The politics of viewing ecocinema in China: Reflections on audience studies and transnational ecocinema

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Peer reviewed article in Interactions: Studies in Communications and Cultures, 2:2, 2012, pp. 159-175.

Abstract

Media and communications scholars frequently publish work on audience interpretations of ecological media. These range from the ways the media frames ecological issues to the socio-political role the media plays in influencing popular opinion on environmental issues. Film criticism is not that much different from other media analyses in its focus on ideological bias and the hypothetical impact of the texts. Considering the emphasis ecocinema 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. This article investigates some potential avenues academic studies of audiences of ecocinema may take. We focus on the ways audiences use ecocinema to generate diverse meanings as we switch from spectator studies to studies of audiences, where we not only explore the ways audience perspectives correlate or challenge the hypothetical perspectives suggested by media critics/academics, but also focus on the plurality of reading positions and the challenges they provide for making sense of the uses of ecocinema. The challenge to homogenized or theorized reading publics is made more explicit once we take into account the major

role cultural specificity plays in audience responses. It is here that transnational considerations help us diversify the range of analysis and offer new perspectives on the socio-political implications of ecocinema. To these ends, I focus on the ways individuals from China (Chinese university students and graduates in the white-collar industries, both groups who identify themselves as part of China's new emerging middle class) encounter and negotiate the transnational dimensions of ecocinema both with domestically produced films and imported productions.

Keywords

ecocinema

transnational

audience studies

China

globalization

class politics

Hollywood

reception

Introduction

In the last ten years, we have seen academic communities cross disciplinary fields to merge the humanities and the sciences in studies of ecological issues in the cinema. Drawing on the history of literature-based critical analysis, academics focus on exploring

the ideological functions of a range of 'environmentalist' or ecological cinematic texts (for Hollywood, see Ingram 2000; Murray and Heumann 2009; for China, see Lu and Mi 2010). Here, we can see an increasing emphasis on ecological considerations over 'simply' environmentalist ones. Broadly explained, this indicates a move from representing efforts to conserve and protect the environment (the ism in environmentalism) to complex explorations and ways of thinking about the connections that comprise the logic of the ecosystem (ecology), including humanity's embeddedness in all its structures. Part of this ecological turn in media studies involves interrogating how the ecosystem can be 'seen ecologically' (i.e. from inside its own parameters) (e.g. Dobrin and Morey 2009) or evoking the advances transmedia considerations bring to representations of human activities within the ecosystem (Cubitt 2005). The field is still young and undergoing definition of its parameters. Thus, certain aspects of the relationship between film and ecology remain understudied, such as the ways audiences consume and appropriate environmental messages.

Media and communications scholars frequently publish articles on media coverage of environmental issues in a range of journals from *Global Environmental Change* (Anttila 2005) to *Political Science* (Kenix 2008). This is important work as understanding how the media (both mainstream and more esoteric fare) frames the science of global warming, sustainability issues, ecological-economic deprivation, decreasing biodiversity and so on reveals aspects of the socio-political role the media plays in influencing popular opinion on environmental issues. Many of these articles use terms such as framing, coverage, ideology and representation in their titles, indicating their modus

operandi of engaging in criticism of the ways media producers subjectively represent environmental concerns. Additionally, journals such as *Public Understanding of Science* and *Environmental Communications* assess the social impact of media communications working at the intersections of philosophical concerns, scientific developments, technological applications and individual spectators.

Many works on ecocinema (or cinema with an ecological conscience, according to Paula Willoquet-Maricondi 2010) take documentary films as examples of ways in which film production can make an activist-critical contribution to ecopolitics. In practice, much of this work is devoted to analytical and critical descriptions of how these films convey the arguments they propose, often complemented by hypothetical postulations on audience readings. Writers thus seek to validate or invalidate the subjective perspectives of the film producers based on their own analytical perspectives, which, perhaps inadvertently, add a sense of 'absolute' truth value to the ecological perspective of the text. Such work plays an important role in bringing wider scholarly attention and more pointed criticism to texts that occupy the margins of mainstream environmental media. But is such academic discussion that much different from critical work on, for example, the ways organizations such as the BBC or the CNN affect public perceptions of environmental issues? For comparison, the discussion generated by the documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth* (Davis Guggenheim 2005) enables critics to debate the ways Al Gore's public persona and his everyman qualities succeed in breaching scepticism viewers may hold about climate change. Conversely, others discuss the ways Gore as an expert politician sways his audiences to his cause. Ultimately what is at stake here is an ideological critique of

the film as a text, instead of any real engagement with the ways audiences appropriate its messages. The conclusions of these analyses are often content with noting that the film has increased awareness of environmental issues, which the conclusions of academic work on fictional environmentalist films share. To a large extent, in continuing the critical dialogue on media's public influence, film criticism is not that much different from other media analyses in its focus on ideological bias and the hypothetical impact of the texts.

Considering the emphasis ecocinema scholars place on the social and political role of cinema, it is surprising that audiences are still a largely neglected group in the field. It is, of course, of vital importance that we analyse the operations of ideology and agency in the production of these texts, but the reception of these films is an especially promising field of study when we consider cinema's potential to visually capture the transnational and even global scale of environmental problems, and engage with them in a way that reaches wide global audiences. Implicit in much of the media criticism is awareness that cinema is not only a communicator of ideas, but also a crucial pedagogical tool that facilitates efficient learning and motivates participation from new generations of audiences. In addition, as film production and distribution technologies become more effective and immersive, cinema has an increasingly vital role to play in improving sustainable production and distribution, as well as communicating these innovations to global audiences.

