

# Introduction

Thomas Elsaesser's 'The Pathos of Failure' ([1975] 2004), originally written at the tail end of the New Hollywood era, remains one of the key works on the period. Subtitled 'Notes on the Unmotivated Hero', the article attempts to place contemporary narrative trends in a context of Hollywood convention *and* European influence, and diagnoses a central contradiction in New Hollywood film: the struggle between the motif of the journey and the figure of an apathetic protagonist. One of Elsaesser's great successes here is to position contemporary cinema in relation to Hollywood history and socio-political shifts *without* ignoring particular patterns and variations in individual films. Not many subsequent studies have been as erudite and incisive (or as evocative) as this, but a great number have continued to emphasize the same qualities in New Hollywood cinema as those discussed by Elsaesser: contradiction and incoherence; aimlessness; narcissism; ambivalence and ambiguity; and nostalgia. For those who have watched a considerable number of this period's most celebrated films, 'The Pathos of Failure' certainly strikes a chord, providing both an account of and a reflection on the distinctiveness of New Hollywood.

As the title of the essay suggests, Elsaesser's main focus is on human drama, on how the tone of New Hollywood is largely founded upon the ennui of the central male, and the attempts of directors to mould a narrative and a mise-en-scène around him. And yet, from an ecocritical standpoint, it is fascinating to see Elsaesser turn again and again, in his descriptions of a changing aesthetic, to the material environment. He writes, for example, of 'the palpable physical presence and emotional resonance of setting' ([1975] 2004: 280); of the 'give-and-take between the documentary texture of a location, and the existential allegory it may have to carry' ([1975] 2004: 282); and of 'an image of America that

becomes palpable not because of the interplay between moral symbolism and an ideological plot structure, but because of its solid specificity, its realized physical presence' ([1975] 2004: 290). These, I believe, can be understood as ecocritical 'threads' which are not followed through by Elsaesser. With his sights set on articulating a new kind of character-narrative dynamic, Elsaesser finds himself acknowledging the material aspects of this phenomenon but sees no reason to really interrogate these, or to make any substantial claims regarding the sustained significance of such features throughout New Hollywood. One could even say that there is a kind of ecocritical unconscious at work in 'The Pathos Failure'; this is writing which *senses* an environmental shift in American cinema, but which – for a variety of reasons – ultimately emphasizes other parts of the story.

In this reading of New Hollywood, I wish to build on Elsaesser's insights and delve more deeply into such ecocritical issues as materiality, environmentality and scale, without losing sight of questions of style, genre, industry and technology. In proposing that New Hollywood was characterized by ecocritical impulses, I am not claiming that this was an entirely coherent trend, or that it had any discernible relation to environmentalism as a political or ethical position. Instead, I argue that certain practices and patterns coalesced at this time, and that the cumulative result was a filmmaking wave whose distinctiveness can be understood ecocritically. These trends, such as the Vietnamization of the western and the rise of location shooting, are not unrelated to existing ideas of New Hollywood, and in Chapter One I will discuss in detail how they constitute a dialogue with popular conceptualizations of the period. However, as I hope to demonstrate, ecocriticism – 'a wide-open movement still sorting out its premises and its powers' (Buell 2005: 28) – can provoke fresh and challenging questions about familiar aspects of New Hollywood, and how we understand its significance.

More specifically, a materialist approach to this period is pursued here. Although each chapter adopts a different set of concerns, they are united by an interest in how New Hollywood films are often weighed down by the presence of a pro-filmic material reality, which Elsaesser describes as 'documentary texture' but which nevertheless contributes to a film's dramatic and aesthetic project. Adrian Ivakhiv boldly begins a chapter of *Ecologies of the Moving Image* with the assertion that 'films create worlds' (2013: 70), and it is around this central idea that Ivakhiv builds his complex and illuminating theory of cinema's ecological activities. I have found that watching cinema ecocritically requires one to see each film not so much as a newly created world, but a newly negotiated

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engagement with the existing world; the following work tends to emphasize cinema's reliance on already existing qualities of the material world, and its poetic re-organizing of those qualities. (Later in the same chapter, Ivakhiv edges closer to this notion when he suggests that 'film cauterizes and reassembles reality' (2013: 74, emphasis in the original).) I find in New Hollywood film a particularly vivid staging of this contingency, as if this was a time in which cinema's world-making capacities became obscured by its world-reliance.

