory straw man of 'Hollywood style' focuses on many cliché aspects - such as normalised hierarchies, hidden and/or transparent production values, consumer-safe plots, etc. - one of the most repeated critiques relates to Hollywood's purported need for a narrative structure based upon closure. In other words,

Hollywood movies require a story that produces ideological closure through a systemic meta-narrative. Of course, meta-narratives are suspect because they tend to be (must be?) totalising, and therefore exclusionary in their results: they create stories that allow in some considerations and exclude others, thus creating the ever-present but unacknowledged marginalised and repressed 'Other'. As Brereton realises, theories of ecology are by definition theories of system, and are therefore attached to many of the same meta-narrative issues. Consequently, there is in both domains a constant risk of problematic totalisations that verges upon the 'totalitarian' (20). The argument of *Hollywood Utopia*, though, is that the totalising concepts in ecological thought are importantly different: 'As a relatively modern phenomena [*sic*], however, ecology remains a totalising concept, which is inclusive rather than exclusive' (21). Brereton calls this a 'both-and' frame rather than an 'either-or' type of meta-narrative (228). This is a very interesting claim, which deserves much greater development: that there is an effective distinction between an exclusionary meta-narrative and an inclusive one. Underlying *Hollywood Utopia*, ultimately, is the hope that an inclusive meta-narrative of the 'both-and' type will show the structure of the Hollywood movie to be a tool for positive reconstruction of values and not just a source for critical deconstruction:

While marginality and otherness will continue to be used as effective objects and instruments of analysis, the primary target of the ensuing textual analyses is to explicate a range of more universal (post)human ecological values embedded within a 'bottom-up' validation of film audiences' prototypical utopian beliefs, which overlay and sometimes transcend the divisive inequalities within and between humans. (37)

Brereton does identify effectively many utopian ecological stances in popular film. A rather obvious instance would be the way Hollywood constantly references 'the therapeutic power of "raw nature" and the honesty of the "savage" Native American.' (38) As Brereton sees it, in fact, 'sentimental racism is the main way that white America has interpreted its genocidal conflict with Native Americans' (97). Much the same response is often shown towards other races. In *Grand Canyon* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1991), for instance, the black character is used to 'embody... a holistic form of eco-knowledge' due to his (or her?) outsider position (119). Sentimentalism is, of course, present in much ecological thought; and Hollywood has rarely been accused of avoiding an excess of sentimentality. So when the subject of ecology is foregrounded in Hollywood one might expect the worst of sentimentalism. This expectation is not always frustrated, as Brereton argues: 'It has

become almost axiomatic for Hollywood that land and nature should not be “abused” or “violated,” since humans owe it to their children to maintain their birthright’ (57). Without further critical content development, of course, such axioms can lead to the worst of uncritical sentimental excesses.

But there are some advantages to having or intensifying such sentiments and utopian hopes. While Brereton may be correct in concluding that ‘[i]n general, non-human agency seldom achieves popularity (unless it is cute) within an identification-driven Hollywood aesthetic,’ he may also be correct in surmising that this leaves room to argue that ‘progressive discourses concerning planetary harmony, together with the hope of a radical ecological human agency’ can be packaged ‘through the representational other of the female cyborg in Hollywood film’ (163-4). Whilst I think that the cyborg has been used effectively even when not so cute, or female, his point stands that sentimental attractiveness is not always and in every way a tool of oppression or uncritical sentimental excess. In fact, sentiment can sometimes inspire proper critical attention, and often the lack of sentiments, rather than their presence, should be criticised as improper. This realisation creates room for a dialectical situation where some sentimental content is used in order to foreground or privilege other content more effectively. Furthermore, as Brereton notes, ‘the creation of easy pleasures need not necessarily preclude otherwise unresolved elements being embedded in moments within the *mise-en-scene*, which often includes a surfeit of ecological utopianism’ (203). All this might sound like too much compromise with embedded hierarchies and ungrounded sentiment, but this is not the only way of describing the situation. As is becoming clear with the resurgent popularity of ‘ideological critique,’ the fear of sentiment, hierarchies and meta-narratives has its own set of vices. Indeed, it seems correct for Pat Brereton to note that

preoccupation with ‘local issues’ and ‘identity politics’ has resulted in cultural theorists often playing safe and avoiding the risk of addressing the ‘big picture’ involving human ontology with which ecological debates must have a central position. (140)

Whilst *Hollywood Utopia* highlights the systemic nature of ecological thought through the investigation of Hollywood film imagery, the essays collected in *Moving Image Theory: Ecological Considerations* offer a meta-theory of perception as an explanation of the way in which we understand film. In other words, if Brereton helps us see ecological theory *in* film, the authors in the Anderson’s volume ask us to see perception of film *as* ecological.