There is then a clear need for academic studies of audiences of ecocinema, but what form

would such a study take? Would we start out, for example, by providing our assertion of valid forms of ecocinema and then see how audiences view these films? Or would we acknowledge that all environmentalist texts are inherently biased and then investigate how individuals negotiate this bias? For now, we will defer providing our analysis of what comprises effective ecocinema, which could function as subjective guidelines for audiences to follow. Instead, we will focus on the ways audiences use ecocinema and generate meanings based on what they appropriate from the texts. This necessitates a switch from spectator studies to studies of audiences where we not only explore the ways audience perspectives correlate or challenge the hypothetical perspectives suggested by media critics/academics, but also focus on the plurality of reading positions and the challenges they provide for making sense of the uses of ecocinema. The challenge to homogenized or theorized reading publics is made more explicit once we take into account the major role cultural specificity plays in audience responses. It is here that transnational considerations help us diversify the range of analysis and offer new perspectives on the socio-political implications of ecocinema.

Specifying audiences

Studies in ecocinema often pay attention to transnational considerations, especially when discussing the intersecting state interests and deterritorialized cultural-economic flows that underline uneven global developmental patterns. Certainly, economic and geopolitical interests are of vital importance, especially when it comes to critiquing the planetary destabilization of the ecosystem. But if we are to truly understand the impact

cinema can have on global ecopolitics, we should not work only on the hypothetical level, but must reorient our thinking to consider the culturally specific perspectives of audiences who view these films. While Anthony Leiserowitz (2004), Jessica Nolan (2010) and others have conducted important research on the audiences of ecocinema, they mostly focus on culturally restricted contexts and evade the transnational scale of environmental communications. To these ends, I focus on the ways individuals from China encounter and negotiate the transnational dimensions of ecocinema both with domestically produced films and imported productions. I make no claim to represent the 'Chinese audience', a concept that is entirely monolithic and homogenizing in its implications. Instead, I make a very specific delineation of what I mean by audiences in this study as they comprise Chinese university students aged 20–25 and graduates working in the white-collar industries, both groups who identify themselves as part of China's new emerging middle class (though this is a largely self-prescribed description).

This conceptualization of the middle class is highly context-specific. Cheng Li, for one, suggests that there are at least four basic groups that we must consider in defining the contemporary Chinese middle class: the capitalist class (private entrepreneurs); professionals, officials and managers with stable middle- or high-level incomes (the new middle class); some small-business owner or private entrepreneurs with stable incomes (the old middle class); and individuals who tentatively fit into these categories but may work in unstable conditions or lack the levels of salary (the marginal middle class) (Li 2010: 154). The majority of participants in the study fit into the second conceptualization of the middle class. To confirm this assertion, they were given a questionnaire requesting

information on their background, including income level of parents, current socio-economic and career status (if applicable), career aspirations and self-designations of class identity. Through this, it was clear that all the participants fit into Li's general range of the middle classes.

The middle classes are ultimately important for this critical analysis as their lifestyles and careers intersect negatively and positively with ecological concerns. This emergent generation who has been raised in the wider context of the 'middle classicization' of Chinese society will come to play an increasingly powerful and visible role in the cultural and, eventually, the political sphere of contemporary China. These individuals are in a unique position, as they have the general means and enough awareness of environmental issues to bring about some concrete change through their consumer patterns and career choices – these are the individuals who at the current trajectory of social development have substantial roles to play in China's ecological development. This limitation of the study is, of course, elitist, but it is important that we analyse these classes as they are the most visible consumers and beneficiaries of China's economic rise, and their everyday consumption habits have a huge impact on China's ecological footprint.

Studying these perspectives is of vital importance if we are to understand China's emerging position in global ecopolitics. China has recently demonstrated substantial concern for the state of (the lack of) global progress in reaching sustainability levels and standards of emissions. While this could be argued to be a part of a wider geopolitical power game for global hegemony, it is not difficult to find concrete evidence of such

progressive policies. Far from the oft-repeated notion of the world's factory, governmental policy and, increasingly, the media pay more attention to the economic and political implications of sustainable practices and costs of production. However, increasing support for renewable energy production and sustainable urban development collide with the human costs of these enterprises, especially the domestic inequality they sow.

Meanwhile, the use of green rhetoric for economic or political gain is also prevalent in the Chinese context, with opportunistic domestic and foreign enterprises taking advantage of the favourable state policies on renewable energy. This is another key reason to study the middle classes, especially those with a professed interest in environmentalism. The young professionals chosen for the study work in renewable energy (such as wind or solar power) and many of the student volunteers expressed interest in the ecological themes included in the call for participants. While we only had 25 participants who had graduated to the level of young professional, they share many similarities in their interests and ideological orientations with the students. They also work in non-Chinese companies and play a concrete part (for better or worse) in the complex political economy of globalizing China. Their interest in ecological issues, their emergent position in society, their general awareness of foreign cultural products and their willingness to embrace foreign organizations present a thoroughly viable group for studying a section of the 'Chinese audiences', even though this is a very limited and class-specific sample of the middle-class Chinese audiences. Due to these limitations, the project is best considered as an invitation to further research on the vital topic of how

audiences in China and in other cultural contexts view and appropriate ecological messages.