The title of this book, *Transactions with the World*, is taken from Gilberto Perez's essay on Jean Renoir in his book *The Material Ghost* (1998), a passage of writing displaying ecocritical qualities which will be discussed in detail below. Equally significant is what the title does not include, namely any invocation of greenness, nature or wildlife – ideas which, at least until recently, might have been assumed to be the proper remit of ecocriticism. In fact, the very concept of 'nature' has been problematized in ecocriticism in a number of ways, whether through the re-definition of nature writing as a genre (Armbruster and Wallace 2001) or by exposing the complicity of 'nature' with social ills such as patriarchy (Plumwood 1993) and consumerism (Morton 2007). For the purposes of this study, the term 'environment' is generally preferable to 'nature' because of its ability to refer to urban as well as non-urban locations (many of the following case studies have densely populated settings), and 'material environment' has the particular advantage of suggesting something more tangible than an atmosphere or sense of place.

## New Hollywood

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In his study of New Hollywood, Peter Krämer writes about all popular American cinema produced between 1967 and 1976, and explains that he chooses not to distinguish *within* this output for the sake of clarity (2005: 2). New Hollywood for Krämer includes the likes of *Love Story* (Arthur Hiller, 1970) and *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen, 1976) as well as *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) and *Five Easy Pieces* (Bob Rafelson, 1970). Robert Phillip Kolker, in contrast, focuses his attention on a 'small group of filmmakers who emerged in the late sixties and early seventies and were able to take brief advantage of the transitional state of the studios, using their talents in critical, self-conscious ways, examining the assumptions and forms of commercial narrative cinema' (1988: 6). These two definitions of New

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Hollywood presuppose very different objects of study (detailed considerations of ‘New Hollywood’ as a confusing and mutating descriptor can be found in Krämer (1998) and Smith (1998)). In setting the parameters of what constitutes New Hollywood in this book, I propose something of a combination of the two, following Krämer’s time frame, but choosing – like Kolker and others – to emphasize the waves of formal and aesthetic experimentation which gathered momentum at this time. The analysis here is not so centred on the role of the director as is Kolker’s, but nevertheless focuses on what was sometimes called the ‘Hollywood Renaissance’, a body of work which has been lamented (Fadiman 1972; Bernardoni 1991) and, increasingly, celebrated (Elsaesser, Howarth and King 2004), sometimes both within the space of the same study (Berliner 2010). Noel King concedes that any idea of New Hollywood will be a ‘discursive construction of a particular kind’, but nevertheless attempts a capsule definition: ‘a brief window of opportunity running from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, when an adventurous new cinema emerged, linking the traditions of classical Hollywood genre filmmaking with the stylistic innovations of European art cinema’ (2004: 20). This broadly matches New Hollywood as it is discussed in the following chapters, with two important exceptions: I understand genre to be an important, but not the defining, feature of the classical model from which New Hollywood departed; and I do not believe that New Hollywood’s innovations need to be understood as European imports, but that they can in many cases be thought of as distinctly localized.