The ecological theory of film perception is offered as an alternative to a more interpretive-based or 'symbolic' theory. Sheena Rogers, in 'Through Alice's Glass: The Creation and Perception of Other Worlds in Movies, Pictures, and Virtual Reality,' (somewhat dogmatically) make this contrast clear through the following brief critique of the reigning constructivist/ideological critique option:

symbolic theorists make a number of serious mistakes. They extend the reach of the symbolic into areas of film meaning where it does not belong. They denied the natural relationship between image and life. They misunderstood perspective structure and overestimated its frailty. They conflated the conventional with the arbitrary, focusing on symbols at the expense of artistic practice. (219)

Whilst this is a little shrill and overwrought, I think the claims are worthy of serious consideration. But if the claim of excess attribution of convention in film is to stick, the question becomes how to ground the relationship in the non-arbitrary. In *Moving Image Theory*, the ecological theory of perception is offered to satisfy this later requirement. In his foreword to this volume, David Bordwell explains that the ecological view describes 'cinematic communication' as relying upon 'a great many non-conventional' and 'ecologically constrained processes' (xii). Under such an ecological theory of human perception (first developed by James J. Gibson) human beings are plausibly described as living creatures acting within a bounded environment. Because action in the environment is central, what interests us is information that helps bring about successful action (2). The idea is simply that '*you see what you see because the information is what it is*' (38, italics in text). In ecological parlance, an 'affordance' is the terminology used to describe opportunities for action (3). Simply put, we perceive objects and events as they really are in order to act upon affordances in the most opportune manner.

In a very intriguing article, 'Acoustic Specification of Object Properties,' Carello, Wagman and Turvey argue that the 'prevailing metatheory' starts with perception of 'inadequate input' which gets processed into 'a mental representation' whereas, in contrast, 'the ecological approach asserts that input, once properly construed, is rich and lawful and specific to its source directly without elaboration by internal mechanisms' (80). Through a set of controlled experiments, the authors show that people can actually hear (among other things) shapes and distances. They claim that such hearing is better thought of as really hearing the properties of shape rather than hearing conventional codes set up to create constructed 'mental representations' of shape. Elegant in its theoretical

simplicity, this approach entails a very different way of describing perception: the description of visual perception might be simplified along similar lines to this description of sound perception. In 'The Value of Oriented Geometry for Ecological Psychology and Moving Image Art,' Shaw and Mace do an effective job of critiquing the 'retinal image' discourse that helps, or at least parallels, the terminology and assumptions of the interpretive project. They state:

If it were possible, however, to render the retinal image superfluous as a stage of processing, the main issue would then be how *information* gets into the visual system, without worrying about the specific properties of the retinal image. (31)

In other words, by focusing upon the system, the specific link in the chain, here the 'retinal impression,' becomes less central and less mysterious. As they describe it, the visual system can malfunction at various places, and it is difficult to see why such fixation upon the retinal impression can be justified without a previous fixation on specific and questionable conceptions of mental processing. Because the idea is that we see things through the system and not via an interpretation of a retinal image, objects are presented directly and not initially represented through interpretation. If this is accepted, 'there is no need to conceptualise the access provided by television and film as *mediated* access' (200). This claim, though seemingly counterintuitive in current discourse, does lead to the question as to why the mediation and constructivist view has become the privileged default? Indeed, it is somewhat strange that the idea that 'we see the world, not our sense data' is such a shocking claim (2).

Such privileging of mediation is certainly the default option in film studies. But, in good oppositional tone, the essays in *Moving Image Theory* present ecological theory as the best explanation of how and why film works. James E. Cutting puts it this way:

to understand why film works so well is to understand much about how we perceive the real world; and to understand how we perceive the world tells us much about how we understand film. This is, I claim, the fundamental tenet of an ecological approach to cinematic theory. (9)

Once mediation is thought parasitic upon direct perception many questions in film theory become easier to answer (or ignore). Moreover, film becomes interesting for its new place in the hierarchy of visual arts. Anderson and Hodgins note that Gibson privileged 'change and transformation' over the 'arrested image', from which they conclude that 'we ought to treat the motion picture as the basic form of depiction and the painting or photograph as a

special form of it' (62). If Gibson is correct that 'frozen structure is a myth', film relates more directly to our normal types of perception and therefore can be thought more natural, and more truthful. Instead of comprising an elaborate and arbitrary semiotics that continually slides and slips, film became largely a type of direct perception mimicker with a 'tip of the iceberg' area for semiotic systems. This is because film is thought to reproduce many of the aspects of direct perception and is therefore intimately related to our natural processes of information gathering. If this is accepted, then the story reads like this: the ecological approach places the human observer in a bounded ecological niche. Perception is often unmediated information. Filmmakers often engage those very same capacities for unmediated perception in order to engage the viewer. Semiotic content is not eliminated, just decentred from the picture.