Self-reflexivity and audience research

The subjective role of the researcher is another limitation that audience studies face, and one we must address here. Ideological analysis is ingrained in any study of environmentalist or ecological issues – one often holds at least a cursory argumentative perspective on the topics discussed. Academics engaging with media from an ecologicalistic perspective often react from a need to challenge what they see as limitations of contemporary studies in ecological media. Alternatively, they may take a more pronounced environmentalist perspective and exhibit their interest in increasing awareness of certain causes. Indeed, ecocinema is a novel field as it affords the academic an unabashed sense of personal political engagement. Shifting discussion from representational/ideological analysis to empirical research is important for widening the scope of the field, but even here, subjective ideological orientation unavoidably emerges. While audiences hold their own perspectives on ecological issues, the researcher combines these into metalevel work that organizes the diverse perspectives according to the underlying logic of the study.

While bias may be unavoidable, especially in a study with a limited range of participants, it is necessary that we maintain a high level of self-reflexive awareness throughout this research. This is not only to do with ideological perspectives on environmentalism (I am obviously committed to advancing ecological research in media studies), but also the

level of cultural context. As we seek to explore ecological concerns in relation to transnational cultural production, we need to consider the ways my personal history influences the final interpretation. As I do not belong to the group I study, and also come from a western educational context, suggestions of analytical bias would not be inconceivable. These would very likely involve criticism of a certain neo-colonialist mentality interested in the uneven development of 'strange' other cultures. Such accusations would not be without merit, and thus they need to be considered at the planning stage of the research. Transnational considerations once more work as a way to address some of the inherent unbalance of the study as they allow us to centralize the positions of researchers and audiences from early on in ways that prohibit simplistic recourse to homogenized reading publics. To start to solve these problems, a substantial part of the research is devoted to exploring the use value of media learning and its relationship to ecological rhetoric. This is part of an increasing drive in film studies to take into account its pedagogical potential, which, of course, is also a key part of ecocinema. If we are to assess the impact of media and film studies in advancing ecological thinking, surely our responsibility as academics is to incorporate as much of this rhetoric into our teaching as possible. This does not have to be pedagogical ideological indoctrination, but encouraging the use of critical thinking on these issues.

Reflections on film as an educational tool

The initial stage of the research involved screenings of two well-known 'ecological' films: Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and Jia Zhang-Ke's *Still Life*

(2006). The viewers were asked to fill out questionnaires and invited to participate in focus groups to discuss their environmental awareness and media engagement. The exercise was designed to interrogate both the eco-critical work of the audiences and the pedagogical aspects of the project. Research on pedagogical communication suggests that discussion-based teaching and use of visual aids is an important way to get students to absorb ideas, including on environmental issues (Barnes et al. 1994; Jones 2007). As the study had to address the participants' existing perspectives on ecological media, it was made clear to the participants that there is no need for advanced study of the topic. Through this, individual differences in levels of knowledge were measured against their critical learning. As part of the self-reflexivity of the study, I had to be careful of the levels of critical input my presence would bring. Furthermore, as all of the interaction in the focus groups would be cross-cultural, it was necessary to take into account the previous experiences and the contextual background of the Chinese participants. Through this, we would not only evaluate the most effective forms of ecological communication, but establish a form of 'learning laboratory' to evaluate how we learn and communicate about globally important issues in different cultural contexts (Marzano 2007; Orlich et al. 2010).

As all the participants responded to a volunteer request e-mail and agreed to convene in screening groups at a university campus in Ningbo, it would not be out of the question to suggest that they were attracted by the potential to participate in environmentalist research (or university-level research). This type of motivation can be seen as indicative of the participants' interest to partake in politicized discussion in the public sphere. The

setting of the discussions and the screenings in a university context will certainly have influenced the participants' responses, as well as their views on the topic. While other motivations are also possible, we need to acknowledge these facets in the responses and the directions of the discussion.

To gather a more nuanced sense of the ways films communicate with audiences and how cultural differences impact this relationship, participants filled out a questionnaire on their self-perceptions of environmental learning. The majority of the answers indicated that they primarily learn about issues from the media, with some level of learning from family and educational institutes. The first part of the questionnaire sought to identify the different degrees of environmental awareness of participants. The questions focused on issues from previous activism to sustainability habits, from views about climate change to political perceptions of environmental themes in the media. For many of the participants, basic environmental awareness was well within their grasp (recycling, pollution, etc.). Once we moved into more specific examples (biodiversity, genetic farming, etc.), participant answers were much less certain. This indicates that the participants hold no distinctly advanced levels of ecological knowledge and engage with ecocinema much like general audiences. Regardless, the participants were divided into four categories based on their previous level of interest in environmental issues as this would influence their approach to the discussion and the films screened – and introduced the necessary level of diversity to the audience grouping. The four categories are as follows:

Ecologically aware (a history of activism and thorough engagement with environmental issues in different learning contexts and institutions)

Curious observant (emerging awareness of environmental issues and environmentalist ideology)