The pursuit of re-interpreting New Hollywood involves altering its corpus in some way (according to an emerging ecocritical criterion), and the attempt to re-characterize this period sometimes leads here to the inclusion of films, such as *Cockfighter* (Monte Hellman, 1974), which may stretch the validity of ‘Hollywood’ as a descriptor. (*Cockfighter* was produced by Roger Corman, whose status in relation to Hollywood is a complex and elusive one.) And yet the gradual disintegration of what is assumed and implied by the term Hollywood – a geographical epicentre of film production, a ruthlessly efficient power structure, etc. – is itself an important feature of the ‘New’ Hollywood in any case. In reaching beyond the mainstream of Hollywood output, however, I do not stretch so far as to incorporate trends in experimental cinema. This unfortunately precludes study of pertinent films such as *Diaries, Notes and Sketches*, a.k.a. *Walden* (Jonas Mekas, 1964–69), but is necessary in order to understand the complicating and enriching role played by the environment with regards to traditions and conventions of the fiction feature film.

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Setting the terms for a study of New Hollywood not only involves determining the criteria for inclusion; it must also involve situating that study amongst the variety of narratives which describe and account for this period's distinctiveness. In Chapter One this approach is set out in detail with the introduction of four 'faces' or versions of New Hollywood as it is often characterized in film-studies scholarship, with a suggestion of how certain debates within ecocriticism have the potential to contribute to and develop each one. The four subsequent chapters then expand on the arguments set out at this early stage. By moving between different conceptions of New Hollywood, I can draw connections between films of this period – such as *Nashville* (Robert Altman, 1975) and *Cockfighter*, or *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah, 1969) and *Medium Cool* (Haskell Wexler, 1969) – not normally discussed in the same context. The goal is to recognize the validity of different notions of New Hollywood and to identify new correspondences and commonalities between them; shared affinities which can be understood ecocritically.

Given that this study covers almost a decade of US American film history, the question of coverage becomes a challenge; how, in other words, to do justice to both the range of New Hollywood and the textual complexity of some of its films? While conceding that there is never an entirely satisfactory solution to problems such as this, my approach is an attempt to balance the conflicting impulses of breadth and depth. Firstly, the range of examples is deliberately developed to incorporate films of varying style, genre, subject matter, commercial success and canonical status. This relates not just to the project as a whole, but also to individual chapters. It is hoped that such an approach will challenge the rather rigid sub-categorization that sometimes takes hold of studies of New Hollywood, in which 'youth' films, 'paranoia' films, 'genre' films and 'auteur' films (for example) are understood as separate entities. So, even when examining a small number of primary case studies, I suggest links and comparisons with films from across the New Hollywood spectrum. The materialist emphasis which underscores this study does not take the form of a particular methodological blueprint. Not all films are treated equally, and the argument moves between a range of sources and ideas, from production to reception, through theory and criticism, searching for different 'ways in' to these films' environmentality.

Related to this is the fact that *Transactions with the World* refrains from pursuing two lines of inquiry – the rise of the disaster film and the emergence of modern American environmentalism – that might be expected in an ecocritical study of

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New Hollywood but which would, I believe, prove to be a distraction. The disaster film, which rose to prominence (and profitability) in the early 1970s, appears to demand ecocritical attention. In films such as *The Poseidon Adventure* (Ronald Neame, 1972), *The Towering Inferno* (John Guillermin, 1974) and *Earthquake* (Mark Robson, 1974), mankind is castigated for its hubristic worldview, its lack of humility and its dangerous underestimation of natural forces. Disaster movies, in Nick Roddick's terms, 'are an essentially earthbound form' (1980: 246). And yet, the form (at least in its early-1970s incarnation) is so fundamentally regimented with regard to how natural threats arise and how they are dealt with, that ecocriticism would add little to our understanding of them. In *Earthquake*, repeated close-ups of convulsing earth, cross-cut with shots of fleeing victims, suggest a determined attempt to distinguish the earthquake from its effects; the film cuts from images of death and destruction to 'culprit shots' of the ground, and a pattern develops whereby the earth is clearly coded as an ontologically distinct perpetrator. Nature looms large and is treated with due deference, but it is simultaneously kept in its place by a strict us-and-them, or us-and-it, dichotomy. A related question concerns whether or not to include disaster movies in the New Hollywood category at all; as Peter Krämer observes (2005: 65), many contemporary reviews welcomed the fact that *Airport* (George Seaton, 1970) and its offspring offered a refreshing dose of solid storytelling and conservative values, an antidote to the *Easy Riders* (Dennis Hopper, 1969) and *Midnight Cowboys* (John Schlesinger, 1969) of the period. Disaster movies are characterized at least in part by their avoidance of the New Hollywood features this book sets out to illuminate.

