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Book Review



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Book Review: *Film, Environment, Comedy: Eco-Comedies on the Big Screen*

by Karim Townsend



About the Author

Karim Townsend is a PhD student at Cambridge Film and Screen, University of Cambridge. His research explores connections between contemporary film and screen media, neoliberalism, ecocriticism, and critical theory. His writing has been published or is forthcoming in journals such as *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, and the *European Journal of American Culture*.

Book Review

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Murray, Robin L., and Joseph K. Heumann. 2022. *Film, Environment, Comedy: Eco-Comedies on the Big Screen*. New York: Routledge.

Outlining the stereotypical characterizations of environmentalists in her influential *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age* (2018), Nicole Seymour observes that whereas mainstream environmentalism and its media representations frequently evince sensibilities such as sanctimony and self-righteousness, a multitude of recent media objects, including films, appear to eschew such sensibilities, instead responding to environmental discourses through absurdity and irony, as well as “irreverence, ambivalence, camp, frivolity, indecorum, awkwardness, sardonicism, perversity, playfulness, and glee” (2018, 14). While Seymour’s important study of this irreverent turn engages with ecocinema specifically in one chapter, Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann’s latest collaboration, *Film, Environment, Comedy: Eco-Comedies on the Big Screen*, seeks to develop Seymour’s approach here, foregrounding the ironic and irreverent in a more sustained focus on eco-comedy films and offering a “strong companion for Seymour’s broad-based study” (2022, 4).

But what exactly is an “eco-comedy”? The authors apply the term to films which, although designed for audience consumption, “interact with audiences not only to entertain but also to (at least sometimes) provide subtle calls for action” (1). The attention on the comic here aims to expand on previous scholarship on ecocinema, which has traditionally been dominated by engagements with eco-disaster films. Works by Ingram (2000), MacDonald (2001), Cubitt (2005), Brereton (2005; 2016), and edited volumes by Rust *et al.* (2013) and Willoquet-Maricondi (2010) offer expansive definitions of ecocinema, but largely elide questions of the comic as a thematic and aesthetic mode. However, while ecocinema has been understood through a range of lenses, so too can eco-comedy, the authors argue, be defined flexibly, variably utilizing numerous comic tropes, conventions, and theories to “expose and amplify environmental issues in comic

ecocinema” (Murray and Heumann 2022, 4). A key contention of the book is that eco-comedies’ diverse engagements with environmental issues “demonstrate the power of laughter to help save the world” (3). In this respect, the corpus of films chosen for analysis is particularly interesting. The elastic definition of eco-comedy here encompasses several films with only marginal comic investments—a decision that stages generative encounters with film studies, genre studies, and ecocriticism, while also bearing a few disadvantages, as I broach later.

A core strength of the book, however, is its commitment to accessibility. Indeed, the authors, outlining their corpus of films—including mainstream Hollywood classics, well-known Oscar-winning films, as well as international and independent films—note that the films chosen are readily available to view on streaming services, a decision that allows readers to consult the films as they read along the three sections of the book.

Part I centers on comic genres and the “green world,” in relation to pastoralism, anti-pastoralism, and post-pastoralism, all of which open onto questions of race, gender, and the body. In Chapter 1, the authors trace the trajectory of the pastoral comedy from Shakespeare’s comedies to Hollywood screwball comedies of the 1930s and 1940s. In their view, screwball comedies can be distinguished from other romantic comedies by virtue of their critical engagement with the green world, which opens up “possibilities for exploring other environmental issues, from colonialism and species extraction to irresponsible science” (16). Regrettably, the authors’ analyses here are chiefly restricted to the level of plot and narrative rather than any sustained attention to the specificities of film form and aesthetics. Despite the interest here in ecocritical approaches to film and the “green world,” more could be said, perhaps, about the materiality of the profilmic and contextual details of film production, particularly in relation to these films’ use of location. For instance, while some of these films thematize imperial visions of the green world, it is noteworthy that these “exotic” locations are often filmed within US borders—to give an example from one of the films discussed in this chapter, nothing is said here about the fact that the jungle scenes of Preston Sturges’s *The Lady Eve* (1941) were in fact filmed in Arcadia, California, with Lake Baldwin of the Los Angeles County Arboretum and Botanic Garden representing the Amazon jungle.

In Chapter 2, questions of pastoralism are developed in a more explicitly postcolonial and postmodern context. The Australian films *Love Serenade* (1996) and *The Sapphires* (2012), as well as *Attenberg* (2010), by Greek director Athina Rachel Tsangari, are examined here to explore issues of the “post-pastoral,” which, crucially, probes traditional androcentric conceptions of the pastoral (30). The authors draw heavily on Terry Gifford’s assertion that the post-pastoral is marked partly by a “recognition that

the exploitation of nature is often accompanied by the exploitation of the less powerful people who work with it, visit, or less obviously, depend upon its resources” (32). This engagement with Gifford allows the authors to explore fruitfully the complexities of the two Australian films, in relation to their shared setting of the Murray River and its colonial history. Yet, although the authors view these films as embodying elements of the “romantic comedy,” questions of comedy seem to recede somewhat to the background here. Most interesting in this chapter is the focus on Tsangari’s *Attenberg*, as the authors draw more attention to the comic and absurd tonalities with which the film makes its observations on animality, gender, and the pastoral. In the final chapter of Part I, the authors turn to Guillermo del Toro’s *The Shape of Water* (2017). Yet, although the authors trace the film’s generic hybridity and its indebtedness to Hollywood’s slapstick comedies from the silent era, such as the films of Charlie Chaplin, the chapter’s focus feels more centered on the film’s engagements with eco-horror than on the film’s use of humor.