Occasional participant (a passing awareness of environmental concerns but no real activist history or interest)

Non-ideological participant (no real indication of environmentalist thinking and little motivation to learn more beyond the immediate)

Out of the 125 participants, 78 fall in the first category, 33 in the second, ten in the third, and four in the last category. The majority of the participants overlap in the first two categories of ecological awareness, which may be largely to do with the volunteer nature of the exercise and its associated call for participants. Further studies would need to extend the scope of spectators further, as it is important to reach those spectators who profess little interest in environmentalism. To take this evaluation of participant perspectives on ecology and cinema further, they were asked to choose films from a range of options that fit their conceptualization of 'environmental films'. While identifying a prearranged list of potential environmental films is another problematic aspect of audience research, it is also necessary to get a wider sense of how and why these individuals see environmental content in the cinema. To minimize the impact this would have on the results, the participants were only provided with films that have been identified as 'ecocinema' by academics. We must also acknowledge that the lack of selection for certain films may be due to the lack of availability of these texts in China or

the difficult cultural status they occupy (such as the early films of Jia Zhang-ke); this is also revealing in its own right. Simply put, the fact that more of these middle-class participants are familiar with the films of Roland Emmerich and James Cameron than those of Jia or early Zhang Yimou indicates something not entirely unexpected – Chinese audiences are increasingly more familiar with US-produced texts, as are other global audiences. Keeping in mind these potential fallacies because of too much explicit guidance of audience opinion, individuals in the first two categories of environmental awareness identified a wide range of films, whereas the last two left these largely blank (which may explain the lack of full scores for any of the films).

Film	**Out of 125**
An Inconvenient Truth (Guggenheim, 2006)	91
Avatar (Cameron, 2009)	85
The Day After Tomorrow (Emmerich, 2004)	82
Waterworld (Reynolds, 1995)	53
Tangshan Dadizheng/*Aftershock* (Feng, 2010)	41
Planet of the Apes (Schaffner, 1968)	35
Sanxia haoren/*Still Life* (Jia, 2005)	27
Huangtudi/*Yellow Earth* (Kaige, 1983)	11
Yingxiong/*Hero* (Zhang, 2002)	4

Shijie/*The World* (Jia, 2004)	2

Within this participant group, Hollywood films are clearly the main point of reference. Unsurprisingly, *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Avatar* are the most frequently identified environmental texts, with the wide use of the former in higher education and the latter's popularity going some way to explaining their relevance. Popular domestic texts such as *Aftershock*, focusing on the devastating Fengjie and Sichuan earthquakes, received a distinctly lower score in the assessment. For these spectators, Hollywood film is the primary way of communicating about environmental issues, whereas domestic film, despite clear thematic connections with environmental themes, has a comparatively smaller impact on them. Admittedly, many of the Chinese examples selected are not mainstream films, or their explorations of environmental themes are secondary to other aspects (such as the historical spectacle *Hero*). But the overwhelming dominance of the Hollywood films testifies to the extent to which popular film culture, at least among the 'cosmopolitan' urban audiences, is dictated by foreign products.

Another issue that may explain these differences involves the politicized quality of both the films and the study. Out of the respondents, 95 per cent saw media on environmental themes as political, with 85 per cent indicating that this leads to inevitable bias in the representation. The results suggest that this group of participants is well aware of the political positions underlying much ecological media production, especially in a context like China with its intimate connection between the state and the media. Yet, Chinese

films with clear political overtones were rarely identified as environmentalist by participants (even in the case of widely seen films such as *Aftershock*), whereas Hollywood, despite its reputation as entertainment cinema, had more impact in its ecological qualities (its ability to make audiences consider environmental issues from a range of angles). We cannot explain this discrepancy by resorting to the usual binary distinctions between entertainment and art, populism and domestic esotericism. Instead this is best explained by considering the implications of cultural specificity in audience interpretations of these films.

The politics of ecocinema

Focus group discussion took place after the screenings of *The Day After Tomorrow* (Roland Emmerich's blockbuster about the catastrophic effects of climate change) and *Still Life* (Jia Zhang-Ke's exploration of the displacement caused by the Three Gorges Dam project in Central China). These are intentionally selected case studies as they initially seem to be polar opposites in their ecological dimensions. Whereas *The Day After Tomorrow* constructs its rhetoric in big emotional swoops and state-of-the-art CGI, *Still Life* is distinctly quiet and symbolic. *The Day After Tomorrow* contains lengthy unsubtle speeches connecting the visually stunning scenes of destruction with human compliance in climate change. *Still Life* is similarly spectacular in its reliance on expansive vistas of demolition and relocation, framed by the backdrop of the Three Gorges. Narratively, the two texts could not be more different, with *The Day After Tomorrow* favouring a linear cause-and-effect progression. *Still Life*, on the other hand,

constructs an ambiguous narrative that captures the sense of ongoing uncertainty amidst social transformation. These differences may be able to explain some of the overwhelming identification of *The Day After Tomorrow*'s environmentalist rhetoric over *Still Life*. Yet, the environmentalism of *Still Life* is not elusive, as underlined by the frequent uses of the character '*chai*'/'tear down' on soon-to-be demolished buildings accompanied by imagery of rising water levels. Throughout we are made to focus on the human misuse of the environment in the name of progress and accumulation and the toll this takes on individual lives. Yet, how can we explain the different perspectives the audiences hold on the films' political–ecological dimensions, especially considering the nominal cultural intimacy and familiarity of *Still Life* to the participants?