Likewise, to broach the apparently central question of contemporary environmentalism would risk confusing one of my claims, that ecocritical film study need not be directly contextualized by, or rooted in, environmental politics and debate. I do not deny or preclude the possible influence of cultural trends of the 1960s and 1970s – and in fact my discussion highlights some significant intertextual correlations with art and literature – but ecocritical film study as I pursue it is especially valuable as a way of resisting the cultural determinism that informs much writing on New Hollywood. This is not to pretend that my approach is apolitical or unrelated to ecological concerns; on the contrary, I write in the belief that ecocriticism's contribution to arts scholarship is timely and vital. I also believe, however, that its potential progressiveness is best realized when it influences not only the themes we choose to emphasize in films, but also the basic assumptions we bring to film analysis.

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## Ecocriticism: Some Literary Pointers

In *The Environmental Imagination*, one of the founding texts of ecocriticism, Lawrence Buell offers the following, much-cited checklist for what might constitute an ‘environmental text’, or a text which can be said to feature ‘environmentality’ as one of its most important qualities:

- *The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.*
- *The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.*
- *Human accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation.*
- *Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text. (1995: 6–8)*

At a later date, Buell modulated his criteria, believing it to be ‘more productive to think inclusively of environmentality as a property of any text – to maintain that all human artefacts bear such traces, and at several stages; in the composition, the embodiment, and the reception’ (2005: 25). *Transactions with the World* draws both on Buell’s initial ideas about the textual attributes of an environmental work and his later concern for extending the scope of interest to all texts, as well as their extra-textual currents. Hence the decision to incorporate questions of historical context, industrial patterns and film technology, as well as style and aesthetics. Were it not for my interest in materiality, a concept which seems underserved by or peripheral to that of environmentality, I would also have followed Buell’s lead in opting for the term ‘environmental criticism’ over ‘ecocriticism’. Another important feature of Buell’s approach is his privileging of literary interpretation. Unlike Greg Garrard (2012: 1–17), who outlines his take on ecocriticism (using Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* as an exemplary case study) as a kind of meeting point between the study of ecological issues and the study of literature, Buell situates himself predominantly as a student and theorist of literature. This question of ecocriticism’s purpose – if it is a means, what is its end? – is directly broached by Robert Kern.

Kern’s ‘Ecocriticism: What Is it Good for?’ offers itself as a kind of instructive demonstration of ecocriticism. The author begins by endorsing Lawrence Buell’s

complaint that representations of nature in literature are invariably read as standing in for something else, and the determination to recognize that nature in art need not always be a reflection or representation of human characteristics is something of a guiding principle for ecocriticism. Kern is also keen to look beyond overtly environmentalist content:

*Ecocriticism becomes most interesting and useful, it seems to me, when it aims to recover the environmental character or orientation of works whose conscious or foregrounded interests lie elsewhere. One object of ecocriticism, as I see it, is to read in such a way as to amplify the reality of the environment in or of a text, even if doing so we resist the tendency of the text itself. (2003: 260)*