The two volumes discussed here are a study in contrasts. *Hollywood Utopia: Ecology in Contemporary American Cinema*, is premised largely upon the idea that Hollywood films can be valuable as a tool with which to understand and fill out specific theories of ecology. *Moving Image Theory: Ecological Considerations*, on the other hand, uses a theory of ecological situatedness to explain how and why we perceive films the way we do. One book highlights visual imagery in order to see how ecological theories look; the other highlights a theory of ecological boundedness to explain how human beings look when they look at film. Brereton's book is a book much more comfortable in the humanities-based discipline of film studies, while the Anderson compilation offers a scientifically based theory of perception to explain and critique the meaning of film. Finally, Brereton's book surveys so many of the cutting edge theories on self and gender construction in relation to ecological considerations that they start to become difficult to follow, while (sadly) the Anderson volume relapses into the habit of describing the subject as a 'he' when, it seems clear from the larger context, men were not the only group involved.

But while the contrasts are important, the use of ecology in both theories signals the equally important similarities in what each volume offers to film studies and broader philosophical issues. Both volumes highlight the tensions that ecology in any guise has with deconstructionist values and a purely de-centred conventionalist picture of knowledge. A theory of ecology is a theory of system, and a theory of system is, in one way or another, a meta-theory of hierarchy, place and value. It may be that there is a difference between an 'either-or' and a 'both-and' meta-narrative, but it remains to be seen how the latter will avoid the same worries and critiques to which the former is susceptible. While

aware of the problematic nature of systemic claims, Brereton highlights its theoretical importance and the articles in the Anderson volume embrace (scientific) system as a valuable tool of explanation.

Both volumes also highlight important positive aspects of the Hollywood project. Brereton finds import in the fact that Hollywood embraces values in a manner that makes them almost painfully explicit. The visual excess of film creates data useful to ecological theories. Of course, the unapologetic and relentless presentation of such values makes them easy targets for deconstruction, but at least they have the virtues of their idealistic vices; intellectual naiveté allows for a strong affirmative stance and explicit avowal of values. Various ideological formations are, indeed, played out in a systemic way. In the same vein, many of the articles in the Anderson volume investigate ways in which the combination of the Hollywood imperative of naturalism with new digital technologies has resulted in intriguing insights into how we perceive human movement and environmental factors, insights that challenge theories often held as somewhat unquestionable in the humanities. This is because, if realism were more a code than a fact of perception, as is often claimed, it seems that realistic movement would be easier to 'code' digitally. In fact, the creation of naturalistic artificial movement has proved very difficult to achieve, and our direct perception has proved pretty sophisticated in its identification of artifice.

But combining these two volumes makes it obvious that there is another issue involved –that is, the position of the academic intellectual in contemporary culture. Both volumes make explicit that ecology is a very interesting concept in relationship to contemporary critical theories: it is a concept that implicates the philosopher and the critic in domains of discourse that cannot easily be distanced from system, hierarchy and scientific expertise. In other words, ecology is a concept that makes the legitimacy of critical distance appear questionable. It may be that culture is largely a human construct, but culture depends upon ecology, and ecology is a much more difficult issue to dissolve into discursive games of institutional structure and power dynamics. Of course, these issues *are* implicated in any ecological investigation, but so are much broader issues; and certainly, the critical tools developed and utilised over the last twenty-five or so years have sensitised many to the limits and framing vices that can exist within positivistic notions of science and truth. Science is a discursive practice and needs to be evaluated critically. But so, too, do the dogmas of deconstruction and critical theory, *etc.* These are

not innocent and transparent either. Ecological considerations certainly require critical investigation, but such considerations also seem to require constructive solutions and scientific investigation. In ecological realms, negative critique is not so easily coded as liberating. As humanistic intellectuals, we may have talked ourselves (and hopefully some important segments of society) out of a slavish attachment to science, but now such talk starts to sound like a way to avoid the duty to investigate and understand the positive results that scientific methodology has to offer. It also begins to sound as a type of wilful intellectual blindness. Just as the problems of society become more obviously systemic in nature, just as society becomes a clear factor in global ecology, humanists (and 'post-humanists,' whatever that might really mean) rest upon theories that avoid a responsibility to become scientifically literate. This humanistic victory sounds pretty hollow in the realm of ecology. Essentialist conclusions and ontological limits to options might just be important to acknowledge in this realm. But there is an even more important tragedy attached to the victory of the critical move: if the academic intellectual hides behind an ideological critique of science and the ideological bashing of 'Hollywood', where are constructive ideals going to be provided? Not just by the creators of Hollywood movies and narrowly trained scientists, hopefully. So whilst these two books could be characterised by the distinction between 'seeing ecology' and 'seeing as ecology,' their most interesting and challenging shared concept is not 'seeing' (or 'seeing as') - it is *ecology*.