More effective is Part II of the book, as the authors’ analyses here (and the films themselves) more insistently explore the intersections of ecological issues and comic modes. In this section, the authors focus on laughter, eco-heroes, and what they term “evolutionary narratives of consumption” (61). In Chapter 4, for instance, the authors examine Native American zombie films, Rod Pocowatchit’s *The Dead Can’t Dance* (2010) and Jeff Barnaby’s *Blood Quantum* (2019), both of whose narratives center on the outbreak of a zombie virus to which Native Americans are immune. Murray and Heumann’s extensive research into the zombie genre is evident here, as the authors trace the genre’s emphasis on questions of evolution and futurity. The two films by indigenous filmmakers chosen for analysis, the authors suggest, use humor to address the environmental and genocidal dimensions of the United States’ history of colonialism, in so doing “revising the narrative and inserting a truly indigenous point of view” (75). Chapter 5 surveys the field of climate fiction and turns to film to engage with the question of how eco-films thematizing the climate crisis move away from simple recognitions of the problems associated with the crisis and instead offer “potential solutions” (78). While cinema bears the potential to raise consciousness regarding the climate crisis, studies have demonstrated that eco-films do not necessarily inspire consistent, long-term activism in viewers (80). Yet, interestingly, such studies have paid little attention to eco-comedies. Indeed, climate fiction in a more humorous mode, as the authors discuss, deploys the “rhetorical power of comedy” to offer audiences possible solutions to coping with the climate crisis. In the authors’ view, films such as *Downsizing* (Alexander Payne, 2017) and *Woman at War* (Benedikt Erlingsson, 2018) offer mediations of the climate crisis and environmental justice, but it is precisely these films’ humor that enacts a move “away from the apocalypse and toward activism” (78). By drawing attention to the activist and

political potential of eco-comedies, the authors highlight the need for more empirical research in the field of audience studies, particularly in relation to the rhetorics of comedy and environmental activism.

Other chapters in Part II of the book offer a welcome detour from the dominating focus of the rural and pastoral in ecocinema. In Chapter 6, the authors explore questions of racial and environmental injustice in an urban context; the primary focus here is *Sorry to Bother You* (Boots Riley, 2018), which, in their view, “offers an alternative approach to a deadly gentrification through a comic evolutionary narrative that heals and connects humanity with their homes” (94). Although the authors seek here to develop film scholar Pat Brereton’s work on environmental ethics in film (95), engagements with film analysis beyond a primarily narrative focus take a backseat to general discussions of human rights and the United Nations in relation to housing. Despite this, the chapter offers illuminating contextual details regarding race and gentrification in the United States and narrative films’ mediation of more communal responses to the injustices wrought by environmental racism. The final chapter of Part II explores the fashion and textile industries as represented in films such as *In Fabric* (Peter Strickland, 2018). As the authors observe, in one of the more multifaceted and sustained analytical chapters of the book, the satire and comic horror of *In Fabric* gesture to the “eco-dangers of a fashion industry of sweatshops and consumption” while also exposing the violence and exploitation of humans as well as nonhuman environments (110).

Chapters structured around longer analyses of particular films tend to be more effective in unpacking the connections between comedy and the ecological. Indeed, in the final section of the book, centered on questions of nostalgia, fuel, and the carnivalesque, Chapter 8 examines film’s “complicated relationship with oil,” particularly in relation to Bill Forsyth’s *Local Hero* (1983) and *Fubar: Balls to the Wall* (Michael Dowse, 2010). This sampling of two films released decades apart allows the authors to contrast the filmmakers’ varying ecocritical investments and depictions of comic eco-heroes. Whereas Forsyth’s film is self-described as “low-key” (138) in its environmental messages, for example, *Fubar: Balls to the Wall* gives a “louder and harder” message, while also “comically and slyly unmasking the eco-disaster of oil culture and offering a communal eco-comic solution to exploitation of human and nonhuman nature” (139). The final chapter turns its attention to fossil fuels as depicted in Disney-Pixar’s *Cars* trilogy (2006-2017). The authors suggest that these films offer “multiple eco-nostalgic alternatives to petro-fuels” (146). As with other chapters, questions of interdependence and community in relation to the natural world come to the fore. Yet, while these films bear ecological ideologies rooted in notions of community as opposed

to individualism, the authors also broach the hypocrisy inherent in Disney's status as a neoliberal-capitalist corporation, whose films are predicated on vast consumer product tie-ins (161).

The recurring theme of interdependence, ultimately, epitomizes the book's aim of drawing attention to the rhetorical power of comedy to "build community" (166), an imperative that resonates strongly amid the COVID-19 pandemic during which the book was written (163). Yet, although the book ambitiously navigates a range of comedic subgenres, the book's corpus presents some limitations, particularly as a consequence of the broad definition of comedy presented here. For example, many of these films' uses of humor and comic relief are arguably only peripheral to their broader concerns. Yet, with this peripherality being sufficient to justify inclusion in the book, it often feels as though the comedic dimensions of certain films are briefly glossed, whereupon questions of comedy give way to general ecocritical readings of the films, particularly narrative-centric analyses. Only in the book's longer and more in-depth analyses do the entwinements of comedy (particularly in its satirical modes), eco-film aesthetics, as well as historical and ideological factors come most strongly to the fore. However, the book's emphasis on the ways in which eco-comic films serve as "cultural forces" (166) provides readers—particularly students, at whom the book seems most targeted—with the tools to explore deeper the intersections of comedy, culture, and eco-film. Indeed, the authors hope for readers to expand not only "the films and sub-genres examined but also the methodologies applied to them to enhance our broad definition of the eco-comedy" (167). As they suggest, in our time of pandemics and climate emergencies, eco-comedies may perhaps be just what audiences need to "laugh at the environment and at least begin to heal the world" (167).

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