There are two separate things happening here: the championing of an overarching way of reading (let nature stand for itself) and a desire to seek out texts where such a reading might not seem immediately appropriate. Kern then carries out an ecocritical analysis of two moments in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, simultaneously shedding new light on the passages themselves and offering an example of ecocriticism's potential flexibility and versatility. In the first passage, Jane and Elizabeth Bennet make separate journeys, alone and on foot across rugged terrain, to the Bingley house, and in doing so each veers from culturally accepted norms of womanly behaviour – Jane arrives rain soaked and Elizabeth visibly flustered. Kern contrasts the sharply judgemental language of some characters with that of the narrator, who seems to relish Elizabeth's experience. He also observes the symmetry employed by Austen in her two depictions of exposure to the elements – one sister comes out the worse for wear, the other buoyed and radiant – and proposes that this suggests a regard (on the part of Austen) for nature itself as a balance. In the second passage, Elizabeth visits Darcy's estate in Derbyshire, and marvels at the sensitive and tasteful landscaping. Kern acknowledges that nature here is obviously being manipulated for narrow human purposes (pride and luxury on the part of Bennet and Darcy, characterization on the part of Austen), but argues that rather than admonishing the characters or the author for this, ecocriticism should look to learn from it. He asks what it can reveal to us about the uneasy relationship between art and nature – both in eighteenth century neo-classicism and beyond.

In the first instance, Kern refuses to reduce evocations of the natural world to mere externalizations of characters' inward processes, and in the second instance

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he locates the externalization as being a kind of social phenomenon on display within the diegesis of the text, which he also begins to historicize. In some ways these are quite distinct and separate interpretive paths to follow, but Kern also seems to be arguing for the *compatibility* of the two approaches; nor is he hamstrung by an overriding agenda, a need to prove or disprove anything relating to environmental issues as such. And how ecocriticism is applied seems to be dictated by the particular character of the passages themselves. At first glance, Austen's characters appear to manipulate and luxuriate in nature with a distinctly anthropocentric narcissism. Rather than springing to environmentalist admonishment, however, Kern trains his attention on moments, patterns and surprising points of emphasis in which the natural world does not seem as subservient as the novel's characters – and its readers – might initially assume.

### Ecocritical Film Study

Just as Lawrence Buell came to see environmentality as a property of all literary texts, so contemporary ecocritical film study has broadened its scope beyond ostensibly 'green' cinema and the investigation of ecological thematics. Forerunners in the field – including important books by Scott MacDonald (2001), Pat Brereton (2004), David Ingram (2000) and Deborah A. Carmichael (2006) – interrogated in political, ideological and aesthetic terms American cinema's conceptualizations of the natural world. With the exception of Brereton's *Hollywood Utopia* (2004), these studies tended to focus on films which could be confidently understood as texts 'about' or 'of' the environment, from avant-garde pastoralism to spectacular westerns and environmentalist thrillers. The first chapter of Ingram's *Green Screen*, for example, declares that the films under investigation 'draw on and combine a range of different environmentalist discourses' (2000: 13). Taken together, these works can be said to have provided something of a wake-up call for film studies, collectively identifying a surprisingly underexplored facet of American-cinema history. The 2013 publication of *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* can perhaps be seen as the consolidation of a second wave of this growing sub-discipline. If it is at all useful to distinguish the early constellation of studies from more recent work, then the shift can be understood in a number of ways: a reduced emphasis on American cinema; a more pronounced theoretical influence; a growing interest in the ecological characteristics of film's ontology, as

opposed to (or in conjunction with) the rhetoric of particular texts. In the introduction to *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*, the editors – echoing Lawrence Buell, and subtly diverging from Ingram – propose that ‘all films present productive ecocritical exploration’ and that ‘all cinema is culturally and materially embedded’ (Rust, Monani and Cubitt 2013: 3, emphasis in the original).