We start from the discussion surrounding *The Day After Tomorrow* as it can clarify the initial attraction most participants exhibited when encountering environmentalist films. For many, the film was an unprofessional and unscientific exploration of climate change, but it has acted as a key factor in increasing their ecological awareness – that is, in advancing their critical thinking on humanity's role in the ecosystem. Adjectives used by the participants ranged from scary to sad, from horrified to moved. Yet, several of the participants indicated that they saw the film years ago and had forgotten all about it after their initial concern. For them, the very act of having to watch the film again for the current exercise had reinforced their appreciation of its message. Intriguingly, cultural differences arose in the students' perceptions of the film's effectiveness as four of the participants were not mainland Chinese (they were from Malaysia, Taiwan, the United Kingdom and the United States). For them, the adherence to superficial Hollywood

conventions in exuberant spectacles of destruction proved to be a key factor in the 'ridiculousness' of the film. The Chinese participants did not find this a problem; rather, this drew their attention to the film's individualized linear narrative. While it would be tempting to make some hasty conclusion about Chinese 'collectivism', this would be misleading, as for the participants, individualism in both the narrative and theme of the film was seen as a conventional 'entertainment' narrative trope that 'cheapened' the message of the film. But this simplification was also seen as a realist, market-dictated technique that allowed the film to have a populist reach. The perceived populism of the film led to its dismissal by some participants, but they all acknowledged its basic potential for increasing audience awareness of general environmental issues.

Still Life in context: Alternative critical perspectives on the film

Before we discuss participant perceptions of *Still Life*, we must address some of the discursive associations a text such as this attains through its transnational circulation. This is necessary as these associations will have an impact on the ways the film is read by media-savvy middle-class Chinese. Much of the public discussion surrounding the film was generated by festival screenings and limited art house releases outside China (these successes received scant coverage in mainstream Chinese media). This mode of exhibition already presages that the film will be read in a certain way – it will be seen as an unconventional, potentially critical text with a clearly identifiable political message. A common criticism of the Fifth and even the Sixth Generation Chinese cinema producers is that they cater primarily for western audiences, as their political content and small

production scale marginalize them from mainstream domestic distribution. While *Still Life* received theatrical distribution in mainland China, this was very limited (almost minimal), which, in itself, is not that surprising – it is, after all, an art film with esoteric content. But since its release, its profile and reputation in China and abroad have been dominated by its success abroad. If its success abroad is a key denominator in its popular cultural discourse, what kind of discourse did the western critics construct around the film?

Influential critics such as *The Guardian*'s Peter Bradshaw and Michael Philips from the *Chicago Tribune* see *Still Life* as a socio-political commentary on the displacement of people from the Sanxia region. An ecologicalist evocation of humanity intertwined with natural landscapes and processes runs through much of the criticism, with recurrent discussion of how anthropocentric projects contradict natural flow and rhythm. Certain critics explicitly distance Jia from other Chinese film producers. Comparing him to Zhang Yimou's commercialist and state-sanctioned eminence, J. Hoberman suggests that Jia is 'more observer than director, [whose films] are predicated on a sense of everyday social flux and, more than any I've seen, they provide some sense of China's seething interior' (2008). Others relate the discussion to developmental politics, as is the case with Nicolas Rapold's comparison of the Hubei building project to the folly of the Titanic. 'It's the anything-goes of a world being remade, like 19th-century America without the bedrock of ideals – instead, only concrete and cash' (2008). Fernando C. Croke sees a similar project in these films in that they evoke the 'existential malaise' and 'spiritual drowning' of the contemporary Chinese society.

While critiques such as these invite attention to the pressing socio-political issues of contemporary China, they can also be identified as the type of discourse that Rey Chow (1995) sees as the result of the pandering 'auto-orientalist' orientation of many contemporary Chinese film producers. This concerns the production of films that target western audiences by providing them with material they expect to see in Chinese cinema, such as rural backwardness and political injustice – the 'naturalization' of non-western cultures as primal others is a handy way to satisfy the critical curiosity of western spectators and critics. Jia's films are far more complex than this, as many of them work as explorations of this particular phenomenon in China. But the general critical reception of *Still Life* solidifies Chow's critical perspective, as many of the critics only provide exoticized or condemning views of China's transformations, even when they discuss the ways the film challenges spectators by refusing the visual spectacle associated with Hollywood cinema.

The ways the critics address ecological concerns can be considered in a sort of neo-colonialist framework where the other bears the brunt for ecological blame and social injustice. The contextual associations evoked by the history of the film-maker, the context of exhibition, the textual evocations of realism, and the admittedly limited knowledge these critics have of China cultivate a critical reading of Chinese politics, whereby it is not entirely surprising that the ecopolitics of *Still Life* are received similarly to other auto-orientalist texts (such as the early works of Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige). Much as the entertainment trappings of Hollywood cinema provide the potential to avoid

real engagement with the issues presented, so the discussion of ecological problems in *Still Life* as only specific to China allows them to be seen as something unconnected to one's own context and the wider planetary ecosystem. This greenwashing mode of cultural discourse neglects one's responsibility on the issues depicted, as they are seen as the property of a socio-politically and geographically distant other.