A crucial book in signalling this shift was Sean Cubitt’s *Eco Media* (2005), not least because of the way in which it argued, in theoretically adventurous terms, for a conception of ecology in which technology plays an active and creative role. Other second-wave books have ambitiously stretched across different periods and national cinemas in their tracing of ecocritical practices and ideas: Nadia Bozak’s *The Cinematic Footprint* (2012) develops a vivid account of cinema’s inescapable material reliance on the material environment; Adrian Ivakhiv’s *Ecologies of the Moving Image* (2013), amongst its many triumphs, gives a sense of how any film’s ecocritical richness is always a combination of its socio-political context and its poetical, expressive inventiveness, and how exceptional films are always exceptional in part because of how they creatively manage the giddy potential of matter and movement. Another way of characterizing this more recent wave is to suggest that it is less reliant on American cultural, literary and landscape studies and has begun to unearth the ecocritical implications of medium-specific concerns (digital cinematography, Bazinian realism, distribution and exhibition, etc.). As Anat Pick and Guinevere Narraway assert in their introduction to *Screening Nature*, another rich collection: ‘Film theory and film studies have only recently rediscovered what is surely most visible about film: its entanglement with the world it shoots, edits and projects’ (2013: 2). This study of New Hollywood cinema is informed by both of those developments. On the one hand, I share with MacDonald and Brereton an interest in situating American cinema within a context of thinking about American culture more generally. Like them, I find writers such as Leo Marx and Henry David Thoreau inescapably useful in coming to terms with American cinema’s particular environmentality. I strive to avoid crude generalizations of the kind that can be dangerously convenient when writing about American culture and its mediated relationship with the material environment; and yet the presence in this book of Philip Roth and Jasper Johns, Flannery O’Connor and Stanley Cavell, not to mention sustained attention to the Vietnam War and the United States flag, means that *Transactions with the World* contributes to an ecocritical conversation specifically about US American cinema that has become somewhat eclipsed in recent years.

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On the other hand, I look to build on the insights of writers such as Cubitt, Ivakhiv and Bozak, and their ecocritical concern with the ontological properties of cinema. Ivakhiv writes of how cinema, regardless of its ostensible subject matter, ‘reshapes the world in many directions’, and like him I ‘wish to focus on films, or film capacities, that move things in the direction of a more fluid, more animate [...] understanding of the world’ (2013: 26). For reasons that I hope become clear in the course of the book, I am not so keen as Ivakhiv to assert film’s ‘world-making’ potential, but I share with his approach a belief in cinema’s extraordinarily complex arsenal of techniques and affects for disrupting and critiquing conventionalized assumptions about the human–nature dynamic. Another key point of departure for the present discussion is Nadia Bozak’s *The Cinematic Footprint* (2012), which not only offers a vivid account of cinema’s primary reliance on natural resources, but stretches beyond a straightforward lament of the industry’s staggering levels of consumption and considers the ways in which particular artists – including Warhol, Erice, Vertov, Haneke, Flaherty and Marker – have creatively explored that reliance in their practice. My emphasis is not so much on how New Hollywood filmmakers thematized their own submission to material ingredients, but I do attempt to navigate between the pro-filmic and the filmic in ways not dissimilar to Bozak. As with the films examined in *The Cinematic Footprint*, I find in many New Hollywood features a deeply symbiotic relationship between a film’s physical, material production and its affective, philosophical potential. The central claim of *Transactions with the World* is that New Hollywood was a film–historical moment in which this symbiosis was crucial.

Both Bozak and Ivakhiv venture across film history, and while they each gesture towards a historicized understanding of key case studies, their work – like that of many ecocritical film studies – is essentially pan-historical. In this regard, *Transactions with the World* is a relatively unusual work. I know of no other book that takes as its object of study a particular chapter in film history and attempts to understand that period’s distinctiveness in ecocritical terms. Describing the timeliness of contemporary ecocritical film study, Ivakhiv writes that ‘there are times when relations between a cultural world and the earth that subtends it become fraught and troubled’ (2013: 28). The American 1960s can be said to be one of those times, and whilst I have already stated my reluctance to explain the unusual environmentality of New Hollywood cinema by way of rising environmentalist awareness, there is no reason to ignore the fact that this was a period of flux in American environmental culture. The publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*

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in 1962 and the first Earth Day in 1970 (whose participants were counted in tens of millions) can be seen as markers of an intensified discomfort about the place of nature in American culture. In *Hollywood Utopia* (2004), Pat Brereton explores the crossovers between American cinema and environmental-cultural politics, and the important intersection between ‘hippie’ rhetoric and environmentalist awareness. From the perspective of the present study, it suffices to say that the New Hollywood period certainly answers to the description of a ‘fraught and troubled’ time for culture–nature negotiations.

What will be more central to *Transactions with the World* is the fraught and troubled relationship in the 1960s and 1970s between Hollywood cinema and the material world. Sustained attention will not be paid here to the transition from classical to post-classical Hollywood, but implicit in many of the ideas herein is the notion that this transition was at least partly characterized by a rupture in Hollywood’s treatment and imagination of the non-human world. At the risk of over-simplifying anything as vastly complex as classical Hollywood’s ecological imagination, I find John Alton’s *Painting with Light* (1949: 1995) a very telling text in this regard; its chapters on cinematography and natural conditions are full of the kind of confident assertions regarding the mastery and straightforward communicability of environments which one cannot quite imagine from New Hollywood cinematographers such as Haskell Wexler or Nestor Almendros. ‘Fortunately,’ writes Alton in the introduction to his chapter on outdoor photography, ‘to the millions who seldom get a chance to go anywhere, motion pictures can bring beauty of the outdoors in the form of entertainment to be viewed in air-conditioned theatres’ ([1949] 1995: 118). Alton’s conceptualization of cinema and its harnessing of natural ‘views’ instinctively feels, from the standpoint of New Hollywood cinema, like the voice of another era. I am not concerned with whether this suggests a progressive development or qualitative advance in terms of ecological ethics, but I am interested in whether something of film-historical interest is at stake here – an underexplored feature of Hollywood’s mid-century transformation.

### **Perez, Renoir and Ecocritical Interpretation**

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In what is perhaps a telling irony, one of the most incisive pieces of film analysis that pays sustained attention to the natural world is an essay which makes no

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claims to be ecocritical at all: Gilberto Perez's 'Landscape and Fiction' (1998), a long and eloquent appreciation of *Partie de campagne* (Jean Renoir, 1936). Just as Thomas Elsaesser's 'The Pathos of Failure' provides ecocritical insights without focusing solely on films' treatment of the natural environment, Perez's essay conveys a rich sense of a film's environmentality by way of a broad-based critical interpretation. Perez understands Renoir's film to be a response, somewhere between homage and critique, to impressionism, a mode that the author describes as still dominating our understanding of 'the country':

*Pastoral is always a fiction, a fantasy of the country, but the impressionists, in keeping with their time – and ours – made it a more realistic fiction, not a mythical Arcadia but something they constructed out of actual passing appearances – the impressions – of the world we all know. And theirs was a more democratic fiction, something that relates to the experience of anybody who can get a glimpse of a stretch of water or a piece of greenery once in a while.*  
(1998: 203)

The essay goes on to weave together broad concepts – such as pastoralism, impressionism and democracy – with the subtle particulars of Renoir's film, including details of narrative, image and production circumstances. Perez's terms, although ostensibly stemming from the theme of landscape, are not quite reducible to it. 'Nature in this film,' he writes at one point, 'though represented with rich vividness, is yet perceived to be always in excess of its representation. Nature is there first and yet not there' (1998: 219). Elsewhere, Perez suggests that Renoir's camera 'meets the world from a position that is always recognizably concrete' (1998: 224) and is 'an autonomous narrative agency that conducts its own transaction with the world' (1998: 220), as if our understanding of *Partie de campagne* should not be confined to the lives of its characters or even the beauty of their environment, but must respond to how the film positions itself in both its filmic and its pro-filmic worlds. (As David Thomson writes of Renoir, 'no one developed a more complete illusion of the rapport between filming and the world it looked at' (2012: 144).) Although Perez does not use the term, his analysis is, I believe, ecocritical. *Partie de campagne*, as understood through Perez, is at its most profound when viewed as the result of his going somewhere and filming something. In its simultaneous attention to film history and film technology, themes and aesthetics, pro-filmic environments and storytelling craft, Perez's essay exemplifies the

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kind of ecocritical approach I aim to bring to this discussion of New Hollywood films.