If Jia were primarily intent on addressing foreign audiences with his film and raising awareness of Chinese issues abroad (and largely succeeding in it), how would the Chinese audiences respond to its messages? Would they complicate the readings of western commentators or align with the criticism or even wilful ignorance of the film, as was the case in sections of the official domestic media? For the participants, the film's realistic qualities and socio-political commitment emerged as the primary topic of discussion. Cultural differences in viewing perceptions arose early on in the discussion, as two of the non-Chinese participants saw the film as an almost 'ethnographic' depiction of China. Both exoticism and realism emerge in this view, where poverty and displacement were seen as the indicators of 'authenticity'. The Chinese participants largely corroborated this view, as they paid attention to the similarities between the aesthetic and narrative qualities of the film and documentary realism. To them, the images and stories resembled coverage they had seen in the domestic news, allowing the film to resemble 'real life', as one participant put it. Intriguingly, the non-Chinese participants suggested that the film is also 'beautiful' in its spectacular qualities, evoking the type of exoticization we saw from western critics. This contradicts what the Chinese participants identified as its most impressive qualities – its truthful qualities. But for

them, there was certainly no glamour (or exoticism) to be found in the film – if anything, its realism was too close to reality.

Cultural differences may be able to explain some of the extent to which the ecological dimensions of the film proved to be a topic of disagreement and confusion. In the discussion, it was clear that many of the participants operate under the assumption that ecological studies of the media are about 'nature'. This type of nature 'thinking' operates much like conservationist environmentalism in understanding the concept of ecocinema as concerning an untouched or unmodified natural environment. While conceptualizations of environmentalism as something preoccupied only with pristine nature abound in most cultures, the relationship between humanity and the environment varies according to the cultural context. In much of the western criticism of *Still Life*, ecological concerns are framed with developmental politics. For the majority of the Chinese participants, the socio-political dimensions of the film overrode any environmentalist concerns they could identity. First, the tradition of 'documentary-like' socio-political representations situates the aesthetic and narrative qualities of the film firmly in the category of depictions of class and social inequality. The second form of confusion emerges from the participants' unfamiliarity with the social and political dimensions of ecological discourse. In both the western and the Chinese discourses, ecological argumentation is subsumed by the more explicitly socio-political dimensions of the film.

Another form of reading largely specific to the Chinese middle-class audiences emerges when we consider the film's depiction in the wider political landscape of contemporary globalizing China, where the constant reshaping of social class status and the uncertainty of these positions complicates any simplistically assumed class identity. Hongbing Zhang discusses the protagonists of *Still Life* as comprising '*cao gen*'/'grassroots people', who according to him, bring to the Chinese mind the following properties:

> […] their lowly, rough and minimal form of existence, their capacity of surviving by any means, legal or illegal, and in all sorts of environments and conditions; and their unique bonding and attachment to soil and earth. For contemporary Chinese media and those in the West as well, the life stories of these grassroots people, discovered or constructed, constitute the rare picture of another type of the so-called 'original eco-state of life', that lies locally beneath and beyond the glaring glamour of globalization in China today, and which, therefore, is viewed with much nostalgia to be fast disappearing from our globalized view. (2010: 144)

The socio-economic and even geographical distance allows the middle-class participants to see the protagonists as almost a caricature of an internal other – as representatives of a social group as alien to them as the whole notion of 'China' seems to be for some of the foreign critics of *Still Life*. The othering of the grass-roots people works as a way to externalize the ecological connotations of the depiction, much as some of its foreign critics did. Ecological readings of the film by Chinese participants are hindered by a

double bind. For some, the cultural immediacy of the film (its use of familiar themes and modes of representation) complicates seeing the spectacle of destruction in ecological terms. For others, its creation of cultural and socio-economic distance complicates taking action on the environmentalist and ecological concerns presented.

To understand the implications of foregrounding social problems instead of focusing on environmental issues, we turn to the ways ecological discourse works in the media environment of contemporary China, especially when it comes to politicized depictions of China's uneven development and the inequality of its domestic politics. News, documentaries, journalistic articles and political programmes are increasingly vocal (when they can be) about class issues and regional inequality. At the time of this study, state media was keen to address these issues as part of its attempt to control any outbreak of the 'Jasmine Revolution' in the wake of the Arab Spring. Thus, social and class issues dominated the media environment and subsumed most other forms of critical rhetoric. It is no wonder then that the participants in the study would interpret a film like *Still Life* as an extension (or perhaps more appropriately, as a part) of this discussion, where environmental and ecological concerns (especially in terms of human ecology) are only a side effect of the real problem – social inequality.

This comprises an interesting mirroring of a trend Hugo de Burgh and Zheng Rong have observed in Chinese political journalism (2011). They argue that journalists in post WTO-accession China have used environmental issues as a way of inserting pointed social criticism into the Chinese mediascape. According to them, the state heavily

controls any media with explicit socio-critical content, but they are considerably more open to coverage of environmental issues. This is first to do with elevating China's global profile from the polluted factory of the world to a leader in sustainable development, and second, addressing the extremely visible and difficult to control online reporting of environmental catastrophes and negligence. The state does not want to be seen as ignoring citizens' concerns (at least explicitly), and taking issue with environmental problems provides a way to address corruption and the inequality of domestic social relations without damaging the fundamentals of the political status quo.