What, more specifically, does Perez prioritize in his analysis that I deem to be important in ecocritical film study? Four important features may be identified. Firstly, Perez's interpretation allows the material environment to be simultaneously 'other' (not a 'serviceable vehicle for the meanings of fiction' (1998: 223)) and a vital aspect of the film's meaningfulness as fiction. To avoid an anthropocentric reading, in other words, does not necessarily require us to marginalize dramatic narrative. Secondly, Perez is alert to the geographical specificity and particularity at play in the setting of *Partie de campagne*. While not insisting that a film should offer any kind of reliable representation of a 'real place', the author interprets Renoir's film on the understanding that its filming location and its setting (the banks of the Loing rather than the Seine, as he observes (p. 206)) have a strong bearing upon its drama. Third, what is at stake in Renoir's film, as understood by Perez, is not the relationship between mankind and nature so much as the fate of particular people in a particular place – and the importance of place in that fate. Although *Partie de campagne* is shown to be ambitious and profound, it appears to achieve this on a localized, immediate scale; it is a story of 'these four individuals who all make love on that river island that summer afternoon' (Perez 1998: 223, emphasis added). And finally, Perez's concern with the presence of an author and film technology in a pro-filmic environment does not run counter to, or qualify his interpretation of, the fiction. Details of production are not cited to 'demystify' the effects of *Partie de campagne*, but to help us understand them more fully. At one point Perez notes Renoir's decision to mount the camera on a motorboat, a stylistic flourish which deliberately jars with the period setting. In this gesture, writes Perez, the camera 'recognizes its own foreignness amid the trees and the river and the rain, its own apartness amongst the things of nature' (1998: 226), a recognition that feeds back into the film's dramatic pathos – as the characters are also doomed to realize the essentially transient nature of their day in the country. Perez demonstrates how an understanding of filming conditions can feed back into the appreciation of the film text; his responses to material context and diegetic qualities become mutually sustaining.

Turning to New Hollywood, and attempting to describe its 'environmental sensibility', Perez's approach presents a fruitful guide, especially in its attention to these four features:

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- Materiality
- Particularity
- Scale
- Filmmaking presence

The challenge of adapting this approach to the following study is considerable, not least because the scope of my argument (encompassing almost a decade of cinema) prevents such sustained focus on a single work. Instead of attempting to match Perez's comprehensive and detailed analysis, I can instead draw on his conceptualization of a film as a fiction which is informed by – but not reducible to – its contexts as well as its aesthetic features. Following Perez, I approach cinema as a confluence of influences, conditions and qualities that can be appreciated as a cultural, industrial and aesthetic phenomenon simultaneously.

Thomas Elsaesser's account of New Hollywood, with which this introduction began, gives a vivid sense of why it might be a particularly rich and fascinating object for this kind of multi-faceted approach. However, 'The Pathos of Failure' is only one of very many attempts to describe and account for the changing nature of American cinema in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and I am keen to stress the extent to which an ecocritical interpretation of New Hollywood can build upon – rather than refute or dismiss – the range of existing accounts. So, in Chapter One, I will sketch out four broad schools of thought on the subject and suggest some ways in which the seeds for a rich ecocritical discussion of New Hollywood have already been sown. For although Elsaesser's hopes for a 'new form of mise-en-scène' and a 'reevaluation of physical reality' ([1975] 2004: 292) were dashed by mainstream trends in subsequent decades, studies of New Hollywood are still attempting to grapple with the tricky question of *what changed* back then. Such studies are often (inadvertently) continuing an ecocritical discussion about New Hollywood, and one that I believe should play an important role in our understanding of modern American cinema.

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