Participant reactions to *Still Life* show an intriguing alternative to these suggestions, first, as the participants choose to focus on the socio-political problems instead of the environmental facade (if it can be called as such). It seems the individuals have been conditioned to recognize socio-political problems instead of focusing on the environmentalist dimensions of the issues. Indeed, many suggested that their lack of awareness of the suffering of the people at the Three Gorges and their unfamiliarity with its environmental costs is to do with state control over the media. While the state may turn a blind eye to the types of journalistic reports discussed by de Burgh and Rong, certain issues are not reported as frequently as others, or they are framed in ways designed to avert potentially problematic readings. The relocation of people is a sensitive issue in contemporary China, and if the reception of *Still Life* had focused on environmentalist concerns, this would effectively support de Burgh and Rong's assertions. But we must also remember that the Three Gorges project is, in itself, a part of the modernization of the Chinese state infrastructure to meet the nation's growing

resource demands. Thus, it is a state-mandated project with an explicit ecological dimension, and environmentalist criticism of it in the form of cinema is highly problematic. Indeed, the participants suggested that they are aware that environmentalist content may run afoul of the state censors: 'films talking about serious environmental problems might be blocked by the government', states one of the participants. Yet, *Still Life* was not blocked by the government, but marginalized in other ways. One aspect of this was to turn attention away from the highly inflammable criticism of the construction project and focus on its human costs, which the state has visibly 'promised' to address via a range of policy measures. The reception of *Still Life* shows that socio-political concerns and ecological issues are often intertwined in ways that are potentially problematic for the status quo, but which can also be manipulated in ways that may negate some of their more inflammatory connotations.

A further obstacle for the film's potential for raising ecological awareness is posed by considering the effects of the state policies in localized form, as concerns that are distant for the middle-class participants. Comments made by the participants suggest that environmental damage is often seen as the cause of 'other' people (not necessarily from other parts of China): 'It would be hard for some "uncivilized" people to stop damaging the environment if there is no penalty', suggested one participant. These 'uncivilized' perspectives are subsequently attributed to 'Asian countries', which excludes the context of the study. Other participants suggested additional problems for acting on the issues posed by the film, which included the geographical vastness of China and the magnitude of institutional (read: state) investment in the construction. While participants were quick

to recognize domestic migration and social inequality as shared Chinese concerns, they were more hesitant to acknowledge the relationship between environmental degradation and their lives. While environmental problems are often depicted as concerns that affect us all, it is possible to sidestep the problematic connotations of such concerns for domestic political stability by focusing on more 'minor', localized issues.

Let us consider this from an alternative perspective. If the problems depicted are not to do with the ecosystem but with domestic migration and inequality, then they may not have any direct relation to the lives of the participants (despite the fact that displacement occurs because of environmental transformations and affects the whole of human ecology in China). This is not to imply that the participants do not care for the more disadvantaged groups in their society, but rather that the threat posed by increased ecological awareness of the domestic political status quo is effectively micro-managed to a more localized concern: 'I knew nothing about Sanxia before, I just thought it was a great construction project for China as we saw on TV. But this film really tells me a lot about how we should consider the relationship between development and nature'. While the clarity of environmentalist rhetoric is often confused with other social or political issues, alternative representations of ecopolitical concerns can challenge the hegemonic proliferation of the state apparatus and diversify the range of opinions circulating in the wider public sphere. However, this participant also suggested that individuals still require a venue in which to vocalize their alternative perspectives, especially when it comes to discussing the intersections of progress, sustainability, human ecology and domestic politics – and it is to this 'venue' we now turn.

Media learning

What are the implications of these domestic readings of *Still Life* for the wider notion of ecocinema and its activist participation in domestic ecopolitics? While media was seen as a key aspect of environmental learning by 97 per cent of the individuals, with film reaching an approval level of 87 per cent as an effective pedagogical tool, its potential in raising political awareness was questioned. Many expressed scepticism over whether these films are able to contribute to social well-being – 'hardly as film is still generally considered as a commercial product' was a typical response by many of the more sceptical participants. Even participants who describe themselves as environmentally aware followed this line: 'I was motivated but don't know how to take specific actions. Even passion can fade, especially after some time'. The discussion concluded with reflections on what would be the most efficient type of cinema to use in learning about environmental concerns. Most participants suggested that *Still Life* made them think more, but they expressed reservations about its reach. *The Day After Tomorrow*, despite limitations in its ecological depth, was deemed more effective by this group, strengthening the assertions about the abilities of populist rhetoric to put across basic messages to wide audiences, as seen in the survey of ecological films.

The most comprehensive type of learning, according to the participants, emerged in the context of interactive learning, as the act of being made to consider these issues led the participants to vocalize what they described as 'unconscious' knowledge they had

accumulated. The range of case studies involved in the exercise allowed the participants to consider environmentalism beyond 'nature'. But it was also suggested that the mediating role of the research context and the discussion was instrumental in developing their understanding of the wide range of ecological themes. Thus, media education does not only involve a one-way system where knowledge is imparted to participants in an enforced lecture hall or theatre setting. Instead, using a range of aids and conversation starters was deemed key to engaging with these issues in dynamic ways. It is also clear that using film as a stand-alone pedagogical tool may not be enough. While participants were clearly able to discuss issues that arose from the films, the guiding role of the context was instrumental in pushing the discussion into areas they may not have considered purely on the basis of the screenings.

The global and the local

While learning from the media is vital for assessing the environmentalist impact of ecocinema, many complications persist between the audiences and the ecological content of the texts. This study has demonstrated some of these concerns, especially as they complicate any notion of simple readings of 'environmentally beneficial' content. Academic postulations about the impact of films such as *The Day After Tomorrow* and *Still Life* remain postulations until they are put to the test in culturally specific contexts. Does either of the films qualify as activist-generating ecocinema then? *The Day After Tomorrow* certainly makes its audiences think about these issues (while taking their cash), but many participants indicated that they had initially enjoyed the film as pure

spectacle and only retroactively came to see its political aspects. More intriguingly, it seems that *Still Life* fails to instil any sort of general eco-critical reaction from these participants. It is not surprising that a difficult art film fails to make an immediate connection with audiences, but the participants easily identified other social problems in its thematic scope.

To a large extent, this lack of connection can be explained by the cultural baggage of the film and the audience. Preconceptions of the cultural status of the films can negatively affect their impact or produce unexpected readings. The fact that *The Day After Tomorrow* is widely perceived as a populist text already limits its use value according to the participants surveyed. While many of the participants positively commented on its ability to reach wide audiences, it was also perceived as unsophisticated and 'silly' even before its screening. Audience familiarity with the history of documentary aesthetics and narrative conventions in realist Chinese cinema and the director's reputation can be considered as another set of expectations that limited audience readings of *Still Life*. For many, its 'dry' documentary-like exposition of social problems would either distance 'ordinary' spectators or limit its audiences to those who are interested in its localized politics.

What is at stake when the social or ecological participation of a film is obfuscated by its cultural status? If an ecological text is not understood by its domestic audiences as such, how can the text claim to make any social or environmentalist impact? Foreign audiences were quick to note these aspects, but for them, a film like *Still Life* mostly functions as a

way to critique China from the outside, and in a largely impotent manner, especially when it comes to domestic cultural politics. These views on the complexities of transnational eco-audiences challenge preconceived notions about the benefits of screen environmentalism, and suggest a range of intriguing theoretical assertions. For one, the discourse of the local and the global reminds us of Ulrike Heise's eco-cosmopolitanism (2010). In evoking this idea, she argues that the local is too restricted in scope to account for the complexity of ecological problems; the global, on the other hand, is too wide or too misappropriated in its rhetorical use. The research on Chinese middle-class spectatorship shows how environmental problems have a clear global dimension even if they find concrete applications in specific local contexts. Yet, before we suggest any simplistic valorization of the local, we are confronted by the contingency of the individuals who make up such a 'local', as their cultural, social, economic and ideological uniqueness challenges any simple categorization of audiences into homogenized categories of the local or the national. In the case of *Still Life* and its ecological content, the local is too contingent or disparate to effect real change, as the dual considerations of state-mandated political culture and the mass inequality of Chinese society complicate activist participation. The participants' reactions to *The Day After Tomorrow* evoke the global dimensions of Emmerich's film, but its ecologicalism (its potential for generating critical thinking on ecological issues) only makes sense to them in terms of its local relevance: 'we are aware of these ecological problems but what can we do?'. For many, it may be productive in communicating environmentalist ideology to large audiences, but it is also easily dismissable due to its simplistic message and its imported, and culturally stamped, status. The aspirational qualities of eco-

cosmopolitanism are difficult to put into practice, as the participants acknowledge that they remain restricted in their abilities to act locally or globally in their own contexts.

The audiences here are only a very small sample, but even on this level, the study is able to raise more questions than it can answer. If we are to truly create the type of participatory reciprocality called for by eco-cosmopolitanism, we must take complex audience perspectives into account. The cultural and social inclinations of the audiences inevitably colour their perception of the films and challenge the utopianism of many academic frameworks. Bias is also a concern that affects the type of audience research conducted for this article. The conduct of the whole research in the context of eco-criticism will have affected the perspectives of the participants. Attempts at acknowledging these limitations and constructing dialogue are vital to overcome any bias, but they can only go so far. Residual bias in political/cultural areas necessitates the expansion of both the participant group and study contexts. This is one of the vital concerns through which this article aims to encourage integration in future cross-cultural research at the intersections of the sciences and the humanities. In conducting this work, it is clear that if we are to understand the social and political potential of ecocinema, we have to take into account a variety of factors ranging from the text to the viewing contexts, all in an analytical framework that promotes cultural awareness of the production/reading process. To meet this demand, eco-cosmopolitanism, as a form of spectator practice, does not necessarily have to mean the sort of borderless travel of individuals or cultural products with which cosmopolitanism is often associated. Rather, it can be considered an artistic/culturalist approach to interpersonal and cultural dialogue

on the planetary ecosystem. It provides one approach through which we can start to harness the power of cinema for environmentalist activism and instigate real ecological change in attitudes and actions of individuals.

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